

“Wearing Your Heart on Your Sleeve”

Colossians 3:12-17

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A few years ago, I visited Seattle with a friend; she lives in Portland and we took the train up to see the King Tut exhibit. After doing our duty to the pharaoh, we went down to Pike's Market and as we were walking back up toward our hotel, we stopped in a store. They had some very lovely women's clothing; as a former retailer I found their pricing strategy curious – items seemed to be priced at \$75, \$225, or \$500 dollars. And while it was mostly women's clothing, there were some home items and a few books, an eclectic kind of place. And after a bit, one of the sales associates came over to where we were standing; I do not remember exactly how the conversation began but she started to talk about the need for beauty in the world – it was something of importance for the culture of the store – and she said it was the practice of French women dress up before going out to add beauty to quoted Coco Chanel, directing our attention to the Chanel biography on the table in front of us. Then, after quickly looking us over, she complimented my friend on her choice of socks for the day; I was wearing jeans and a tee shirt with a windbreaker tied around my waist, the only bright spot in glancing at me came as an appreciation for my manicure.

If this is not the exact quote she shared, it is very close, Chanel once said, “I don't understand how a woman can leave the house without fixing herself up a little – if only out of politeness. And then, you never know, maybe that's the day she has a date with destiny. And it's best to be as pretty as possible for destiny.”

Some of us will remember Glamour Do's and Glamour Don'ts; these were pictures of fashion done right and fashion worn badly. It was a bit shaming, really, there was a black bar across the eyes on the 'don't' pictures so they would not be recognized as though this fashion faux pas could lead to someone's social demise. It's become more popular now to publish two famous folk photographed wearing the same outfit, women more often than men but not exclusively, with the tag line, 'Who wore it best?'

And lest you think this is all about women, GQ's, that's Gentlemen's Quarterly's Facebook page has over the years suggested among other things 'The 9 Things You Need for the Comfiest, Swaggiest Airport Outfit Ever'; actually published an article titled 'How to Get More Attractive While You Sleep'; and listed '5 Respectable Things Every Man Should Have in His Wardrobe.'

Interesting, isn't it, that the things are respectable, not the man. This idea that what we wear adds or detracts from the well-being of the world is a good metaphor and today it goes all the way back to the first century as the writer of Colossians suggested donning as it were, the virtues Jesus taught. So, in a way, Jesus asks us, every day when you get up, every day when you go out, “Are you putting me

on,” are you showing off my values and my message? Because it will make the world a more beautiful place. Sadly, many have experienced a judgmental or even brutal Christianity and ask the more cynical version of the question, “Are you putting me on?”

Wearing the Christ is baptismal imagery; through history of baptism the faithful literally took off their street clothes and put on white robes as a part of their baptism. These robes were probably not what we’d call flattering, in a fashion sense, but stood for the outward appearance of an inward change.

One of my favorite authors used the phrase, “He was smiling but it didn’t quite reach his eyes,” isn’t that a great way to describe our inner dissonances? We want to appear cooperative or friendly, but when we don’t feel it all the way through, it shows. Years ago, when I was in seminary, I read an interview with couture designer Emmanuel Ungaro, he said that he loved dressing women and hoped that his designs helped them feel powerful. He stated that his goal was seduction – both the power to seduce women into buying his designs and then the hope that the wearer would feel powerful enough in his designs, to get what they wanted out of life.

I’ve saved that interview for twenty years because it also stated that even Ungaro, when it came right down to it, believed it is all illusion. A beautiful illusion.

The thing is, Jesus started tailoring his own life towards justice, compassion and love – the beauty of all that, when, at twelve years old, he stayed in the temple while the rest of the family left Jerusalem and started for home. The opposite of helicopter parents, families traveling to Passover, formed caravans of various sizes so Mary and Joseph assumed Jesus was with the group until the end of the first day’s travel. And then they rushed back to search for him; in his answer, it seems he has no compassion for them or what he’s put them through, certainly for Jesus it is a moment when he separates illusion and outward appearances from truth and mission.

Going back to Chanel, she was also quoted as saying, “I don’t do fashion. I am fashion.” What Colossians is saying is “I don’t do Christianity, I am Christianity.” We can tell when genuine love is showing through and we can tell when it’s not – when the true self/genuine love is there, there is no posturing, no calculating, no working out the best angle but being true, living out one’s truth; it is a genuine giving of one’s self and it is beautiful. Not a veneer of beauty but a depth and breadth of beauty. This is work in the same way that gardening is work, or sewing and handcrafts or building are work contributing to the world’s beauty.

Here at the House of Hope, we are not all Republicans and we are not all Democrats or Independents but we are all one, the Body of Christ; within that body we are all called to compassion. Compassion is a meeting place; we simply cannot be distant or in opposite corners if we are wearing the compassion, the gratitude and forgiveness of Christ, the one garment. It’s a feel-good thing but not just a feel good thing, it is work. This calling needs to disturb us because I’m betting there is someone right now that each of us can name for whom it is difficult to have compassion. Let us make no illusions about our feelings nor our mission.

Poet, theologian, John O'Donohue wrote: "The greatest evil and destruction arise when people are unable to feel compassion. The beauty of compassion continues to shelter and save our world. If that beauty were quenched, there would be nothing between us and the end-darkness which would pour in torrents over us" (Divine Beauty, 191). In our deeply divided times, I would ask, do we fear our differences and the outward needs of others so much that it mitigates our own inward conversion toward this darkness?

But again, it goes all the way back to the first century, several verses before today's Colossians passage started, is a reference to those who are wearing "anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language" (3:8), – making the donning of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience a change of wardrobe. The gospels and epistles are constantly asking us about the tailoring and fit of our faith.

I have spoken before about Ruth Gendler's *Book of Qualities*. One of them is Power. "Power,' she wrote, 'made me a coat. For a long time I kept it in the back of my closet. I didn't like to wear it much, but I always took good care of it. When I first started wearing it again it smelled like mothballs. As I wore it more, it started fitting better. ... I was afraid if I wore the coat too much someone would want to take it or else I would accidentally leave it in the dressing room. But it has my name on the label now, and it really doesn't fit anyone else. When people ask me where I found such a becoming garment, I tell them about the tailor, Power, who knows how to make coats that you grow into. First, you must have the courage to approach him and ask him to make you the coat. Then, you must find the patience inside yourself to wear the coat until it fits" (The Book of Qualities, 26).

On Wednesday evening, the PBS Newshour did a heart-wrenching report on the priest scandals in the Catholic Church followed by a preview of a documentary on the Apollo 8 flight around the moon in preparation for the next mission to land on the moon; the two captured some of the worst and best of humanity. So I was in tears as Casey Gerald, author of *There Will Be No Miracles Here*, came on to answer three questions from readers about his recent memoir. His book challenges the idea of making his success as a young, gay African American man, a symbol of the American Dream because, in his words, "it is a distraction from the fact that most kids are going from nothing to nowhere." Here is the heart of the world's need for compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience: we can always find one beautiful thing to lift up and make shine so that all can be distracted from the great and overwhelming needs of others and the world. Even the birth of Jesus. So, we very quickly get another view of Jesus as a young man, defying his parent's expectations so he can begin to live differently. The path he lives is uphill and treacherous – and each year just after Christmas, we are given the chance to renew our will to follow.

Of Christmas, Howard Thurman wrote, "When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flock, the work of Christmas begins: to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among people, to make music in the heart." And unless this is accomplished by love it will be an illusion that will not last; the war to end all wars was but an illusion and the beginning of nearly constant warfare ever since. It is in wearing compassion, forgiveness, and humility that salvation arrives and stays – and so it is Jesus who wants to know... Are you putting me on? I hope so, says he, because I want to tailor your life. Amen.

