

Satisfied with Second Place

By Glenn Brumbaugh

So, when you think about putting on new clothes, what's the first thing you need to do? Assuming that you are already wearing older clothes, the first thing you would need to do would be to strip off what you already have on. After all, you can't wear layer upon layer of clothes, at least not comfortably, or easily – even though as Pacific Northwesterners, we certainly know the value of being layered, especially in the ridiculously damp cold winter. But in the course of our normal lives, we put on new clothes to replace older clothes that are no longer working for us. They may be worn out and not accomplishing their function anymore. They might be out of style, or no longer representative of the image we want to portray.

There's quite a difference between the clothes I wear now and the clothes I wore 30 years ago. But then again, in some respects, I'm also quite a different person than I was back then. Gone are the days of cut off Metallica tee shirts and camo vests. I put the worn-out work boots away in favor of more sensible footwear. As my personality and values evolved, so did my wardrobe. We tend to dress and appear in ways that reflect our personality, our sense of who we are.

In fact, it is not only our clothing choices that reflect this. Even our choice in pets can reflect our personality. Researchers at the University of California, San Diego recently came out with a study showing that, supposedly, people and their dogs often look alike. In the study, a panel of judges was able to match 16 out of 25 purebred dogs with their owners. The reason for this, researchers say, is because dog owners tend to choose a pet that bears their resemblance in some

way. The study identified similarities between pets and people such as physical characteristics or personality traits or both. According to the study, happy, outgoing, and affectionate dogs tend to be owned by warm and friendly people. Grumpy, snarly, pop-eyed, pug-nosed pooches tend to ... well you get the idea. When the Chicago Sun-Times ran this story, they included pictures of several people and their dogs. It's said that Actress Fran Drescher's dog, Chester, has a similar hair-do as its owner. And a picture of J. Edgar Hoover with his boxer were eerily similar.

The Apostle Paul in our epistle reading this morning is writing to a new church—a group of Christians. He's writing to folks who have accepted Christ as Lord and Savior. And he instructs them to "Take off the old human nature with its practices and put on the new nature, which is renewed in knowledge by conforming to the image of the one who created it." He likens it to taking off the old clothes that they have always worn and putting on the clothes of Christ as they step into a new life with him. But what exactly does putting on the clothes of Christ look like? Well, in the preceding verses to today's reading, Paul goes through several lists of vices that we are to strip off: vices that make our focus on ourselves and not others; vices that cause us to act in negative and hurtful ways towards others; vices that divide the community instead of strengthening it. The old clothes we take off are the garments that we wore as part of worldly culture. They bear testament to a personality based on getting ahead, in fact, of winning at all costs. The values they lift up are greed and selfishness, putting one's needs above the needs of others, and the willingness to lie and deceive others to

achieve our own personal goals, in whatever arena we interact with others in. When we wore those clothes, we didn't think anything of it. That's what most of the people around us wore. We were fitting in with the crowd, wearing the "cool hip" styles of the day.

It can be truly amazing how similar the struggles can be between the people of Paul's day and our own. In Paul's time, there was a lot of inequality and injustice built into the cultural fabric. People were stratified into different classes. It became harder and harder to get ahead. The rich were obsessed with getting richer, and the poor found it harder and harder to make ends meet, all the while the government became more and more corrupt.

Kinda sounds familiar doesn't it?

So how is Paul telling this new Christian community in Colossae to react? He's telling them to step into this faith they've come to embrace. He's making the point that the Christian walk inherently contradicts the values of the culture around them. In both his letters to the Colossians and the Ephesians, he stresses the need to follow in Christ's footsteps, to emulate the incarnation of Jesus. Through baptism, we die to our old life, and rise to new life in Christ. We live new lives that are markedly different from the way we lived before. He tells us what those new lives look like, what they're based on, what our new wardrobe consists of: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness or meekness and patience, forbearance, and forgiveness, with love tying all of it together.

Based on what we know of Jesus and his teachings, it makes a lot of sense right? But how easy is it to put those clothes on? And how well do they fit us? It

can be easy to praise such high values, but how successful are we in living them?

There's the story of a seminary professor who taught the Christian graces of love and forbearance for forty years until he retired. Occupying himself in his retirement years, he poured a new concrete driveway to his house. Finished, he went in to rest and get a glass of iced tea. Returning later to view his proud achievement, he discovered that the neighborhood kids were putting their footprints all in the wet concrete. The angry professor chased the kids down in a rage and beat the tar out of the ones he could catch. Hearing the commotion, the professor's wife rushed into the yard, saw the angry professor thrashing the kids, and began to reprimand him: "What a shame," she said. "For forty years you have taught love, forgiveness and forbearance. Now look at you. You've lost your testimony." To which he replied: "That was all in the abstract. This is in the concrete."

But how do we handle the conflict between what our society values and the ethics taught and modeled by Jesus?

It is not easy to step away from the drive to succeed so ingrained in our society, at least to succeed in the way success is defined by culture. We're told we need to work hard and strive to get ahead, to achieve all we can achieve. We need to climb that corporate ladder and seek those promotions. The better paycheck is always the bigger paycheck. The newer car is always the nicer car. The bigger house is always the better house. But what is the real cost of that choice?

In a competitive world, in order for you to be a winner, somebody else has to be a loser. For you to have the coolest and best stuff, somebody else makes do with less, or no stuff at all. To wear the wardrobe Paul is suggesting is not an easy fit at first. It means being satisfied with second place, of not being first, of not being the winner of what the world defines as the big prize. In Paul's time as well as our own, unfortunately, the concept of humility and meekness, or gentleness, depending on the translation you are using, are viewed as weaknesses, of being traits of losers, not winners. Yet the Greek word that is translated as meek or gentle, actually literally translates as "controlled strength." It's the same root word that's translated in reference to the donkey colt in Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. It's representative of a wild steed that's been broken, but still retains all its strength. In the same way we show our strength by being content not to be the winner, to being satisfied in second. It's in ensuring that we finish the race together, without losers, that we exhibit that strength.

The point that is central to Paul's letter to the new community at Colossae was that the community takes precedence over the individual, at least as far as success is defined. But he stresses that it's through our own work on ourselves as individuals, that the community succeeds. By shedding the old clothes of an inequitable and unjust system, and the selfish and harmful values that system uplifts, we find ourselves in new clothes that promote unity through love, and compassion and kindness to others, putting others interests before our own. As Jesus tells us in Mark's Gospel, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all." That's a pretty tall order in a culture that lifts up the

notion of the rugged individual, that praises independent success and achievement.

The choice we have is whether we follow the example of Jesus and take his lessons to heart, or as so often happens these days, yet again make Jesus fit into our culture, instead of working to change culture to fit Jesus.

Which wardrobe will you choose to put on? Choose wisely. Amen.