

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
August 8, 2010
Colossians 3:12-17
“New Life in Christ, Part II”

The topic for last week and this morning is “The New Life in Christ.” We exist in this world, and we also believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Redeemer. How does the one affect the other? How are we different because of our Christian faith? That’s an important question to consider. If Christianity is simply one option out of many equal options before us, then I would sadly argue that we are not truly different because of our faith. Imagine you are standing before a buffet line containing lots of different foods and desserts. Is Christianity the steamed vegetables near the front that we feel obligated to put on our plates while our hearts and bellies gravitate to the brownies and sweets at the other end of the buffet? Imagine you are nestled into a comfortable couch holding a remote that lets you access hundreds of cable television channels. Is Christianity the documentary we might glance at in passing because it will be educational when our real interest and focus is saved for the reality show or action movie found on the pay per view channels?

If the Christian gospel – the belief that God exists, that God in Christ lived, died and was raised, and God continues to be in close relation with us through the Holy Spirit – is merely a collection of teachings on par with investment advice you get from your financial planner, exercise advice you get from your fitness coach, diet and medical advice you get from your doctor, and fashion advice you get from your partner or friends, then there is nothing I can say today that will offer you lasting peace and real hope. And even more sadly, there is nothing in scripture that can bring lasting change to our world, our community, or our life together.

When today’s scripture was written to the young church in Colossae, the expectation was that the individuals of this congregation had encountered something transformative, something as different from their previous experience as day is to night; as heaven-heights are above valley-depths. That expectation is also placed upon us. The author, writing on behalf of the apostle Paul, tells Christians to seek things that are above. Initially this is done in a very practical manner – by listing off vices to avoid and virtues to pursue. However, by being practical and specific, what had once been a stark contrast between things of heaven and things of earth was now flattened out to a narrow list of options laid out before us, like the buffet table or cable network of equal choices to consider. We read the list and promise God, “OK, I’ll try to avoid impurity, evil desire, greed, anger, malice and slander – check – and I’ll work on being compassionate, kind, humble and patient – check, check.” Yet you and I both know how easily those types of promises are broken.

That’s why this entire discussion about the new life in Christ is linked to a powerful metaphor, one which talks about “stripping off the old self and being clothed with the new self.” There are lots of ways you can picture this. In the early church, when you

were baptized, you put aside your old clothes and put on a fresh new robe of fine cloth. Or think of the Prodigal Son parable, in which the young man returned to his father, and immediately had his tattered, soiled robes replaced with a fine new robe, befitting one who no longer feeds and sleeps with pigs but who is welcomed home as a beloved son. In this metaphor, it is not just a matter of getting new clothes, like the kind you buy your children as they prepare for a new school year. Rather the old life is seen like the old clothes that are seen as rags and wholly unworthy, fit only to be destroyed or cast aside.

Here's where the subtlety and beauty of this passage becomes apparent. I mentioned last week that the good news of our faith is that we are "hidden with Christ in God" (Col 3:3). We are engulfed, enfolded, embraced into Christ. We fully participate as the living body of Christ and in so doing, come to see one another not as isolated individuals we bump into in this world, but as co-participants in the body of Christ. We are members one of another, just as in Christ we live and have our being. That is why we avoid the vices, because they harm our relations with one another within this larger being of Christ. And that is why we seek to show virtue – to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience – because through these things, we nurture our relations with one another within the body of Christ.

The children's sermon I gave earlier was probably more for you adults than for the kids. Putting on a coat is a change in our outer condition, but the change also leads to something happening inside us. We act – we put on a coat – we consciously, intentionally clothe ourselves in Christ, and as a consequence of that act, we are warmed up inside.¹ We are transformed inside, not by our own doing but rather, by God's Spirit and grace which moves within us to continue an internal process that was initiated by the external act. That is why Christianity is never just one philosophy amongst a range of philosophies. It is a participation in Christ, who first justifies us, makes us right, and, as a consequence of that participation, we are sanctified, warmed up; transformed deeply, richly, and permanently. We are literally changed for good.

I struggled with analogies that I could suggest as a way to illustrate this last point, but a couple examples came to mind. There has been a lot of talk recently about the television series "Mad Men," a show about advertising executives in the early 1960s. It is a show filled with stylishly dressed executives and their wives, where it seems everyone smokes, drinks, commits adultery, and indulges in other versions of self-destructive behavior while maintaining perfect hairdos and wearing tailored suits. It's a world of office parties where someone gets drunk and misbehaves – and immediately we think, "That couldn't happen today; you'd get fired or sued, or both." It's a world where pregnant women routinely smoke and drink and we think, "Doesn't she know the damage she's causing her unborn child?" As a sign of our life in Christ, we stand in a different place; we wear different garments now. We see that the world of Mad Men is not right, not healthy, not virtuous; and how many of their choices seem like darkness to the bright light in which we now live. However, as a reminder of the fact that we exist in a fallen, troubled world despite our new life in Christ, we find ourselves drawn to shows

like *Mad Men*, who model what it was like to live in the old garments and in subtle, perverse ways, try to entice us to put back on the old robes.²

A second analogy comes from a phrase I read in an interview with actress Laura Linney. None of us likes to grow old. I often hear comments like “Growing old ain’t for sissies.” Aging is hard work, physically and emotionally. Over the years, we lose aspects of our freedom and independence; we can’t drive anymore and we outlive our peers, loved ones and friends. Laura Linney is good friends with the actor Liam Neeson as well as with his former wife, actress Natasha Richardson. Richardson died suddenly after taking, what appeared to be, an innocent fall on a ski slope. She fell, got up, soon sent the paramedics away, and only later complained of a headache. Sadly she died within two days from a hematoma, a blood clot in the brain. Perhaps being especially mindful of the suddenness of Richardson’s death, Laura Linney spoke about the “privilege of aging” and how growing old is the greatest blessing.³ There is a profound truth to that phrase – the privilege of aging – yet a truth we too rarely remember. Just yesterday I officiated at a wedding, a celebration of new life as two people committed to create a future together as a married couple; and then I traveled to Mt. Lebanon Cemetery to officiate at a graveside service on the thirteen-month anniversary of Ted Brooks’ death, praying with a family who’d lost a loved one, who know there is a real and sometimes rare privilege of growing old together.

The reality of faith – the story of Jesus Christ that we have taken to heart as a baptismal truth and life-shaping reality – places us in a new and distinctive location in life. Things are different now on this gospel side of the dividing line of faith. We see there are vices to be avoided and virtues to be pursued, for such is what it means to be a Christian. We look at the world of *Mad Men*, of adultery and addiction and self-destructive ways, and discover that we cannot be a part of that world any longer. We look around us and remember that life is fragile, each day is a gift, and sometimes we are wise enough to appreciate that aging is a privilege. Yes, sometimes we lose our way. We stumble and fall back across the line – into addiction, anger, lust, fear, doubt, and temptation of myriad forms. But like the loving Father welcoming home the prodigal, like the mother hen offering safety to wandering chicks, God calls us back. And we clothe ourselves in something external – a promise that empowers us to show compassion, an example that reminds us to be kind and patient – and in the clothing of this new self, something is changed within us. We are warmed. We are made whole. We are at peace.

There is much more this scripture passage tells us. It reminds us to forgive, simply because we have ourselves been forgiven. It tells us to be thankful, for if you can’t be thankful for what you’ve already got, you can’t handle any more. It calls us to worship together – to sing hymns and songs, to chew on God’s word until it is part of our body and very being. And to do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus – everything.

We began by asking, “How are we different because of our identity as Christians?” The New Life in Christ is something in which we are clothed that transforms, redeems and makes us new. It is God’s grace plus our commitment to ways of faith, kindness and mercy. It is a finished deed and an ongoing reality, our agreement to become who we

truly are, moving from death to life, from one world to another, from individualism to the living body of Christ. A simple litmus test for this New Life is this: Can you name that in your life for which you are thankful? Can you give thanks to God for it? That ability comes from Christ. It emerges when the peace of Christ rules in your hearts. Start there. Give thanks. And let the New Life in Christ begin today.

AMEN

¹ John W. Coakley, Feasting on the Word, Colossians 3:12-17 (First Sunday after Christmas Day), *Theological Perspectives*, pp. 160, 162.

² Cf. "The Allure of Messy Lives," Katie Roiphe, *New York Times*, August 1, 2010, pp. Styles 1-2.

³ Frank Bruni, "The Age of Laura Linney," *New York Times Magazine*, August 1, 2010, p. 45.