

Wear It Like You Mean It

Colossians 3:12-17

Home Moravian Church, Dec. 29, 2024

The first one I really noticed was worn by Colin Firth, in the 2001 film *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Against a deep green background, the face of Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer took up most of the acreage on Firth's chest. One look at that sweater and Bridget Jones, played by Renee Zellweger, promptly dismissed Firth's character, Mark Darcy, as a rube and a clod. Of course, they got together in the end; but the film made it clear that one's social life could be destroyed by one really ugly Christmas sweater.

But a few years later, ugly Christmas sweaters were catching on as the "must have" apparel for the season. High school bands began to wear them in Christmas parades. Goodwill stores set up special boutiques just for the tackiest sweaters, which sold as fast as they arrived. We're not talking a few pretty bows or baubles; the hottest-selling sweaters were full-on Rudolph, especially if his nose lit up. These days, you don't have to hunt for vintage sweaters; each year brings new collections from fashion houses competing for most outlandish. Designers for the *Tonight Show* are responsible for Jimmy Fallon's annual Christmas sweater giveaway, delighting audiences with execrable creations that only a true professional could conceive.

The difference between fearing ugly sweaters as unwanted Christmas gifts and fighting for them at the Goodwill can be summed up in one word: Irony. People have learned to wear the sweater *ironically*. Their attitude shows that they know the sweaters are not attractive; they wear them as a joke. One takes part in the tradition in order to *mock* the tradition. One wears the sweater, but one doesn't *mean* it. That's irony.

Today you'll see lots of these sweaters at the mall, in breweries, and at hipster parties—but almost never have I seen a light-up Rudolph at our Christmas Eve services. I think this speaks well for Christmas Eve lovefeast as the least ironic event on everyone's holiday calendar. No one participates in the lovefeast tradition in order to mock the tradition. We come because we *mean* it. It's the opposite of irony. It's innocence. And I think that is what people love about the Christmas lovefeast. It feels like the last experience of innocence in what should be the most innocent of holy festivals: Christmas, when we celebrate God's coming to us as an infant.

What should we be wearing to celebrate an experience of innocence? Paul has some answers in his epistle to the Colossians: "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience." These are the garments we wear because we *mean it*. They are the garments of innocence: our *real* Christmas clothes.

Paul's clothing metaphor brings abstract concepts into a tactile realm: kindness and compassion are abstract, but clothing is something you can touch. These garments Paul names: How do they feel? They must be very fine clothes. The fabric of compassion and kindness must be wonderful to touch: soft, warm, draping gently over the wearer. Perhaps it even rustles a bit, making a quiet statement when we move. Clothing is something we can feel; and if we can feel it, we can remember it.

I remember the dress I wore when I was confirmed. At the time, my family was not living near any Moravian churches, so I was confirmed at First Presbyterian Church in Henderson, North Carolina. I was eleven. Actually, to tell you the truth, *all* I remember is the dress—not even the whole dress, but just its fabric. It was a thick, heavy cotton, intricately

woven with white-on-white designs. I'm pretty sure the dress was expensive, which can mean only one thing: It was a hand-me-down from my wealthier cousin MaryAnn.

I think it's appropriate, in a way, that my one memory of confirmation is this sensory experience of clothing. I can moan and groan about whether I was confirmed too young, or perhaps scold my younger self for not having paid attention; or I can just be glad that the one thing I remember is something that connects, all these years later, with the teachings of Paul. Compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience; like my best clothes, I notice how good they feel when I wear them. And like the dress I got from my cousin, they are costly; in this world, practicing virtues like kindness and humility always comes at a price. Also, like that dress, these garments are hand-me-downs; they are the garments of our faith that have been worn by many, many generations before us. They are made of the rich, heavy, costly fabric of the Christian life: a life that connects us, over centuries, with millions of followers of Christ who have tried, and keep trying, to be as good as human beings can be, in the name of Jesus.

When we wear this fabric, we mean it. We don't put on humility or patience as an ironic statement. But these fine garments will not protect us the way irony will. Irony is armor. As Jedediah Purdy writes in his book *For Common Things*, "Irony has become our marker of worldliness and maturity. The ironic individual practices a style of speech and behavior that avoids all appearance of naivete: of naïve devotion, belief, or hope." When we're being ironic, we affect a knowing detachment because we think it protects us from being disappointed or hurt.

The opposite of irony is innocence; and innocence is not armor. Innocence is peril. Innocence makes us vulnerable. Like love, innocence leaves us open to loss.

So why put on these garments that Paul urges upon us? If we had what the world calls common sense, we would be afraid to. Compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience: They will not protect us from being hurt. So what's the attraction of these clothes?

It's got to be that fabric: that fine, heavy, costly, beautiful fabric of the Christian life. It doesn't protect us, but it does something better: It connects us. It weaves our story with those of many, many generations of naïve, hopeful, believing Christians; and it connects us to one another. The fabric of our Christian lives is not armor, but it is strong and sturdy, withstanding centuries, because it is woven together by love. As Paul tells us, "love...binds everything together in perfect harmony."

Just imagine such a fabric! Threads of human life in infinite number and variety, woven together in a perfect pattern of love. When, in all innocence, we clothe ourselves in this fabric, we notice how good it feels. If we can feel it, we can remember it; and, because we remember, we can keep coming back to those clothes. No matter what hurts, what disappointments, what losses we experience, as Christians we are resolved to put on compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience—opening ourselves up to a world of hurt, because we refuse to close ourselves off from a world of relationship. That's innocence; and in the experience of innocence we are closest to Christ—especially to the Christ child, whose birth we celebrated with lovefeast, over and over again, in the last five days, without ever getting tired of it.

When I went to bed on Christmas Eve, even with my eyes closed I could still see the pews full of worshippers—not just at the last lovefeast before bedtime, but the last five lovefeasts, including the one for our congregation last Sunday. I could lie there and see them all. I saw a lot of smiles, and a lot of tears. I saw hundreds of people who might spend the rest of the year trying to clothe themselves against hurt and loss and the terrors of the world—I saw

them all willing to hope, willing to believe, willing to be innocent, for at least the amount of time that it takes to burn one beeswax candle. They were willing at least to try on the real clothes of Christmas—and in those clothes, in the light of those candles, everyone looked really, really beautiful.

The Christmas Eve lovefeast is a marvel of sensory experience, and that's so helpful in keeping the memories present. If we can see it, taste it, smell it, *feel* it, we can remember it. As this year passes and the new one arrives, let's use those sensory memories to keep us connected to the experience of innocence.

And let's remember not just the sight of the candle flames and the beautiful decorations, not just the smell of beeswax and cedar and coffee, not just the sound of the music or the taste of the lovefeast buns, but also the feel of our real Christmas clothes. Let us remember how good it feels to wear compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience—and be resolved that we will wear them constantly, and wear them with sincerity. Let us clothe ourselves, with joy and gratitude, in the fabric of Christian life, and as Paul might say: Wear it like you mean it. “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.” (Colossians 3:15.)

Amen.