

New Life In Christ—A New Wardrobe

Gal 5:22-26, Col 3:5-17

Good morning! Happy Labor Day! I'm glad that you made time in whatever kind of last gasp of summer celebration you have to join us to worship today. You know, it seemed to me that the first months of the pandemic dragged on forever—April was at least two months all by itself! But somehow August went by so quickly! Here we are ready to start the fall!

This time of year always reminds me of going back to school. I remember the new clothes that my mom bought for me. After a summer of shorts and tee shirts, suddenly I needed bigger clothes and found myself in stiff, scratchy shirts and long pants. Somehow those new clothes told me that it was time for a change—time to go back to school, to learn new things, to listen to the teacher. Are kids this year getting new school clothes even if they are attending online? I wonder. Certainly the new wardrobe was a reminder for me AND for my friends that we were launching into something new.

Of course our clothes send powerful messages all through life, don't they? Alice and I got to celebrate her sister's tenure as interim dean at the University of Utah School of Nursing this past week. There was an outdoor reception for faculty and benefactors and some family. After months of wearing sweat pants and cutting our own hair, we got all dressed up. I think my new suit (that I got for Gracie's wedding) made me look more respectable than normal. I probably spent more time talking to the big wigs because I dressed the part. Today we are talking about putting on the new clothes of our new life in Jesus. This fresh wardrobe is the external reminder—to us and to others—of the internal changes God is making in our lives.

All this summer we have been learning about the new life in Christ by reading Paul's letter to the Colossians. Today we get to the description of what that life looks like. Here at last he spells it out. I love this passage of the Bible--take chapter 3 verses 12 to 17 and tape them up on your refrigerator—this is what our lives should look like! Our resurrection life doesn't wait for some time after death—our life with God starts right now. And it is described here in Colossians 3. Paul says we are raised with Christ. We are given new lives in Jesus,

beginning today and lasting always. But that doesn't mean that we get to live in a fairy tale. We aren't taken away from the sweat and the tears and the grit and the conflict of ordinary, daily life. No—being a Christian doesn't deliver us from doubt or from hard relationships or from difficult responsibilities. This resurrection life doesn't take away our challenges, but it does transform us through them. God can use difficulties to shape us.

Paul lays out two kinds of life in our reading today—one is the kind that we need to leave behind, that we need to put to death. The other is the new life that Paul says we need to “put on.” This is our new wardrobe for our new life. The starting point for living into our resurrection life with Jesus is leaving our old life behind. Look at the behavior Paul calls us to leave: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, greed, anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language, and lying. By contrast he calls us to put on—to clothe ourselves with—compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.

This is not just a “wouldn't that be nice” daydream. Imagine there are two towns, or two countries. One is characterized by Paul's old life list-- sexual sin, anger, rage, lies and greed. The other is characterized by the new life list—compassion, kindness, patience, humility, gentleness, forgiveness. Which country would you rather live in? Which place is going to lead to human flourishing? The benefits of the new life are obvious, aren't they? But this isn't magic. Putting off those old clothes of lust and anger and greed is hard. Leaving that old life behind is not a one and done decision. No, it is a continuous, conscious, day by day, moment by moment choice. All of us have some pieces of that old wardrobe that are especially hard to let go of—that ratty cloth of anger or greed that might feel comfortable but is actually killing us.

Paul calls us to let go of our old lives--lives of doing whatever we want whenever we feel like it, and damn the consequences. Then he reminds us of WHO we really are—and WHOSE we are. We can do this because we are God's chosen people, holy and beloved! He reminds us that we are children of the King, we don't need to play in the sewer! Because we've been called to this new life of love, we can put on our new wardrobe. We are empowered to clothe ourselves with compassion and kindness and gentleness and love.

There is a story about a man who really wanted to marry a certain beautiful woman he'd met. The man was a wicked, selfish, greedy man; and the woman would only consider a husband who was kind and fair and concerned for others. The man decided he would trick the woman—he would put on a false face, a mask, and pretend to be the kind of man she wanted. He would start acting like the kind, gentle, humble man she wished for. It took a long time, but the evil man was committed to winning this lady. Finally she was attracted to his kindness and good deeds. Eventually they fell in love and married. After their wedding the man confessed to her—I have misled you, I've been wearing a false face. He took off his mask, and his wife said, why were you wearing a mask? You look just the same without it!

Yes, over time the man's actions of compassion had changed him. He had been transformed into the man he'd been pretending to be! That is the way it is with us. What we do defines us. What we do defines us. As we choose each day to put aside those old clothes of greed and lies and instead choose the new clothes Jesus offers us, we are shaped into new people. God rarely changes a person dramatically overnight. Instead he chooses to work in us slowly, over a long time. He molds us and shapes us. He transforms us, one choice, one action at a time, more and more into His image. Our Immerse Bible puts it like this: "Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him." Our new life in Jesus is a life of continual growth and transformation and change—becoming ever more like Jesus! God intends to work through you and me to give us full lives and to bring new life to others!

I think I've mentioned Father Greg Boyle before. He is a Catholic priest in Los Angeles. He was assigned to the poorest parish in the city, surrounded by housing projects and full of gangs. As he tried to serve and love the people in this neighborhood, he started various efforts to help people escape the prisons of gangs and poverty and lack of opportunity. These became Homeboy Industries —today it is the largest and most successful gang rehabilitation program in the world! The point of course is not really about gangs, it is about the *people*. Once he took Abby and Shemeeka with him on a trip to speak to a group of judges. They were two tough girls—lots of tattoos, they'd been in prisons, they had been in gangs—but now they worked at Homeboy. The girls told the judges about their lives --of torture, abuse, abandonment,

violence—it was riveting and received a thunderous ovation. As they neared home again, Fr Greg was checking in with his mom on the phone. He said they'd been in San Francisco talking to judges and these two wonderful women helped him give a workshop. Shameeka said “Huh?” “What?” You called us wonderful women. Yeah? So? Shameeka said, “I don't know—when you say it, I believe you.” That is what love in action looks like—it helps people move beyond their past and their hurts and start to become the people God made them to be.

Church, that is what we are here for! Jesus empowers our new lives so we can help bring flourishing to our neighborhoods and workplaces and schools. We practice forgiveness. We don't cancel someone because they hurt us or annoy us. We love them and wait. Wait for God to change them. Or to change us! This process of being shaped into God's image is long and gradual. Our first reading from Paul's letter to the Galatians is another way to talk about the new life we have in Jesus—the fruit of the Spirit. Listen again to how he describes the fruit that the Spirit grows in us—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Don't get derailed by that list—this is not a list of chores for you to do! It isn't a list to look at and get discouraged or beat yourself up about. No—this is a description of what GOD does in our lives by his Spirit. The fruit is the result of GOD acting in you, not us struggling to do it! Our part is to be willing.

Fruit doesn't appear overnight, although right now it SEEMS like our tomato plants are popping out new tomatoes each day! No, fruit is an organic process—it grows over time. It's the result of a life of faith, nurtured by God. As we put on the new clothes of our resurrection life each day, we make space for God to act—to mold us and transform us.

I love how practical Paul is. He knows that we need to forgive, and to be forgiven! He knows that to live in community with others we all need grace. Then he says above all we should clothe ourselves with LOVE. Love is what holds it all together. In the Message it says: “regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.” Love is the foundation of our new wardrobe. And remember what love *really* is—it is a rugged commitment to act for the benefit of others. Love is fundamentally about ACTING, not about feeling. Love is acting for the good of someone else, not ourselves. Love is the thing

that turns us inside out—facing out towards God and neighbor, instead of being stuck in the endless inward spiral of selfishness.

After Love, Paul’s emphasis is on peace. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, because we are one body and are called to live together in peace! Here is the Message version: “Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other. None of this going off and doing your own thing. And cultivate thankfulness.” Now that is a countercultural message for our society isn’t it? We are called to be together, to sacrifice for each other, not to selfishness! We are called to be thankful, not always grasping for more like spoiled children.

How do we do all this? How do we put on those virtues of goodness and compassion? How do we wrap it all up in love and let peace rule? How can we learn to be thankful, even in the middle of a pandemic and recession and political circus and social unrest and all the rest? By staying close to Jesus! Look at verse 16—here is the Message again: “Let the Word of Christ have the run of the house. Give it plenty of room in your lives. Instruct and direct one another using good common sense. And sing, sing your hearts out to God!”

When we keep God’s Word in our hearts and minds, we are empowered to live more and more into this new wardrobe of our resurrection life. That is why we are reading Immerse this fall. Do you want to let the Word of Christ have the run of your soul? Then spend some time reading Scripture! I promise you that reading through the New Testament and talking about it with some friends can revolutionize your life. Jesus can move from a nice but kind of vague idea to being a living friend, active in your life. I really hope you go and sign up to join us in Immerse and especially—sign up to be in an Immerse Group! Sharing and learning from each other as we read Scripture is the most valuable part!

Paul tells us that our new life in Jesus can start right now. We begin with the daily, moment by moment turning away from those old ways of death—lust, greed, anger, lying. Instead we can put on our new clothes from Jesus— compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, and discipline. We can be ready to forgive – and cover it all with love. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, and let his Word dwell in your richly, and be thankful—singing songs of gratitude to God in your hearts!

Notice that each of those are choices we can refuse. We can open ourselves and let God's love and power and peace and joy flow through us—changing us and changing others. Or we can cling to fear and anger and pride and lust and ultimately death.

Friends—let's encourage each other to take new steps in this resurrection life with Jesus! Let's bear with one another, forgive one another, and practice gratitude—to God and to each other. Let's live into this life of love, peace and thanksgiving that we were made for.

I love how Paul concludes this—verse 17 is a one sentence summary of how we can live this new life in Jesus. Whatever you do or say, do it all in the name of Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him! So, as you start to honk the horn or get ready to type out that cutting response on Facebook, think—would you feel right doing that “in the name of Jesus?” If not, stop! Let's live lives that surprise people. Lives that point them to Jesus by what we do and by how we do it, as well as by what we say. “Let every detail in your lives—words, actions, whatever—be done in the name of the Master, Jesus, thanking God the Father every step of the way.” (Col 3:17, The Message)

May that be true for each of us all this week!

Let's pray: Father God—thank you! Thank you for saving us, thank you for sending us Jesus to rescue us and sending your Spirit to transform us into whole, real humans. Father, mend our brokenness and help us to open all of our lives to your healing, transforming action. Empower us to live out each day in the name of Jesus, living in love, joy, peace and thanksgiving as we share your love with those around us. In the powerful name of Jesus we ask all of this, amen!