

“Church Clothes”

“As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”

As a child, I had three sets of clothes: play clothes, school clothes, and church clothes. Each had its place, and they were *not* interchangeable – you would never wear play clothes to school or school clothes to church. While we did not have school uniforms in public school, there was a dress code that clearly defined the difference between what was acceptable and what was unacceptable, which basically meant anything that might fall into the “play clothes” category. We went to school in our school clothes, and after school we changed into our play clothes before we went out to play with our friends. On Sunday morning, we reached into another part of our closets for our church clothes, which were the most formal and least comfortable clothes we owned. Our congregation didn’t have a formal dress code, but there was no doubt in anyone’s mind as to what was considered acceptable dress for people who attended worship at St. Peter’s.

Dress codes have changed in many churches (but not all; there are still some traditions in which worshippers are still expected to attend in their “Sunday best”); but no matter how we may dress when we gather for worship. Paul reminds us this morning of the clothing with which all of us have been attired, clothing that identifies us as children of God:

- “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” – Galatians 3:27-28.

Paul uses “in Christ” repeatedly throughout his letter to the Galatians to characterize Christian existence as a state of corporate unity with Christ (“... *in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.*” – 3:14). All the Galatian believers, without distinction, are already children of God in Christ Jesus via “the faith.” Paul is sharing this message with a church that was experiencing conflict and division, caused in part by the fact that Jewish Christians were now being joined by Gentile converts, people with whom they had formerly never associated before becoming Christians. These former divisions were affecting the life and mission of the church and are one of the main reasons Paul writes this letter to the churches in the province of Galatia in Asia Minor; he chastises them for “*deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel*” (1:6) and reminds them that “*a person is justified not by works of the law but through faith in Christ Jesus.*” (2:16). The insistence on the part of the Jewish Christians in Galatia that Gentiles must first convert to Judaism before they became Christians deeply offended Paul, because he saw it “*for what it was – not only an affront to the Gospel but also an affront to the God of Abraham, who called Abraham and Sarah and all their descendants for the benefit of ‘all the families of the earth.’*” [Genesis 12:3].” (Alan Brehm). Paul is telling the Gentile Galatians that they are now given the honorific name “children of God” (lit. “sons of God”) that was once reserved for the Jewish people alone (“*You are children of the LORD your God ... you are a people holy to the LORD your God; it is you the LORD has chosen out of all the peoples of earth to be his people, his treasured possession.*” – Deuteronomy 14:1-2). Paul has “*taken a title that originally asserted Israel’s special privilege and extended it to include Gentile believers.*” (Richard B. Hays).

Paul points to baptism as the means through which all people – Jews and Gentiles – have been united with Christ, which entails death to one's old life and entry into a new world:

- “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” – Romans 6:3-5.

Paul pictures those who have been baptized into Christ as also having *“clothed yourselves with Christ”* (3:27), which is possibly an allusion to a feature of early Christian baptismal liturgies. Persons being baptized (most of whom in the early church were adults) removed their garments, were baptized naked, and then put on a new white garment, signifying the new life they were entering:

- “Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” – Romans 13:14.
- “You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” – Ephesians 4:22-24.
- “Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.” – Colossians 3:9-10.

To be “clothed” with some quality or attribute is to take on the characteristics of that in which one is being clothed. Paul’s language of “putting on Christ” is another figurative way of describing the mysterious person union with Christ to which he refers earlier in the letter: *“... and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who live in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live in faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”* (2:20). In such a union, those who are “in Christ” share in his divine sonship and take on his character. *“The baptismal imagery here, then, points to the transformation of identity that the Galatians have undergone.”* (Hays).

The implications of this transformation are spelled with reference to the abolition of social distinctions: *“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”* (3:28). Being baptized “in Christ” means that one is incorporated into the Body of Christ, in which each member belongs and each has its place within the body’s unity:

- “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into the one body – Jews and Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of the one Spirit.” – 1 Corinthians 12:12-13.
- “In that renewal there is no longer Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!” – Colossians 3:11.

In this new reality, ethnic distinctions (“Jew or Greek”, another word Paul uses for Gentiles) no longer matter; all are constituted together as one new people of God (*“For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.”* – Romans 15:8-9).

Social classes ("slave or free") are also negated in the new creation; *"Paul is declaring that God has created a new community, the church, in which the baptized already share equality."* – Hays). The transformed community is even a place in which gender distinctions ("male and female") have lost their power to divide and oppress; for *"all of you are one in Christ Jesus."* The fundamental feature of the faith community's identity is its unity in Christ. Because the baptized have entered into union with Christ, they all participate equally in the same privileged status as joint *"heirs according to the promise."* (3:29).

- "In the church men look upon one another no longer as free men or slaves, as men or women, but as members of Christ's body ... in the Church no one has to be considered in his special capacity, whether he be Jew or Greek, freeman or bondservant. And such respect of persons must be excluded at all costs. We take account of each other only with regard to our membership in the Body of Christ, that is to say, that we are all one in Christ." – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

The clothes that we wear on different occasions also serve the purpose of identifying who we are and our purpose in that particular context. Many people wear uniforms to identify their roles and the responsibilities with which they have been entrusted; people may wear their best clothes to a wedding or funeral as a means of showing respect to the people who had invited them to share this occasion; and some schools and offices still impose dress codes for the sake of the learning or work environment. Being "clothed in Christ" serves a similar purpose: it identifies us as children of God both to ourselves and to others, a means through which we witness to the fact that we have been reborn through Holy Baptism as God's holy people and incorporated into the Body of Christ that is the church. While some of us do wear specific clothing both in worship and in the community (although there are no regulations in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada that mandate that pastors must wear this apparel), the true means of identification through which others may know that we are brothers and sisters in Christ is not something we can make for ourselves or buy in a store, but the "fruits of the Spirit" with which we have been attired so that others may know our identity as the baptized people of God:

- "... the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control ... If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another." – Galatians 5:22-23, 25-26.

We have been "clothed in Christ" so that we might know who we are and also so that others might know that we are the ones called by Christ to *"let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."* (Matthew 5:16). As my parents clothed me as a child with the appropriate attire for various contexts, so has God clothed us as God's children with the apparel that will allow us to fulfill Christ's command that his followers be *"witnesses ... to the ends of the earth."* (Acts 1:8).

- "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience ... Above all, clothe yourselves in love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." – Colossians 3:12, 14.

Those who have been reborn through Holy Baptism need to clothe themselves with specific virtues. They are now *"God's chosen ones, holy and beloved,"* and therefore *"it is as the new people of God that they are to put on the qualities of the new humanity."* (Andrew T. Lincoln). The five virtues with which

the baptized are to clothe themselves are required for harmonious living as a community; the new people of God need both a deep and heartfelt sympathy for the situations of others and an active consideration for others interests and needs. It is *love* – the love described by Paul in 1 Corinthians as the quality that “*bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things*” (1 Corinthians 13:7) – that acts as the bond not only for the other virtues but also for the community in which they are to be displayed. It is by both clothing themselves with the virtues bestowed upon us at baptism and actively sharing these virtues both within the church and in the world that other will identify us as the children of God and the bearers of Christ’s light and love to all the world.

- “‘Love’ (*agape*) surpasses everything else that the new man has to put on and to do ... [it is] the fastening together of separate items which are thus brought together into a unity. Consequently, one could interpret love as the perfect bond which joins all other virtues to form an organic unity ... Thus love is understood as the bond that leads to perfection. It binds together the members of the community who live in the unity of the ‘body of Christ’ and thus produces ‘perfection’ in the community of the one body.” – Eduard Lohse.

The “church clothes” that we wear may no longer be in a separate section in our closets, but we still need to take care that we wear the clothing that is appropriate for church – both in our worship gatherings and as we go forth into the world to love and serve the Lord. Our church clothes cannot be bought in a store or made on a sewing machine; they are the clothing that is bestowed upon us at Holy Baptisms, the clothing that identifies us as children of God, the clothing that bears the virtues of God’s abiding presence to others, the clothing that witnesses to all the world that we are people of God, clothed in the righteousness of Christ, sharing the light of Christ so that people may experiences God’s love and know that there is a place for them in the presence of the Lord. Amen.