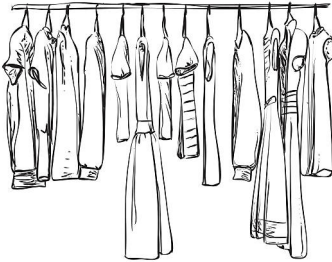


June 19, 2022

The Second Sunday after Pentecost

The Rev. Garrett Yates
St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church



“Clothed in Christ”

If you could travel back in time, and you decided to go to Inverness Elementary School in Birmingham, Alabama, in the early 90s you would have found a young kid oddly dressed. My mom worked for Polo Ralph Lauren, and when I was young I may as well have been an advertisement for the brand to my 6-year-old classmates. Most of the guys and gals of Ms. Clark's first grade class wore gym shorts, whimsical t-shirts, and athletic shoes; I was in collared shirts, large embroidered polo-playing rider over my heart, leather plaited belt, starched pants, and penny loafers – I learned from an early age the importance and the potential embarrassment of the clothes one wore.

“You have clothed yourselves with Christ,” the apostle tells the Christians in Galatia. It is such a curious statement. A statement that would have struck his hearers as strange, as different. The ancient world knew of putting on the virtues, of clothing oneself in the virtues of courage or temperance, even other writers of the New Testament speak in such a way. But Paul, here in Galatians, is breaking new and unprecedented ground: clothe yourselves not in virtue, but in a person. Clothe yourselves in Christ.

Paul wasn't grabbing the metaphor out of thin air; he knew his Hebrew bible. You remember the story – Adam and Eve, post fruit, realize they are naked. They were naked pre-fruit, but they didn't know it. It was only when they disobeyed that they became conscious of their trespass and felt shame. So, they run off and hide. And then you'll remember that God is walking through the Garden in the cool of the day, and he calls out for them. They didn't want God to see them naked. But God being God finds them. And then there is this tender moment where the text says that God made garments of skin for them; for Adam and his wife he clothed them. Rabbis have puzzled over what this verse means. We know that Eden was known as the garden of the gods, the home to angelic existence and so we wonder if God gives this celestial couple actual skin, flesh to help them weather the rough world they were about to encounter?

Or did God take one of Adam’s animals, perhaps sacrifice it, and use as clothing. The text isn’t clear. But this little suggestive detail signals to me that God’s first response to humanity’s nakedness isn’t to punish them, accuse them, or mock them. He acts compassionately, and tenderly. Naked and ashamed, God clothes them, and, as it were, blesses them on their journey into the world.

Paul, picking up the motif, says now something new and different is happening. Now, you get to put on Christ’s skin, Christ’s clothing.

You have clothed yourself with Christ.

I wonder what sort of thought went into what you would wear this morning. Maybe you chose something colorful to mirror the colors of early summer. Maybe you decided to wear a necklace your spouse bought you or a piece of jewelry passed down from your mother. Maybe you went shopping recently and are in something new. Maybe you chose something casual, something that fits comfortably; maybe you dressed in the dark and didn’t think too much about it.

Clothing communicates a lot. Among other things it communicates status and belonging. We may wear a hat representing our alma mater, or our boat club, or our favorite team. We may try to avoid brands altogether. We might love wearing old clothes, dressing as plainly and unassumingly as we can – in this we imply that we have a rich inner life. In the first fall after moving to Lincoln, a parishioner bought me a flannel button down from L.L. Bean with a note that said, “If you want to be a real Lincolnite...wear this.” Clothing is about belonging.

What we wear says something about who we are. How we want to be seen. I reached in my closet this morning and grabbed one of my 15 black shirts, but with Paul’s epistle on my mind, I wondered, what does it mean to be clothed with Christ?

I find this an endlessly suggestive metaphor. What would it mean to see God as a warm winter coat or as a

bespoke suit? As a beloved cardigan sweater purchased on your honeymoon, or an old navy-blue Lacoste jacket you inherited from your father, or a pair of argyle socks you wore on your wedding day? Clothing connects us to those we love, to memories of love; clothing reminds us of who we are. Clothing is about belonging. But there is a negative side to clothes too. Clothes can be a way to draw boundaries.

It's a radical statement when the Apostle says in Christ "there is now no male or female." In Paul's day, married women wore a garment called a stola, "a large sleeveless overgarment with narrow shoulders," which was a sign of virtue and modesty. This was a piece of clothing that marked Roman women, in life and in art, as distinctly not male. Clothing can reinforce boundaries but it can also erode social norms around masculinity and femininity. This is why folks in earlier decades were so anxious about women wearing slacks, and why the question "Who wears the pants in the relationship?" packs such a punch.

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are one in Christ Jesus." And yet, as the irony of history would have it, all three of the distinctions that Paul explicitly names as undone by Jesus are distinctions that, at various points in history, have been created in part through clothing.

For example, in the Middle Ages, the church demanded that Jews wear special sartorial markers: as the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 declared, in order to prevent "pious Christians" from having sex with Jews or "Saracens," "such persons of either sex, in every Christian province and at all times, are to be distinguished in public from other people by the character of their dress." Many slave societies have attempted to set apart slaves by their clothing: in ancient Rome, lawmakers tried to distinguish enslaved women from free women by dress. Even in societies where slavery was racialized and enslaved people more easily identifiable by skin color slaveowners clothed slaves distinctively: in the eighteenth-century Caribbean, for example, it was typical

for planters to order the linen from which they would have slaves' clothing made "dyed a distinguishing color to help identify slaves."

Paul's voice rings down through the centuries: NO - you are clothed in Christ now!

On Paul's terms, Jesus is not the kind of clothing that creates social divisions but the kind of clothing that undoes them. Jesus is not a Vineyard Vines dress or a Barbour jacket or an expensive pair of Italian designer shoes. I was talking to Katie last night about what she wore as a teenager to school, and of course at her day school they wore a uniform. A gray plaid skirt, paired with a collared shirt with the school's insignium embroidered. Katie wasn't particularly fond of this, but we did talk about how uniforms have a distinct social advantage: they level the fashion playing field. Students can't announce their status or class by their dress; their clothing, in a way, creates community. So, I wonder if Jesus is more like the school uniform that erases boundaries between people. Or at least that is the kind of clothing Jesus wants to be. When we put up walls in the name of Jesus, we are turning the Lord into an expensive designer dress.

God clothes us, God in Christ is our clothing, and God calls us to clothe others. Consider the Epistle to James where he writes: What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? In Matthew 25, Jesus says, when you saw another naked, did you clothe them? If you gave them clothes you clothed me.

This image of being clothed by others came alive for me as I read about a poignant time in writer and theologian Stephanie Paulsell's life. Paulsell, who has taught at Harvard Divinity School for many years, is someone who writes honestly and searchingly about her life in God; she is someone, you might say, whose been stripped naked by

experience, and has had to look long and hard to trace the hand of a loving God in life. In her book *Honoring the Body* she writes about a particularly dark and excruciating time in her and her family's life when she suffered the unthinkable: a late term miscarriage. Looking back, she writes:

Several years ago, having miscarried a cherished pregnancy on the day after Christmas, I found myself seemingly screwed to my bed with depression, unable to work, read, or pray. I was, however, able to talk on the phone. Day after day I wore out my friends, especially my friend Kay. The year before, Kay had left behind a job, salary, and colleagues to spend a year in prayer and silence. Violating her dearly bought solitude again and again, I cried on the phone, "I am so depressed that I can't even pray. I try to pray, but I can't." A few days later, a package arrived from Kay. It contained a simple beige jumper and a note that read, "I have prayed in this dress every day for a year. You don't have to pray. Just wear it. It is full of prayers." I did wear that dress. I wore it and wept in it, and cried out Why? to God in it. I let the prayers in that dress pray for me when my mouth was dry and full of ashes. And when I became pregnant again, I continued to wear that dress. Kay loves long, loose clothes, and her dress was spacious enough to accompany me nearly to the end of my ninth month. Her prayers were spacious enough, too, to gather up my fear and grief and anger. And my joy, when it came.

Paulsell had learned what it meant to be clothed in Christ. Christ's clothing is sometimes a presence, a prayer, a kindness from another. Someone offering us a shawl, a dress, a shirt that has been prayed over. Christ clothes us when we are down. And his clothing – his loving and intimate presence – clothes us until we reach resurrection.

Our faith is a profoundly material faith; it deals with earth and matter and bodies and clothing. We leave it to other religions to chart the spirit's ascent into the immaterial realm. Our story is about God descending to the world of

flesh and blood. Taking on skin. Clothing bodies. Healing shame.

So often our clothes become about covering shame. Or feeling ashamed. I'll share something that is at the edge of embarrassment and humor for me. I'll just say that post fatherhood, my clergy collars are a little snugger these days, and I don't have as many options among last summer's clothes to wear this time around. It's not something I'm all that excited about. Its been hard to fall further away from my high school self. But I was talking to a friend the other day – he too is a new father, and we were talking about this dad weight. And he said, "hey man, there is now more of us to love our daughters." His lightheartedness, in its own small way, clothed my shame in a different clothing. Love, mercy, acceptance have a way of doing that. And God is the one who draws near to clothe us in love.

God's clothing line, you might say, is Christ.

You have clothed yourselves with Christ. Reflect on that this week as you open your closet doors.

