

“Good Fashion Sense” • Colossians 3:11 – 17
Sheth LaRue • December 30, 2019
Salida First Presbyterian Church

A few years ago my nephew was a fan of this show called Fireman Sam. The show was originally broadcast in the United Kingdom and only within the last four years has it been broadcast in the United States. All he could talk about and all he wanted to watch was Fireman Sam. It was an all consuming firefighting life: he went to the fire station, he had his parents chase down the fire engines, he watched other shows involving firefighters. The good uncle that I am, I wanted to get him some ‘official’ Fireman Sam swag for his birthday. Remember that part about it being a British TV show? Turns out, all the toys and clothing is also British - meaning, I’d have to order international for my four-year old nephew’s birthday present. Which I did because I’m a good uncle!

I got him this pajama set with Fireman Sam all over it, and while the shipping cost as much as the gift itself, it was going to be worth it to see his eyes light up. The night of his birthday we all got together to open gifts, and about the third gift in, he got to mine. I knew I hit the jackpot - everyone else gave him books and police cars, but nothing Fireman Sam. He opened my gift just a little bit and saw Fireman Sam and his eyes lit up! Then he finished unwrapping it and saw that they were pajamas and his eyes dimmed. He held them in his hands for a moment, looked at them, and then tossed them aside to move on to the next gift.

Within a few months he had outgrown the pajamas, and a few months after that he had outgrown Fireman Sam. What I thought was the perfect gift turned out to be a mere blip on his radar. I’m not heartbroken by this - I know that a gift for a child is going to go to the wayside rather quickly. I know that most of the things that I’m going to give him are going to be forgotten, thrown away, and replaced by something else. But there’s something that my nephew will never forget - because I remind him whenever I see him - we’re family and I love him dearly.

In our scripture today, the apostle Paul was writing to the Colossians to remind them of how much he loved them. Paul was doing something else, too, and it echoes into our lives as well these many years later - Paul was reminding us of a gift we all received when we were made alive in Christ Jesus. The church in Colossae was going through a rough patch and Paul had written to them to encourage them to remember what first drew them to God, to the church, and to their faith.

Paul uses clothing language throughout this passage to spark their memories about their earliest moments in the faith. In those days, when someone was baptized, they would discard their old clothes, be baptized, and then be dressed in new clothes. The christening gowns of today were born out of this tradition. But Paul doesn't tell us to put on normal clothes. In our passage today, we're encouraged alongside the early church to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience and love. These aren't clothes for our bodies - they're clothes for our souls.

These are virtues that we all gained when we first came to know God, yet somehow they've ended up in the back of the closet for many of us. When we first came to know and understand God, Jesus' love for us, and when we felt the Spirit moving in our lives we were excited - like my nephew when he first glimpsed those pajamas. But as we began to open other gifts, as we began to actually function as believers in this world, those gifts were moved to the wayside. We may have seen other gifts that we clung to - self-control, faithfulness, asceticism. We may have gone back to our old way of living - selfishness, power grabbing, domination, anger.

Paul's virtues aren't often seen in our world outside of the church...and honestly, they're not always seen inside the church, either. Thinking about the workplace, how often is it said that a boss shows compassion or humility or patience? We prefer a shrewd businesswoman; a cunning developer. If we look at the political sphere, it's almost laughable to imagine a world leader showing love, gentleness, or kindness. We want someone tough on crime; a maverick. We desire those who are scrappy, no-holds-barred and are willing to go all out for their business or their country.

But Paul is telling us to put on different traits: Compassion. Kindness. Humility. Gentleness. Patience. Love. Why would Paul desire for us to return to these essentials? I think Paul was calling for the Colossians to return to them, and I think God is calling us to return to them because they're what the world needs most right now. These virtues are what God desires most for the church to hold on to right now. But what does that look like? And how do we use them?

In our larger world, we're seeing a lot of things on the news - migrants on the border with Mexico, a growing chasm between the haves and the have nots, a burgeoning homelessness crisis, and drug abuse epidemics. It's easy to say 'those issues are happening elsewhere, so they don't concern me'. It's easy to turn off the news and ignore it all. But our ignorance doesn't make these issues go away. They are still present, and they need our compassion. Those who are on the

border claiming asylum, those who are trapped in poverty, those who are consumed by their drug addictions - these people need our sympathy and concern for their sufferings. They need our tenderness, mercy, leniency, kindness, charity. They need compassion.

In an admission of my faults, when I see one of our country's half-million people who are experiencing homelessness on the corner begging, I have a knee-jerk reaction that they can fix their problem by getting a job. Then I pause and think about how difficult it can be to get a job, and I'm knocked down off my pedestal. In our translation, Paul's word is 'kindness', but it's more than that. It's usable, useful kindness. It's Spirit-produced goodness which meets the need and avoids human cruelty. It's understanding these people's disabilities and their lack of proper documentation, acknowledging their addictions or their lack of mental stability and realizing that it's not as simple as getting a job. Paul is calling for soft-heartedness: not saying 'get a job', but talking with them about why they're experiencing homelessness and finding ways to meet their immediate needs so that they *can* get a job.

Paul calls for us to put on humility - but where can we wear this virtue? We're told that to get ahead in this world we need to self-promote and make a name for ourselves. We're supposed to brag about who we are and what we're doing. My social media is filled with people's pictures of their perfect lives; beautiful wives and brawny husbands; top sales leaders and house-flipping phenoms; selfies with fit bodies feeding the hungry. Paul's virtue of humility seems to be the antithesis of being an American; and when we are called out on it, we somehow manage to grade ourselves on a curve - *well, I'm not as big-headed as them; I'm not as arrogant as he is*. In truth, we can all take ourselves down a few pegs and recognize the lowliness of ourselves and cry out for our utter dependence and reliance on God.

This word 'gentleness' seems simple, but in the Greek, it's more than gentleness. We don't have a straight translation: it's expressing power with reserve, avoiding unnecessary harshness, yet without compromising or being too slow to use necessary force. In our language, power and gentleness are opposed to each other. But here we're called to use them together, to master our anger and passion, and work to set things right. It's Jesus clearing the temple courts of vendors; it's Dr. King's non-violent resistance; it's like Dietrich Bonhoeffer who stood against the Nazi regime, saying, "If I sit next to a madman as he drives a car into a group of innocent bystanders, I can't, as a Christian, simply wait for the catastrophe, then comfort the wounded and bury the dead.

I must try to wrestle the steering wheel out of the hands of the driver.” Gentleness is using one’s power with responsibility and reserve.

The patience Paul is calling for isn’t the kind where you wait for your husband to take out the trash; it’s forbearance, endurance, constancy, steadfastness; it’s long-suffering and being slow to avenge the wrongs caused to us. It’s self-restraint, it’s holding on, it’s waiting for God to act. Patience is choosing to not reply to that comment on Facebook; it’s holding onto your kids as they make poor decisions; it’s staying close to your family member as they struggle with depression.

While I may be way off in Austin, I still hear and know about all the stuff that is swirling around here in these walls: doubt, frustration, anger, resignation, and uncertainty. People have left, people have taken breaks, people have checked out. I think it’s understandable - I know that this pastoral search is difficult. I know it’s difficult because we want to move on, start new things, press forward, and find some stability and consistency. I’ve been right here with you all even if I’m not physically in the seats next to you. It hurts my heart that *my* church is going through this, and I want to fix it - I really do - but I can’t. I have to lean on the process and the committees; I have to trust in our leadership team; and I have to know - truly know and believe - that God is in control of all of this.

As we enter into a new year, we’ll be entering into a new phase in this congregation. We’ll be faced with new challenges, new frustrations, new difficulties. We’ll greet new leaders and their families and say goodbye to others who have served here. We’ll have to let go of things and programs that we’ve held near-and-dear to our hearts for many years. We’ll have to finally say goodbye to some people and welcome back those who have returned.

We’ll greet new visitors, add new members, and baptize some babies along the way. We’ll celebrate lives, rejoice in weddings, and be encouraged to continue in what we’re doing. We’ll teach and guide one another with wisdom; we’ll sing along with the organ and piano, as well as with the guitar and drums. We’ll laugh within these walls, mourn within these walls, and be together as one body within these walls.

Don’t be discouraged with this church, nor with the things of this world. Don’t be disheartened when things don’t go as planned, when there are setbacks, or when things seem to be at a standstill. Easier said than done, right? Dress yourselves in compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. And over all of these, put on love. This is our outermost garment - the one the world sees. Love accentuates all the other virtues. It is only from love that true

compassion, real kindness, undisguised humility, firm gentleness, and patient long-suffering proceeds. Love is greater and more excellent than all the others, adds beauty to them, and brings them all together in perfectness.

I've told you this before, I'm going to say it now, and you'll definitely hear it from me again: you are my family, and I love you dearly. Let us as one body welcome in the new year with these virtues draped around our shoulders. Let us be bound to one another in love, and let us move into the world guided by love. This morning I want to end where I began, with Paul's words to the Colossians. But, let them be Paul's words to the Salidans:

Words like Jewish and non-Jewish, religious and irreligious, insider and outsider, uncivilized and uncouth, slave and free, mean nothing. From now on everyone is defined by Christ, everyone is included in Christ. So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.

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. Let the Word of Christ—the Message—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! 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. Amen.