



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL  
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
— Stockbridge, Massachusetts —

# *Put on the Clothes of Christ*

## August 18, 2019

### **Text: Colossians 3: 12-17**

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

### **Sermon:**

Italian fashion designer Miuccia Prada says that she lives and works and designs by this truth—that what you wear is how you present yourself to the world, especially today, when human contacts are so quick. She says that fashion is “instant language.” Before you greet someone, before you speak to them, before your eyes meet, and maybe you share peace with them, what you wear communicates something to that person approaching you on the street, and the same was absolutely true in the time of Jesus in Jerusalem. Now some of the clothing in that time called for taking a wide berth. If, for example, you saw the gleaming breastplate of a Roman soldier or the torn clothing associated with the leper approaching you, you might choose to take the long way around. If you saw the long flowing robes announcing the arrival of a scribe, or if you saw the color purple, which was reserved for members of royalty, you may have found yourself in a respectful place. Sackcloth whispered that someone was repenting for something they had done, while a veil implied someone was mourning over a recent loss. And only a priest could wear linen robes with multi-colored thread. Clothes are *instant language*, identifying role, power and station.

Then again there were some types of clothing that were less obvious. Every man who was faithful to God was required to wear a garment that had fringe at the bottom. It indicated to whom they belonged. Don't think that communicated something? Think about the woman who'd been suffering for years; all she knew was that Jesus was wearing that fringe and before he taught or even spoke, she knew that if she reached out and touched that fringe, she knew that she'd be connecting herself to the source of the holy. Whiter or lighter garments would indicate a male, where darker or more varied colors would indicate that it was a

female wearing those garments. Beads, pearls and other adornments woven into garments would have indicated station and wealth. Then just like now, before words were even spoken, what you wore and how you wore it spoke volumes to those passing by.

On the other hand, sometimes what you *weren't* wearing was sometimes a profound statement. Do you remember those Roman soldiers who were wearing those breastplates? Do you remember what they did to Jesus before they nailed him to the cross? They stripped him of all his clothing. They stripped him of his station and his standing; they took off all his clothes that he would have no identity and be humiliated before all who were there. Removing clothing means removing honor. But you may not remember what Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus did. It was not just an act of courage; it was an act of love and honor. After Jesus died on the cross, they went to the powers that be and said, "We want to take Jesus down from that cross," and more than that, they took Jesus' body and wrapped it in bands of cloth. Sound familiar? Just as Jesus came into the world lovingly wrapped in bands of cloth by his mother Mary and laid there in the stable in Bethlehem, now these two men were restoring care and dignity and honor to Jesus by clothing him—by wrapping him in cloth.

What you wear can also be a sign of how much others love you. If we remember John's Gospel we know that even those clothes that were used to restore honor and be wrapped around Jesus—even those clothes, as beautiful as they were, weren't as full as they could be, because do you remember what happened when the women returned on that Easter morning to find Jesus? Those clothes and the thing they used to wrap his head with were all lying neatly piled there in the tomb. Even that much love was no longer enough to wrap Christ, for God had wrapped Christ in brand, new life and fully unblemished love. It is that love that we find in the newness of Christ, the newness of life that we should now wrap ourselves. Multiple times in this reading, Paul says, "Clothe yourselves with Christ." Put Christ on so that when you walk down Main Street in Stockbridge and people are approaching you from as far away as the Red Lion Inn, they can tell that love is coming their way. If you remember in John's Gospel, he said, "They will know you follow me by your love." Paul is saying, "Put on these garments so that before a word is spoken, before you even get to offer them peace, they can already see the love and the light of Christ." Let that be your introduction.

Last week we spoke about those things we need to put away, put behind, or even put to death. Do you remember? We talked about Paul's ideas about fornication, lying, and slander. We remember that those things are not the first fruits of anything; they're not things any of us willingly choose to do but instead grow out of the small choices that we make every day, until they ripen into fruit, albeit sour ones at that. But if you look at each one of those choices—those choices we make that Paul wants us to put away—are not choices made for the other but rather choices mistakenly made for ourselves. Whether it is to crave the touch of another, even if it isn't very deep; whether it is to bear false witness against someone out of protection for being wronged—all of those things we talked about last week are all ways really of protecting ourselves or fulfilling some deficit within ourselves—things that Paul says we must put away.

If you remember last week I told you about a church in Danvers—a church that left their church—that is, they left their building, weighed down by the enormous history of that building and by the building itself. Weighed down by so much tradition and expectation associated with the physical structure, the people in Danvers decided they needed to get away

for a while. And so they closed down that building for an entire summer. They left to go worship out in the city of Danvers out in public places—to see what people needed in the town and to see where new life could be shared. Before they did anything, they first let go of all the things they thought they were responsible for or that they were clinging to valiantly, so that there could be new space created for them. If we look at this list that Paul gives us today, you will notice that the things that are in there, including compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience are all directed outward. All of those behaviors are not intended for our own benefit but rather to benefit others. Love poured out. “Clothe yourselves in love that gives and secures,” Christ said, “Not for your own sake,” but as Paul would write in Corinthians, “For the sake of the other.” Giving—always sharing. They are the actions and choices that don’t enable us to bear fruit but enable the whole world to bear fruit around us. They are all fundamental actions that Jesus modeled in his own life but are then extended to the other—things given away, not for us alone. Things to put on so that people don’t even have to talk to us; they already know that they can trust us, that they’re safe with us, and that in our presence they can be fully who God called them to be.

Danvers left their church and they spent a summer away. When they came back, they were nervous about going back into that building because they had been away for a while. Do you ever miss church? Remember how it is to come back? They had all missed church for a long time. But in the city of Danvers, they had learned some things. They had learned that there were populations with children who were struggling with developmental disorders or with behaviors and attitudes that made it hard for them to be in the company of others. These were children who would call out at the strangest of times or needed to run around—kids who were kids in a way that sometimes made others nervous. These were families adrift and alone, who couldn’t find a church to go to, let alone a playground where their kids would be welcome. So when they returned and stood outside their church, an idea seemed to occur to them instantly. Rather than having a grand opening for the church to invite those people in, they wanted a different form of welcome. So instead of a sanctuary they created a carnival. Instead of communion bread, they served hot dogs. Out on the lawn in front of the church, they prepared for 25 or 30 guests because they assumed about that many would come. About twenty minutes in, they were running to the grocery store. First, 75 people showed up; then there were 100 people and then there were 125 people, many of them bringing the kids that they had noticed about the community—people who didn’t feel comfortable inside but could be themselves running around outside. They put on the clothes of a carnival, because that’s how they imagined Christ to be, and they found children flocking to them.

When they finally came back inside, they ended up creating a four o’clock service that was aimed at those children, and where kids could be kids. It was a time where everyone could come, no matter who you were or where you were on life’s journey. Then at 5 o’clock every week they had a potluck meal, where all those people from the 4 o’clock service stayed on, and those people coming to a more traditional service held at six could come too, so those populations could overlap, so they could meet and start trusting one another to build the kind of relationship wrapped in love that Christ speaks of here in this passage. So they left church and returned to experiment with life in a whole new way—a way of holy living. If you read the rest of this passage, while Paul talks a lot about clothing ourselves with Christ and putting on external things like carnivals and things that welcome people in.

If you look at the end of this reading, Paul maintains that it has to go beyond appearance to depth. “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,” he said. Not just dance in your heart; not just have the peace be there when it’s convenient or easy, but let the peace of Christ **rule** in your heart when every choice you make comes out of a sense of Christ’s peace. Paul writes, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” May the love of God pour out; may it actually indwell within you, so that with gratitude in your heart you can sing songs and hymns and spiritual songs to God just like what happened this past Thursday here in this room.

You see, it’s a holy way of living. So that’s why they called him Holy Bradford. Remember that last week we met John Bradford. Holy Bradford—the one who was the pastor and teacher to the kind. He lived so righteously and well that everyone couldn’t help but notice that John Bradford. I didn’t tell you what happened to him either. The king who he’d been working with had died, and a new king came into power who did not have that relationship with him, which may echo what happened in Egypt with the Pharaoh and Jacob. But shortly into the new queen’s reign—there but for the grace of God I go—Bradford, if you remember. He went. He was arrested and imprisoned on the charge of trying to stir up the mob. After all, that’s what prophets do. They speak truth to power, but power didn’t like it so much, so they arrested him for trying to stir up the mob. Before his execution he was sent to prison, and there in prison (see if this sounds familiar), he would continue to write religious works. He would send letters out to faith communities; he would preach to anyone who would listen. Doesn’t it sound a little like Paul himself? For it wasn’t the space that held him but rather God indwelling in his heart. Christ was right there with him. He lead Bible studies in his prison cell, if you could imagine.

On January 31 1555, Bradford was condemned to be burned at the stake. That was his chance to put on his final outfit—to clothe himself in Christ. And he got a special outfit made for the occasion, made by Mrs. Marlot. She made what was called a “shirt of flame.” It was a devotional work; each stitch was made in love and care, praying over a certain scripture. It was sewn specifically for his burning, made in the style of a wedding shirt. It ended up being a common feature for these horrific burnings. People were able to clothe the ones they loved with honor, no matter what the powers of the day had to say about them. Because even with life in Christ, the world is still the world, and speaking truth to power still brings all the risks that come. His execution was scheduled for 4 o’clock in the morning in the hopes that it would pass by unnoticed, and yet the crowds flocked in to honor him. There was someone burned at the stake alongside of him, and John was reported to have said to him, “Be of good comfort, brother, for we shall have a merry supper with the Lord tonight.” Sound familiar? It reminds us of Jesus on the cross comforting the others who were with him.

Here’s the thing with clothing yourself in Christ, the thing that Danvers learned and the thing that John Bradford learned—once you put all that on, and once you allow that to be your identity; once you allow that peace to rule in your heart, allowing Christ’s words to be your words, your life fundamentally changes. Once Christ dwells within you, you dwell within Christ, and there is nothing in all of creation—no church building, no burning stake, nothing in all of creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ. Do you want to know how to follow Jesus? Simply put Jesus on and see where he takes you. Not “there but for the grace of God I go,” but instead, “There **because** of and **with** the grace of God I happily go.” Amen.

*The Rev. Brent Damrow, Pastor*