

Green Hill Presbyterian Church  
“Christmas Clothes”  
Thomas G. Speers, III  
Christmas 1—December 30, 2018

Lessons: Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:41-52

For as long as I can remember, Christmas has always involved clothes. It has often included toys, gadgets, books, food, and along with these always also clothes. A new tie. A pair of trousers. A sport coat. A sweater. Christmas dinner often includes the opportunity to put on some of those new clothes so that we all look a little bit extra special as we celebrate the birth of the Christ child and the joy and the stress of being together as a family. I have memories of my grandmother being particularly pleased with the clothes that she picked out—I’m sure with my mother’s help—from Hutzler’s or Joseph A. Bank in Baltimore where she lived.

Those memories of Christmas clothes came flooding back as I read Paul’s letter to the Colossians: *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.*<sup>1</sup>

Paul is giving to us the very finest Christmas clothes that could ever be given. As we look back over the year gone by and look forward to the year ahead, Paul’s words offer clear guidance on how we might live our lives as followers of Jesus Christ. Herbert O’Driscoll writes that this reading is about “the congregation as a people close to God. And we are pulled up short at its very first statement. We are addressed as God’s chosen ones. Ask anyone why he or she is in a congregation and you will get many answers, most linked with some aspect of personal choice. You will almost never hear someone say ‘Because God chose me.’ [That of course is why we all are here.]

“There follows a wonderful description of gifts needed to form and hold a Christian congregation, all of them practical and realistic. We might almost call them the commandments of congregational life. Among them . . .

- Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.
- Forgive each other. The word is repeated three times!
- Be thankful. This is utterly central to our lives.
- Let the word of Christ dwell in you. Most of us think of the Word as being in a book, rather than the word of Christ being actually in each of us.
- Teach and admonish one another. Wonderful things can happen when a congregation realizes that many of its members have this gift and ministry.
- Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord.

“No aspect of congregational life is outside the realm of the holy scripture that says to us, ‘I took you to see a child in a manger a few days ago. Today I want you to see how vast the consequences are for your life.’”<sup>2</sup>

When our children were little, we taught them that an officer in uniform would always give them help if they were in need. As members of the congregation of Jesus Christ we too are given a

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<sup>1</sup> Colossians 3:12-14

<sup>2</sup> Herbert O’Driscoll, Growing pains: 1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Psalm 148; Colossians 3:12-17; Luke 2:41-52 in *The Christian Century* Vol. 120 No. 25 December 13, 2003. © 2003.

uniform, clothes of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience and love. Put on these clothes and show the world who we are.

Clothe yourselves with compassion. Compassion, you will remember, means literally to suffer with. You know how to do this well. I continue to rejoice at all the ways you have shown compassion for and with each other across the time I have been with you and I wonder how we might *put on* compassion for a wider circle of people. Where are we called in the year ahead to put on compassion?

Clothe yourselves with kindness. A couple of years ago I read Evan Thomas' biography of Richard Nixon and for me the most moving part of that book is a wonderful story of kindness. When Senator Thomas Eagleton was forced off the ticket as Senator George McGovern's running mate, Nixon "pulled out a pen and wrote a letter. It was addressed to Eagleton's young son who had visited the Oval Office with his father the year before. 'Politics is a very hard game,' Nixon wrote the thirteen-year-old boy... 'What matters is not that your father fought a terribly difficult battle and lost. What matters is that in fighting the battle he won the admiration of foes and friends alike because of the courage, poise, and just plain guts he showed against overwhelming odds.'"<sup>3</sup> Is there someone you know who could benefit by a similar act of kindness?

Clothe yourselves with humility, gentleness and patience. I have shared before the words of Judge Learned Hand "that the Spirit of Liberty is that spirit which is not too sure that it is right."<sup>4</sup> Could we in the church put on humility, gentleness and patience in such a way in our broken and hurting world, that we might show others that different people from different places with differing views can actually live and learn and even thrive together?

And put on forgiveness. This is so important that Paul mentions it not once but rather three times. Forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Where might we practice or even wear this forgiveness in our church, our country, our world in the year ahead?

Above all, clothe yourselves with love. Gene Peterson translates it this way: "regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it."<sup>5</sup> As we used to sing as kids: they will know we are Christians by our love.

We have been given the finest clothes anyone could ever ask for. They are comfortable. They are appropriate for any occasion and they fit just right. Make sure you wear them this year.

Let us pray: Loving God, we give you thanks for Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Clothe us with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience and love, that we may be Christ for the world. We pray in his name. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Evan Thomas, *Being Nixon: A Man Divided*, © 2015 Random House

<sup>4</sup> Learned Hand, *The Spirit of Liberty Papers and Addresses of Learned Hand*. Alfred A. Knopf © 1952

<sup>5</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message, The Bible in Contemporary Language*. NAVPress Publishing Group. © 2002.