

Sermon – December 26, 2021
“Clothe yourselves with Love”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Colossians 3:12-17

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them a blessing for your people that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor while we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

Good morning! Merry Christmas! Does anyone know what time it is? Don't forget that on the Christian calendar, Christmas does not end on Christmas Day. There are twelve days of Christmas and the wise men are just saddling up their camels. There is more to come in our Christmas season. I would like to thank each of you for your great generosity and the gift that you gave to Kay and me. I also want to thank you for your love, patience, understanding, and willingness to try new things such as reading an Advent devotional together and trying to provoke one another to love. It is still today for those of us who are yet alive, so we have yet another chance to provoke each other and those in our community to love. May our attempts continue not only in Advent and Epiphany, but throughout the year as long as it is today.

On the secular calendar, we have blown past Boxing Day and are looking forward to the New Year and possibly are giving thoughts to resolutions for improvement in the coming year. Is anyone looking for a membership in the coming year at a spiritual gym? Hang on to that thought and let's see if we can develop some ideas this morning that might help us to grow spiritually in the coming year. On the Christian calendar, we have turned from descending into darkness, and,

with the arrival of the Christ child, have begun climbing up the mountain of transfiguration where we will witness Jesus' glory. But first, we will dwell in the days of Christmas and continue to enjoy our celebration of the arrival of the baby Jesus, God in the flesh, the Incarnation.

Normally, we move on through the Christian calendar to Epiphany and get to the attributes of a Christ-follower later in the year. However, I thought that it might be helpful for us as we prepare for our climb up the mountain to look at the attributes of Christians given by Paul in his letter to the Colossians. From Paul's list, we might be able to develop a few spiritual New Year's resolutions as we begin another secular new year. In Colossians, Paul tells us to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and love. Let's look briefly at some of these new clothes that we are to put on. First, there is compassion. This is not mere care for each other, but means we are so moved that we feel it in the depths of our internal organs, or our bowels. This idea of compassion is to have strong emotional feelings from deep within our nature for others. Kindness is one of the fruits of the Spirit. It is how we are to always treat each other. Humility is not putting ourselves down but lifting others up to where we are. Jesus comes to a humble place at his birth and will humbly die on the cross, lifting us all out of our sins. Those who follow Jesus are to look for the humble paths in our lives to follow, for it is on the humble paths we will find Jesus. Meekness is also a fruit of the Spirit and is like gentleness. It is not a harsh, judgmental characteristic, but a gentle, sweet spirit. All of these items of clothing are put on through prayer and openness to the Holy Spirit.

Patience is another fruit of the Spirit. I think we see a theme in Paul's letter with many of these characteristics being Spirit-fruit in our lives. I have at least two words of advice for developing patience. The first is, if we pray and ask God for patience, God will place someone in our lives to help us develop patience. The second is that to develop patience as a fruit of the Spirit, God places someone in the congregation we attend who is our opposite and requires our patience as we seek to be in ministry with one another. If we are seeking to put on patience, and we pray for the fruit of patience, expect God to put someone in our life to help. Also, expect God to put someone in our church who is our opposite who can help us put on patience. This is not to discourage us from praying for patience, but to help us realize this item of clothing is put on through interactions with people. As we work to develop patience with others, let us always

recall how patient God is with us. And if we find ourselves thinking everyone else could use some practice developing patience, then we probably need to add patience to our resolution list.

Next comes forgiveness. This is the language that we as Christians speak, forgiveness. It is a foreign language to the world. If we have a complaint against another, we must forgive, not go and share our complaint with others in the church. This is another one of those places in our Bible that we should have a verse underlined. In this verse you can just underline the word “must.” Forgiving others is not optional, nor is it conditional. If we want to be forgiven by God for our transgressions, then we must forgive others when they transgress against us. Absent here in Paul’s writing is any mention of the question, “Do I have to continue in relationship with someone whom I have forgiven?” For Paul, Christ is the example. When Christ forgives us, he does not withdraw from us, but if anything, is more extravagant in his love for us, if that is possible. I think our own approach here may always be guarded so as not to put ourselves in some jeopardy, but our forgiveness is to be like Christ’s, total.

This brings us to the last attribute in Paul’s list, love. We are to clothe ourselves in love. Now we have been practicing provoking one another to love throughout Advent and that gives us a good starting point to become those clothed in love. Can we provoke each other to love all of the coming year? What would our congregation look like if we all had as a spiritual resolution to provoke one person each week to love? What would our church and community be like if the 20+ of us provoked 20+ people to love each week of the coming year? Do we think we would notice? Do we think the community would notice? And while I count smiles and waving at people as attempts at provoking love, remember Jesus’ example is to die on the cross for our sins. Holding no love back, he died, loving us into the kingdom of God. This is extravagant love, love that we are to clothe ourselves with and emulate in our lives, extravagantly loving others.

Paul does not simply tell us that we are to put on these garments, but gives some guidance for how to get dressed with these new clothes. The first is for us to be thankful. As followers of Christ, we are to always be thankful for Jesus our Savior, Messiah, and Lord. One approach to thankfulness is to resolve to start each day giving thanks to God. Then stop at lunch and give thanks for the morning’s blessings and for help meeting challenges. Pause again in the evening and thank God for our blessings of the day and for our successes and failures as we have lived another day. And finally, as we lie down to rest at the end of the day, give thanks to God for this day we have been given and for all the love shown to us by God this day. Resolve to

develop thankfulness, starting to give thanks somewhere in our day, and then to grow by adding more and more times of thankfulness until we find ourselves giving thanks all of the day.

Paul's next coaching point is to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly. We want to read the word, alone and with others, each day. For those who read together during Advent, pick a Gospel and read through it together. Let what we have already begun be a springboard into a life of letting Christ's word dwell in us richly. Other great resolutions are to join a Bible study or Sunday School class and if you can't find one, then get with a few others and start one. A great way to start this discipline is to resolve to read the Bible, or a Testament, or a Gospel, or a chapter or a verse. The point is to begin to get God's word into our hearts and let it dwell there. It is through the indwelling of the word of God that we are transformed.

Paul then tells us to teach and admonish one another in all wisdom. I would advise great caution here if you resolve to teach and admonish others, as too often we end up teaching and admonishing others not in love but in a manner that causes them to react negatively. So, while discouraging us from resolving to teach and admonish directly, I will share that there is a life-transforming approach here that John Wesley developed that I can and do highly recommend as a resolution in the coming year. That is banding. A band is three to four people meeting together weekly to share with each other in love around five key questions. If we would like to experience spiritual transformation in our lives, if we would like to move from having accepted Jesus as our Savior to experiencing forgiveness, grace, and the putting on of the garment of love in our lives, then resolve to join a band. I am so serious about encouraging people to try banding that if we are interested, I will help find people to meet with, help find training, and will meet with groups to share how a band works for three or four meetings. If we desire to be a different person in Christ by this time next year, then resolve to join a band in the coming year.

The next word of advice from Paul is one I think Barbara will like; it is to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God in our hearts. This is not listening to the radio or your phone play music. This is to sing a hymn or a psalm or line of a psalm each day. Get yourself a copy of the Methodist hymnal and start singing. Methodist theology is a sung theology. It is found in the hymns of the church. If we want to connect more to Christ, sing his praises and learn about his love. The psalms were sung for centuries and they lend themselves to being sung to many tunes. Sing them as you can. One of my great uncles, Uncle Bud's attempts at this seemed to have been to sing the words "pine tree" to the tune of Amazing Grace. I don't know that this meets the

intent here but maybe it is a start. Spiritual songs are a bit different. If you have ever been to a worship service or large gathering and song breaks out and continues, that is my understanding of a spiritual song. We are singing as the Spirit guides us, sometimes the words of a hymn, sometimes just a musical note. Be open in the coming year for a stirring from God to sing, and follow that stirring with song.

Finally, we are to seek to do all that we do in the name of Jesus. I think of this as the Jesus test. Before we do something, we are to take time to ask ourselves if what we are planning is something that Jesus would do in our situation. If it is, then we can do what we have planned; if not, we need to reconsider. Another aspect of this test is to ask ourselves, “Could we stand up in church on Sunday and tell people what we are planning to do and expect them to agree that our plan is what Jesus would do?” If we find ourselves reluctant to share our plan, then we might need to reconsider. A related test is to look to scripture for an example of Jesus doing what we are planning to do. If we find such an example, then we can proceed; if not, we may need to change our plan. A final test of our plan is to ask ourselves, “If we proceed, can we give thanks to the Father for what we are doing through Jesus?” Not being able to thank God in the name of Jesus is a good indication that our plans need to change. Resolving to follow this process in the coming year would save us from many issues and challenges.

We have covered a lot of possibilities for spiritual resolutions and the putting on of new clothes in the coming year. I don't think we should try to resolve to wear all of these new items of clothing, though that is Paul's intent. Instead, let me suggest that we spend some time in prayer asking the Holy Spirit to guide us and then we pick one or two of these new clothing items to make as a resolution for the coming year. And as we do remember, we are not seeking as much to change our behaviors as we are to be transformed into Christ, to put on his clothes and live as Jesus asks his followers to live.

Pray with me: Come Holy Spirit and guide us into a new year. Give us fresh insights and whisper guidance to us so that in the coming year we may draw closer to Jesus. Show us what needs there are in our lives and what new garments are ready for us to put on so that we might become more like Christ. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, we pray and give thanks for guidance. Amen