

“Clothe Yourself with Christ”

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Colossians 3:5-17

One thing that I discovered during my recent move to a new apartment is that I have A LOT of clothes. I didn't realize how ridiculous my wardrobe had become. I only wear about 10% of it anyway, and I was hanging onto a lot of items that hadn't fit in many, many years. I'm held hostage by the idea that those things are going to fit again, so I have a hard time throwing stuff out or donating it. But- since moving is a good time to get rid of old stuff I decided finally to part with those things that didn't fit and didn't look good anymore, because deep down I knew I didn't need or even want them.

In his letter to the Colossians, St. Paul uses a clothing analogy to describe those virtues and habits that look good and fit on a disciple of Christ, and those that do not. He encourages the Colossians to strip off the old self so that they can clothe themselves in the new person who is made in the image of God.

There are certain virtues, certain habits that do not fit a Christian and do not look good on disciples of Jesus. Among them are anger, malice, evil desire and greed- and, well, you get the idea.

That list is pretty obvious, I would think- and the things he described aren't negative only to Christians, either. People of many faiths or no faith at all would agree with some or every item on the list as undesirable personality traits. Why then would Paul bother to elaborate on them? Well as he began this passage, he said to put to death whatever is earthly. In other words- left on our own- we are all vulnerable to those unattractive ways- even if not as full-time character flaws.

It is easy to spot anger in another person- when we're not going fast enough in traffic, we find other drivers who will ride our tails and shake their fists. But do we know it in ourselves? Or do we discount the number of curses we say under our breath?

It's easy to spot greed in others. There was a story in the news this week about the trend of stealing I-pods- either for keeps or for resale- that is nothing but greed. But do we recognize our own greed? We may not take it as far as theft, but we crave all types of belongings that we don't really need, and we envy the wealth of others.

And often we judge the general sinfulness of others- but do we admit to our own spiritual sloth? How many times have we chosen a television show over prayer?

We all have tendencies toward one or more of these uglier virtues. We can deny it if we want, but in the end, denial only prevents us from realizing the fullness of life that is given to us in Jesus Christ.

We all need to look in the mirror occasionally- really look at the person who is staring back at us and ask ourselves if we're living the life that we intend to live, if we are the person who we want to be.

I know that sometimes when I do this- the person looking back at me is not who I thought.

Back in college some friends and I were having a game night and we were playing one of those 'true colors' type of games where a question was asked to the whole group, everyone wrote down their responses in secret and put them in the middle, and the player who was 'up' had to guess who wrote what. One of the questions had to do with your worst character trait. Someone had written down 'bad temper,' and my roommate at the time guessed that I had written that one.

And I had always prided myself on NOT having a temper.

I thought about this for a long time after the game ended. Maybe I took it too seriously- it was just a game after all, but my friend had touched a nerve, and I couldn't let it go. In the end I realized that I did have a temper- at least, more of one than I had previously thought. The silver lining on it all was that it helped me to deal constructively and proactively with anger, instead of suppressing it so that it came out in ugly outbursts. I still need a reminder every now and again, but at least I know what I'm dealing with here.

Facing up to our reflection in the mirror is tough, if for no other reason than it challenges our illusions of ourselves.

And I think that's why we don't like to look too closely. Our illusions are precious to us, and when they are shattered, we have to slowly and painfully pick up the pieces and put something back together again.

But it is always the right time to take a good look in the mirror and to get rid of those habits and virtues that we do not need or even want anymore and instead to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.

One reason that I like this image, this clothing analogy is that getting dressed is a deliberate action. Most of us don't just throw clothes on at random- we spend at least a little time finding clothes that match and fit.

Being a disciple is a deliberate action. We can make an intentional effort to choose compassion over anger; kindness over cruelty or apathy; humility over pride; and patience over impatience. Paul says that we are being renewed in knowledge according to the image of God, which is to say that being a disciple of Jesus is a process- it involves growth and change. We are not born as full grown adults, nor are we born again in the waters of baptism as fully matured Christians.

When is the last time that you took a good look in that figurative mirror? What image did you see there? Do not run from your reflection. The person looking back at you is a chosen one of God, holy and beloved. So clothe yourself with the image of your Creator- and know the fullness of life that is given to us in Christ.