

The New Spirit

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Sermon Series: The God Who Makes All Things New

Colossians 3:5-15

“Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, weakness and patience.”

- Colossians 3:12

There are two schools of thought about what people should wear to church. In some church circles, it is expected that people wear their best clothes to church. Since we offer God the best of everything, the same logic applies to dress. We offer God our best, not normal, everyday wear.

The other school of thought is it really doesn't matter what people wear to church, since God judges the attitudes and disposition of the heart. God looks on the heart, not the clothes. Many churches today promote a relaxed dress code in worship. One church advertises on its web site, “We don't care what you wear to church. I mean, you probably shouldn't wear that bright, orange tutu in your closet, but other than that, it's pretty much wide open.”

I don't have a strong opinion on the matter. You can honor God either by dressing formal or dressing casual. My only request is that you wear something that appropriately covers your body.

As I think back over 28 years of worshipping in this church, the oddest outfit anyone ever wore to church was a Santa Claus suit. A man, dressed as Santa Claus, complete with a red suit, black boots and white beard, sat conspicuously one Sunday morning in the second row of our former sanctuary. He joined in singing the hymns and

reciting the prayers. When we passed the friendship pad, I wondered, how would he sign his name?

After worship, he introduced himself. It turned out he worked as a Santa Claus and had just enough time for join us for worship before his shift began at Tyson's Corner Mall.

Our Scripture lesson addresses what Christians ought to wear to church. Paul writes to Christians in the Colossian church, “Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, weakness and patience” (3:12). Two verses later, Paul advises these same Christians, “...clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (3:14).

This passage is often read at weddings. A bride and groom are summoned to “clothe yourselves with love.” They are encouraged to wear wedding garments of mutual forgiveness, mutual forbearance and mutual love.

Many Christians, though, do not dress the part. The clothes we wear are enumerated in verse 8. We too often wear clothes of “anger, wrath, malice, slander and abusive language.”

Paul characterizes the Christian life as taking off the old self and putting on the new self. He writes in verses 9-10, “You have taken off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self.” We can leave this old self

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behind. We don't need it any longer, since this old self has no future. Paul writes in Romans that this "old self has been crucified with Christ" (6:6).

Billy Martin, former manager of the New York Yankees, would tell new rookies in spring training, "It's an honor to put on New York pinstripes. Whenever you wear this uniform, play like Yankees, play like world champions." In similar fashion, Paul urges us to put on Jesus Christ. We put on, as we would New York Yankee pinstripes, the identity and character of Christ.

In the early church, baptism was traditionally administered on Holy Saturday, the evening before Easter Sunday. After baptism, new catechumens discarded their old clothing and wore white robes for the week following Easter. The white robe symbolized being clothed in Christ. "For as many of you who have been baptized have put on Christ" (Galatians 3:26-27).

Our theme for Youth Sunday last week was "new creation." "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation: everything old has passed away; behold everything has become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The year 2007 is a time of renewal for our church. We believe in the One who is able "to make all things new" (Revelation 21:5). God wants us to discard our old self and be clothed with this new self.

I don't want to give the impression this new self is as easy as putting on a new suit of clothes.

Renewal is a lifelong process of taking off the old self and putting on the new self. God's work of renewal means the Spirit must root out deeply ingrained selfishness from our lives.

I'd like Jesus to do a little remodeling in my life, but he wants to do a total makeover. In the TV show, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, a team of people rebuilds a family's home in seven days. It's a spin-off of the show *Extreme Makeover*. We'd like Jesus to remodel a room or two, but leave the rest of the house intact. When Jesus remodels, he does an extreme makeover.

C. S. Lewis writes in his book *The Joyful Christian*:

"When I was a child I often had a toothache. And I knew that if I went to my mother she would give me something, which would deaden the pain for that night and let me sleep. But I did not go to my mother, at least not until the pain became very bad. The reason I didn't go was this: I did not doubt that she would give me aspirin, but I knew that she would also do something else. I knew she would take me to the dentist.

I could not get what I wanted out of her without getting something more, which I did not want. I wanted immediate relief from pain, but I could not get it without having my teeth set permanently right. Dentists would start fiddling about with all sorts of other teeth, which hadn't yet begun to ache. They wouldn't let sleeping dogs lie. If you give them an inch, They will take a

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mile. Now if I may put it this way, our Lord is like a dentist. If you give him an inch, he will take a mile. People go to him to be cured of some particular sin.... Well, he will cure it all right, but he will not stop there. That may be all you asked, but if you once call him in, he will give you the full treatment. He's going to see a job through."

Paul's admonition to take off the old self and put on the new self is directed to the whole church in Colossae, rather than individual believers. In other words, we can be better Christians together than we can be alone.

As I see it, the church of Jesus Christ has essentially two functions in Scripture: to encourage each other and to hold one another accountable. I am impressed with how many times Scripture implores us to offer encouragement to one another. The writer of Hebrews advises us "...to encourage one another daily" (3:13). The writer goes on to say, "Let us encourage one another with love and good deeds" (10:24-25).

If you are actively pursuing a Christian life, sooner or later you will become discouraged. You will discover just how deeply ingrained and stubborn is your old self.

Encourage is a compound of two words from the Latin, the prefix "en" coupled with courage, which mean to give courage to someone. We want, in our fellowship, to give courage to each other.

The church exists to encourage each other and hold one another accountable. Our freedom-loving culture bristles at the thought of accountability. We are accountable to no one. I do my own thing.

Perhaps you've heard me say previously I've been reading revival sermons from the First Great Awakening of the 18th century and the Second Great Awakening of the 19th century. I've become particularly intrigued with John Wesley's sermons. Wesley was appalled by the lax behavior of Christians in the Anglican Church. While a student at the University of Oxford in England, Wesley joined a "holy club" with his brother Samuel. They held one another accountable with a series of 21 questions, which is attached to this sermon. These questions shock our 21st century sensibilities. They seem invasive and excessively personal. But these questions were not intended to be legalistic inquiries into people's personal behavior; they were designed to promote spiritual maturity.

Let me illustrate the meaning of accountability, using one of Wesley's questions: "Do I grumble or complain constantly?"

I know of a pastor in Missouri who became frustrated with his congregation's complaining about trivial things, like the choice of hymns or informal dress in worship. He invited his church to swear off complaining, criticizing, gossiping and using sarcasm for 21 continuous days. People who took the pledge

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were issued purple bracelets. If they catch themselves or one other complaining, they're required to take off the bracelet, switch it to the opposite wrist and start over counting the days.

The TODAY show caught wind of this movement and mounted a camera in the minister's office to monitor the minister. Two hours later the minister was caught on camera uttering a complaint. It took this minister almost four months to put together 21 straight days without complaining. Some of his parishioners are still working on it!

When Wesley founded the Methodist society in 1744, he broke his community into bands of 6-12 people, in order "to speak to each other freely and plainly about the state of our souls." Wesley reduced these 21 questions into five questions for each band. The purpose was, in Wesley's words, "to watch one other in love." They were intended to safeguard against poor judgment and self-deception.

Sometimes we confuse love with permissiveness. Then we wonder why there is such an epidemic of moral failure among Christians today. Maybe we need greater vigilance in watching one another in love. In this culture of rugged individualism, we are so afraid to say anything to anyone. True fellowship demands accountability.

Stu Weber writes about his first day at the U.S. Army Ranger School in Fort Benning, Georgia. He remembers the raspy voice of his drill sergeant barking out

orders, determined to transform those new recruits into the Army's best.

As this sergeant was ready to announce the first assignment, his soldiers braced themselves for something tough, such as running ten miles in battle gear or rappelling down a sheer cliff. Instead, he told them to find a buddy. "Find yourself a ranger buddy," he growled. "You will stick together. You will never leave each other. You will encourage each other, and, as necessary, you will carry each other." It was the army's way of saying, "Difficult assignments require a friend. Together is better."

Who's your ranger buddy? AA makes extensive use of sponsors in its 12-step program. Rock stars and celebrities are assigned "sober companions" or "clean-living assistants." Buddies are invaluable, whether you are scuba diving or firefighting, dieting or exercising.

Do you have a spiritual buddy? The church is not a social club; it's a fellowship of spiritual friends who encourage one another and hold each other accountable.

