

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“What to Wear”

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John 10:22-30

22 At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter,²³ and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. ²⁴So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, ‘How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.’ ²⁵Jesus answered, ‘I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; ²⁶but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. ²⁷My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. ³⁰The Father and I are one.’

Revelation 7:9-17

9 After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰They cried out in a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!’ ¹¹And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, ¹²singing, ‘Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.’

13 Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, ‘Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?’ ¹⁴I said to him, ‘Sir, you are the one that knows.’ Then he said to me, ‘These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

¹⁵For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

¹⁶They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;

¹⁷for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’

There is an old fable about a poor tailor who in search of work, walked into a small town. It was a very cold day and the only thing that the tailor had to his name was a fine coat that he had earlier made for a wealthy gentleman. The gentleman had never paid him for the coat so the poor tailor had kept it for himself. As protection from the wind, he wrapped it around himself tightly as he

walked into the small town. Upon his entrance, he left a favorable impression. The villagers saw this stranger, walking into their midst dressed in the fine coat of a rich man. They assumed he was an aristocrat or possibly even royalty. Consequently they took him into their home. They wined him, dined him, and entertained him. They treated him with the greatest of honor and respect. They offered him all sorts of favors. The poor tailor, because of what he wore, was accepted as a very important, influential man. Of sorts of comedic complications ensued. The details of the story are not important but the lesson is. The moral of the fable is something out of a Men's Wearhouse commercial: clothes do indeed make the man.

As the 25th anniversary of my ordination approached, I went into the basement and found some pictures taken on my ordination day. My first thought was predictable: I could not believe how young I looked! Laura's sister commented on *Facebook* that Laura and I looked like babies. Perhaps we were. My second thought was a bit of a surprise. I could not believe what I was wearing! My coat and shirt and tie and pants didn't seem to match well. I certainly looked a bit uncouth. I mentioned this to someone here at the church, I can't recall whom. They offered me this wisdom about my fashion error. I was told that at that point in my life I had been away from my mother too long to remember and use any advice she gave me about what to wear; and I hadn't been with my new wife long enough for her to be brave enough to give me advice as to what to wear. So I was stuck with my own ignorance about fashion.

Many of us have a certain fascination with clothing. In our culture, clothes serve some specific functions. First of all, they give our bodies some privacy. Although if you walk through Twelve Oaks Mall on a hot summer day you might wish that certain people would use a few more clothes for this particular function.

Another function of clothing is to form a bond with others who dress similarly. Think "teenager" here. Whenever my daughters look at my high school yearbook they are taken with my bell bottom pants, my wide belt, and my leisure jacket. They ask, "Dad how could you dress like that?" The answer is simple: because everyone else did. I believe that may be the only possible current explanations for low riding pants, body piercing, and tattoos. It doesn't end with our teenage years however. We always tend to want to dress like those who want to be.

Clothes also reflect our personality. Some people like to dress in bright colors. Others prefer to be more subdued. Some people like to take chances and wear things that make them stand out from the crowd. Others are more comfortable blending in. Some people love to dress up in formal attire. Others don't even own high heels or a suit and tie. I know some people who are so casual that they wear shorts 365 days a year, even through the midst of winter.

Some people put on clothes to be somebody. By this I mean something more than a Halloween masquerade or childhood dress up play time. A doctor once confessed to me that he wore the scrubs, mask, and rubber gloves for hygiene. But he also wore them for encouragement. He said, "If you are getting ready to go into surgery, if you are dealing with the issue of a person's life, you need to look like a doctor even when you don't feel like one." Clothes offer to us the authority of position, the power of recognition, and the confidence of knowing we belong where we are.

It is clear that clothing is not merely a covering, something to keep us warm and protected and private. Clothing has to do with our reality. Clothing makes us something special. Put different clothes on someone and you will get a different person.

You need to know that the Bible talks a lot about clothes, more than what we might think. You might recall the very first fashion, those fig leaves sown together by Adam and Eve because they were naked and ashamed. You might not recall that later in the third chapter of Genesis, God makes the garments of animal skin for man and for woman. God's tailoring is a sign of God's grace, the promise of divine forgiveness to overcome human shame and fear. We remember that when the prodigal son returned home, he received the best of robes as a sign of his acceptance by his loving father. Again, clothes became a sign of God's grace and the power of forgiveness. In Biblical tradition, clothing was often a symbol of God's ability to transform humanity, to change who we are and where we are going.

This morning's Scripture from the book of Revelation speaks of a vision of heaven, of the Lamb of God dressed in a robe of white, surrounded by an enormous crowd from all over the Earth, praising God and dressed also in bright, shining, pure white robes. Earlier in the chapter it states that the crowd numbers 144,000 but now the writer tells us that the faces are so numerous they cannot be counted. They are of every nation, tribe and color. A witness to the scene asks, "Who are all of these people dressed in white robes?" The answer is simple. "They are the ones who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb. They are the ones who have come out of a time of tribulation and have been redeemed by the power of God in Christ. They are the ones who were beaten down but now are victorious through God."

The image of the Blood of the Lamb isn't always a pleasant one to consider. We know that such references point to the significance of a time when sacrifice was offered on the altar. Later the Blood of the Lamb was symbolized in the sacrifice of Jesus upon the cross. Still later the martyrs of faith found purpose in their suffering and death in the image of spilling the Blood of the Lamb. Personally, I am not good around blood of any kind. When I donate blood, I have to look away. And I wonder how can something washed in blood produce something so dazzling white? I have produced plenty of pink underwear to prove that theory wrong.

But we must remember that these words were written at a time of persecution. It was a time in which the experience of the faithful was not encouraging. The Christians of Asia Minor were being punished by the Roman officials for their refusal to worship the emperor. The powers of the world appeared to be in control of the future. And the faithful needed to know that God was still in control. The words were written to persuade the people of faith to trust that God will redeem the future.

While persecution for our belief may not be such an issue, we face day to day choices about who we might worship. Persecution is not just physical pain. It is pressure to renounce your belief. We are encouraged to lose our faith in the flood of distress and worry that comes our way. We are tempted to follow more tangible and worldly solutions to meet our needs. But the Blood of the Lamb is the power of God to do what we cannot do for ourselves. It is God's proclamation that in faith we are already worthy. It washes away that which frightens us and limits us and stains us; and produces strength and courage in the faithful so that our lives and our words reflect God's hope and God's purpose.

This passage speaks of God's faithfulness, to be steadfast in the midst of human failure. This passage speaks of God's love, of forgiveness and acceptance put upon us as the finest garment of all. This passage speaks of hope, hope that each and every one of us can be graciously reclothed in the midst our situation and in the times when the world has seemed to wear us down. Our garments, spotted by our wrongs, dirtied by the wrongs inflicted upon us, stained by worry and trouble and fear, will be washed clean by the power of God's possibilities. We will be clothed in grace and wrapped in a dazzling love.

Church reformer Ulrich Zwingli once noted that when a young novice entered a monastery in the Middle Ages, he was given a monk's cowl. All of them were the same size. The young men looked ridiculous in such a large outfit. But over time the monk grew into the cowl. One day it fit him perfectly. Zwingli said that when we are baptized we are given the big name "Christian." It is much larger name than we can wear. But over time we grow into it. It begins to fit us when we start living in the hope that we profess.

One of Amelia's prized possessions in life is a small pillow she received from one of my aunts when she was a baby. She affectionately calls it her "bow." She slept with the pillow all through her childhood years. It was her familiar, safe comfort item. Over the years, parts of the cloth began to wear thin. Some of the original fabric was first replaced by her Grandma Ritter. Years later it was repaired by her Grandma Kustush. She was always thrilled that the love of both of her grandmothers was in the sewing and the cloth of her "bow." The other day I was vacuuming in her room without permission. I almost teared up when I saw the bow mixed in with the blankets of her unmade bed. The bow was still there!

The clothes we wear as the people of God are like that comfortable, familiar pillow. The love of God is the clothing that to paraphrase the old commercial "is the true fabric of our lives." It is the

promise of grace that we wear when we understand how much we are accepted and forgiven. It is the fabric of strength that never wears out even when life tries to wear us down. It is the hope that we wear when we faithfully live in God's presence, knowing we have a place in God's tomorrow.