Wisdom of Solomon 5: 15-20 Colossians 3: 1-17 Luke 12: 22-31

Dress Code August 7, 2016 Mary R. Brownlow

I have three older sisters, who were born within 4 years of each other. When they were little, before I was born, my grandmother liked to buy these three little girls matching outfits: sundresses and Easter dresses and such things. I have seen them in old photos, and they look very cute. As I grew up, my parents, who were very frugal, believed in hand-me-downs. So I got wear these little dresses, one after the other, for about five years: the same exact dress, over and over. And lots of other hand-me-downs, too. I won't say that I was scarred by this experience, but I think that I **needed** to learn to sew in my early teens in order to break loose from the oppression of old clothes that I did not choose. The funny thing was, when I was 15, I discovered thrift shops and vintage clothing. So, ever since, as least half of my clothes have been hand-me-downs again. But they are my choice, my taste. I wear the clothes that I choose.

Clothing has a lot of meaning. It's an identify-er. We wear uniforms to show our status, our jobs, our expertise, and other clothes to show our wealth. We wear t-shirts when we volunteer together. Clothing can show that we belong. Or, we can use clothing to shock and awe. We sometimes use clothing as a cloak for disguise, for hiding. In writing, it can be used as a metaphor for the effect of our presence on other people. The Book of Job uses it in this sense, "clothed with shame" and the Book of Proverbs describes the ideal woman with, "Strength and honor are her clothing." Perhaps because clothing can be such a hot-button issue, because it can say so much, it becomes a useful tool for spiritual teaching.

So, in the reading from Colossians, we read about clothing, and it catches my attention. Who is telling me how to dress now? Is it a hand-me-down? Is it a uniform? Do I get to choose?

The people of the first century church at Colossae in Asia Minor are getting advice on how to grow into the Christian life. They have been baptized, which was seen as a life-changing moment of commitment, stripping off the old life like a dirty, worn out garment and putting on the new self with the help of Christ. It is a moment of renewal, but also a lifelong process. After baptism, they were equipped to grow into the likeness of God: to live up to their human potential as those created in God's image. Paradoxically, baptism was a kind of death. We heard, "for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." We do not emphasize this aspect of baptism when we bring an infant forward in this church, but to those early Christians it was a very real part of conversion. They literally faced death for choosing to become Christians. And it was important for them to turn aside from, "to put to death" as it says, behavior that would compromise their new life.

So they are told to strip off the old clothes – anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive language – and put on some new ones – compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. The inner transformation that was begun in baptism is to be made visible in their treatment of other people. In the same way that clothing sets a group apart, the love and harmony displayed by this community would be the marker of belonging.

For some of these early Christians, this meant not only a change of belief but a change of profession. A second century document tells us that the following types of work, among others, were forbidden to those who wished to be baptized: one who makes images, one who teaches children the work of this world, one who hunts or teaches hunting, one who teaches fighting or war or driving horses, or one who is a soldier of the prince (unless he agrees not to kill when ordered to). All those professional markers of identity were to be left behind, so that a new life, "hidden within God", could be revealed. There are aspects of the old person that used to be so important – whether they were "Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, or free" as it says. The barriers created by these identities are dissolved within the community of the risen Christ.

Our lives are different, of course. I know a lot of people who teach children the work of this world who are wonderful examples of faith and discipleship. I know hunters and soldiers who are devout Christians. So we need to read and live Scripture to match the tasks before us today. What do we keep and what do we lose?

I come back to the idea of "renewal in knowledge, according to the image of our creator." This is a journey of discovery: finding out in what way we are created in God's image. We don't just put on a uniform, then say we're finished. Instead we discover more about the identity that has been obscured under the trappings of the old life. The life that has been hidden will be fully revealed as we live clothed in love. Who knows what we'll find there?

I have a theory about congregational life. We speak of gifts: so and so is so good with children, or so good with finances, or with flowers. So and so is such a good musician. And we naturally expect those people to share those particular gifts with the church community. There is a tendency to make assumptions, (sometimes gender-based assumptions, I am afraid to say) and to pigeon-hole ourselves and others according to the obvious gifts. We want to dress them in the clothing, the uniform of that one calling. But I think that each person here has a hidden gift, or maybe more than one. I am continually finding out that the expert in finances is a great cook, or that the artist is wonderful at personnel matters, or that the musician has a gift for prayer. Maybe this is the most important task of a minister: to help people discover and uncover their obvious and hidden gifts. In my case, I'm the mom who made lots of Halloween costumes and I turned into a minister! Go figure.

The passage from Luke about the lilies of the field speaks to me about the fact that each individual is wrapped and sustained and clothed in God's love. And just as a field of flowers is beautiful in both repetition and variety, we are each as beautiful and remarkable in our humanity. We don't need Solomon or any other king to demonstrate the way we are gifted – clothed - by a God who celebrates our full growth and potential.

Our individuality and our various gifts do not disappear as we open ourselves to the transforming power of God in Christ: they are revealed more fully in service. Beyond the old groupings, we find that Jew and Greek have a lot to offer each other, as do men and women, young and old, rich and needy, right-brain thinker and left-brain thinker. We have the opportunity, in this gathering of diverse people, to nurture each person's obvious and hidden gift. And how does this *nurture* happen? Read those verses in Colossians: "clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience." The following verse says "Bear with one another," but this is a very bland and minimal translation of what is really 2 things, two verbs: tolerating one another and

"gracing" one another. Or we might say, dealing graciously with one another. That same verb, *charizomenoi*, is from the same root as charisma, or gift of grace. So our dealings with each other, in this community wearing garments of the new self, are actually able to call forth each person's gift, each person's best qualities, each person's highest good. It's a win-win set up, as far as I can see.

I said earlier that we need to read and live Scripture to match the tasks before us today. One task is tending to the needs of this congregation, our local body of Christ in the world. We have pains and needs and potential that can be realized within this circle, using the guidelines and spiritual "dress code" we find in Colossians. But all of this nurture cannot be for our own benefit only. As we help our children and *all* children grow and realize potential, we can allow them their differences, their rebellion, their quirkiness. And our gracious dealings need to reach beyond these walls. We can use the example of the God who feeds and clothes and loves creation as a whole and in its many separate glories. We are inspired to stretch out our hands to find each beloved raven, each beloved lily, each beloved field: not only to tolerate it in its difference and individuality but to call out those qualities. Renewal is a gift that can be offered to all.

And, speaking of the tasks before us today, I don't think I have yet experienced a year in which so much public discourse is imbued with "anger, wrath, malice, slander and abusive language." Surely we are called to demonstrate another way, surely we can strip off that old destructive clothing to speak words that instruct, reconcile, and heal. Surely each of us, in our own way, can show how we are clothed in love, and how baptism can change speech – not as a sign of superiority, but as a sign of care for God's creation.

So I don't have to worry about wearing the hand-me-downs of some other Christian life, that doesn't suit me or fit my personality. I don't have to worry that I will be forced into some uniform kind of behavior that will stifle my growth in the image of the divine. I don't have to worry about losing myself in a gaggle of sisters. God calls me to more than that.

As we approach the communion table today, we remember different symbols of our life in Christ: heavenly food, not heavenly clothing. But still there are themes of union and renewal, of nurture and of grace. I pray that you will find - in the bread and the cup - an experience of God's desire to feed your life so that you can grow. As we receive the elements from each others' hands, I pray that you will experience not just tolerance, but grace. As we covenant together, I pray that we will recommit ourselves to renewal in knowledge according to the image of our creator.