

September 10, 2017
14th Sunday after Pentecost
Exodus 12:1-14 / Romans 13:8-14 /
Matt. 18:15-20
The Rev. Carenda Baker
preached at St. Andrew's, Shippensburg

Last week I was on my way home from Chambersburg and I stopped at the Sunoco station on Walnut Bottom Road, just where the entrance/exit ramps to Rt. 81, exit 29 are located. When I went inside to pay for gas, the friendly cashier greeted me, and then said, "Are you a chef?" I had no clue where that question came from, but I laughed and said, "No, in no one's wildest imagination would I ever be a chef!" Then she said, "Are you a baker?" Still clueless about her line of questioning, I said "No, but my last name is Baker". Then I said, "I am an Episcopal priest". I was wearing a black clergy shirt. As I sometimes do on the way home, I had slipped out of "uniform" by removing the detachable white collar. Without the collar, it was just a black shirt, so I finally understood why she was asking about my occupation. After apologizing to me, the cashier launched us into an incredible theological conversation. "Since you're a pastor, let me ask you a question", she said. "What do you think about Muslims who believe Jesus is the Son of God?" Talk about a curve ball! I told her I knew that some Muslims believe Jesus was a prophet of God. Tentatively I asked, "Is it important to you that Jesus is the Son of God?", to which she replied emphatically and with a hint of impatience, "Yes, he is God's Son." She continued, "I am a Muslim and I believe Jesus is God's Son. A lot of people tell me this can't be. That I can't be a Muslim and believe Jesus is God's Son". I responded, "I believe it is the same God we worship but in different ways. I don't see a problem with your believing Jesus is the Son of God". She thanked me profusely and said that I was the only Christian besides her sister she had ever met who thought we worshiped the same God, adding "and my sister is really into her Jesus as Lord and Savior". She went on to say that her father was Muslim and her mother was Christian. Her father had told his children that he didn't care what faith they practiced, as long as they practiced one. Just before I left, she said – gesturing toward her co-worker – "Pray for us." I asked her name, and told her I certainly would pray for them. The exchange left me scratching my head - and smiling.

Do you know the cliché, "Clothes make the man / clothes make the woman?" When we put on a uniform of any kind, it makes a statement. Whether it's a cap and gown, a sports, band, or military service uniform, nurses' scrubs, a doctor's "white coat" or a priest's collar, how we dress says something about who we are and what we value in life.

Each of today's Scripture readings offers us a wake-up call to become "fashion conscious". The good news today is found in the thread that runs through the biblical story of God and humanity, and what it looks like when a God of love acts. "God is love" are words we've heard and read in Scripture. But this can be awfully confusing because the culture we live in believes we can love just about anything: ice cream, the Phillies or Pirates, the flowers in our garden, a certain piece of music, making money. Most often when the word "love" is used outside a community of faith, it's referring to sentimental or romantic feelings. But love in its Christian understanding is an "action word". It is not the same as simply liking someone or something, or having pleasant feelings. Love for Christians is made visible through actions.

We pick up the Exodus story today where the Israelites have been enslaved in Egypt for many years, and God has called Moses to lead them out of slavery. Moses tells the people something big is about to happen. At first, the passage sounds like it's all about rules they must follow in a carefully choreographed religious ritual – sacrifice of a lamb, blood on the doorposts and lintel, eating a meal together with specific foods. And those directions are there, but the directions are all for the sake of being prepared to act. God is about to act powerfully on their behalf and they have a part to play in what will happen. They need only the essentials, because they are about to become extremely active people riding the freedom train out of Egypt. Time cannot be wasted. They dare not be weighed down with multiple layers of clothing, or have a bunch of bling jangling at their wrists and swaying round their necks. We're talking simplicity here, minimalism. Fully dressed and ready for action. Sandals fastened and a staff in hand to help them move swiftly over a lot of rugged terrain in a short amount of time. The God of love and justice is going to liberate them. They need to be dressed for liberation.

Thousands of years later, Paul writes to the Christians in Rome, reminding them that they follow one who was willing to be completely *undressed*, if you will, figuratively and literally. Jesus let himself become totally vulnerable as a human being to show that the God of love acts to reveal – reveal everything that is sick, sinful, evil, divisive, and self-serving in the world - in order to save and heal the world. The Christians in Rome know the story of Jesus' life - about his preaching, teaching and healing. They know, too, about his death and resurrection. They have chosen to follow Jesus' as the Way, so they have "put on" Christ in their baptism.

Paul reminds the Christians in Rome what he had taught them, and what their baptism meant. Their old way of life has been stripped away, and they are newly clothed in the Spirit of Christ. God's people do not wear spiritual "hand me downs". Always there is a fresh and promising expression of Christ's life in the person who is baptized.

This radical and life transforming cleansing bath, this sacrament of baptism has gone through many changes in the 2,000 year history of Christianity. In the early medieval age, between the years 300 and 400 C.E. baptism involved a two to three- year period of instruction called the catechumenate. During this period candidates to be baptized participated only in the first part of worship, the service of the Word. They were dismissed from the assembly before Holy Eucharist. Following that intense two to three year period of instruction, and after thorough examination - including an exorcism pronounced over them to insure that Satan truly had been put to flight - when the day finally came for the candidates to be baptized, usually on the night of the Easter Vigil , the men and women were separated into two different areas, because they entered the baptismal waters completely naked to be immersed. Plunged under the water – just as vulnerable and naked as the day they were born - they symbolically went with Christ to the grave in his death, and came up out of the water, raised to new life with him in his resurrection. As they emerged from the water after being baptized, each newly baptized Christian was dressed in a clean white garment, symbolic of the love, light, and life of Christ they had just put on. They now belonged to a community, Christ's living body, the Church, and were welcomed to their first experience of receiving Holy Eucharist.

We need reminding sometimes, too, just like the Christians in Rome did. The apostle Paul tells them to “put on Christ “. What that means for us is that we readily admit we cannot conjure up Christ-likeness all by ourselves. “Putting on Christ” requires humility and vulnerability. It is not a do-it-yourself self-improvement project. It means seeking to live more and more with an undefended heart that is open to the Holy Spirit's influence. Putting on Christ is a process and a way of life. It requires intentionality and being formed through the disciplines of prayer, Scripture reading, worship and participation in the Sacraments, and commitment to sharing ourselves and our gifts in the life of the faith community. “Putting on Christ” is what enables us to love our neighbors as ourselves, to act towards others the way we want to be treated.

In another of the epistles, the letter to the Colossians, the writer describes even more clearly what being clothed in Christ looks like. Listen to Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Colossians 3:12-14 in his book *The Message*:

“So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.”

The God who is love has clothed us in a gracious and spacious garment of reconciliation, restoration and right relationship. It is a garment woven with the fabric of God's own love. It needs no sequins, no flashy "bling", no matching accessories to make it stand out and be noticed.

The God of love and hope acts, drawing us into the future where all things will be reconciled and made whole. And this work of reconciliation is what Jesus describes in the gospel reading from Matthew. Jesus assumes that where there are people, there will be conflict and disagreement, even among the faithful. He offers practical and wise direction about how we can, in love, care for relationships with our brothers and sisters in the faith community, how we can practice loving our neighbor as our self. The way to deal with conflict is not through separation, exclusion, punishment, or "ex-communication". It is not about three strikes and you're out. It is not about forgiving only a prescribed number of times, and then dusting off our hands and saying, "Oh well, we tried". The love in action Jesus describes here means doing the hard work of tending relationships by speaking the truth in love when we disagree, while keeping our open hand extended toward the other.

We all know there are times when we just don't like some people very much. It's true in our families, it's true in the culture around us, and it's true in the life of congregations. Love does not mean we will always have feelings of pleasantness, ease, and comfort in our interactions with each other. Continuing to love in times of disagreement and conflict is neither easy nor comfortable, but it's necessary. The fact that Jesus says when two or three are gathered in his name, he is there among them means that God is present witnessing the interactions, the efforts, the negotiations we offer to care for the community. God cares and wants to help us. Building, restoring, and maintaining relationships of truth, love, and forgiveness are that important.

The God who is Love acts – to liberate and save, forgive and heal, acts to empower us to join God in creating that future where everything finally will be reconciled and made whole. So let's take a look at the condition of our own Christ garment. Where is it frayed, wearing thin, or maybe even starting to tear? Perhaps you are in need of liberation from something that's dragging you down, holding you back from mirroring Christ's love. Maybe you have difficulty accepting the fact that God believes you are worth saving. Or maybe there is a situation, a sin, a habit with which we repeatedly wrestle. Perhaps we need assurance of forgiveness and the courage and faith with God's help, to begin again. Maybe there are tender wounded places in us that need healing, which we keep well hidden. Most of us will have at least one situation where we need the Spirit's help to put love into action, to let Christ's light shine through us.

We have been clothed with the Spirit of Christ, dressed like royalty in new and abundant life. The risen Christ is God's designer label. Christ is God's handmade wardrobe for us. Our Christ-likeness is practical, absolutely appropriate year-round wear, ready for any weather. This clothing will never go out of fashion. If anything, this garment of Christ-likeness will become even more valuable and precious the longer we wear it and grow into it.

So what do you think? Do clothes make the woman or man? Let's take our holy fashion sense out into the world this week and see! It just might be that Christ's light will shine so brightly in us that others will recognize God's love in our actions, and they, along with us - will give glory to God in heaven. *Amen.*