

June 25, 2017
Third Sunday after Pentecost

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Clothed”

The Reverend Amy Starr Redwine



“I find myself picturing...God bent over, stitching fur garments for Adam and Eve.
I imagine that God is sad while stitching, and I imagine God's gift as one of utter
tenderness: *I know you have to leave, but here is one last thing I can do for you before you go.*”

~Lauren Winner, *Wearing God*

The Church of the Covenant
Presbyterian Church (USA)
11205 Euclid Avenue
Cleveland, Ohio 44106
CovenantWeb.org

Colossians 3:12–15

12 As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

Genesis 3: 8–13, 20–24

8 They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. ⁹But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?' ¹⁰He said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.' ¹¹He said, 'Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?' ¹²The man said, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.' ¹³Then the LORD God said to the woman, 'What is this that you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent tricked me, and I ate.'

20 The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all who live. ²¹And the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them. ²²Then the LORD God said, 'See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever' — ²³therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. ²⁴He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

“Clothed”
Colossians 3:12–15; Genesis 3: 8–13, 20–24

What experiences have you had of making clothes for someone or of dressing someone you love? In my family, a couple of the most cherished articles of clothing we own are dresses my grandmother smocked by hand for me and my sister. Once, in a well-intentioned but ultimately failed attempt at being more like my grandmother, I asked for a sewing machine for my birthday and, with a lot of help, managed to make exactly one dress for my daughter. It was a shocking amount of work, especially considering how quickly she outgrew it!

Even if we have never made clothes by hand, chances are each one of us has had or will have the experience of *dressing someone we love*. Maybe we dressed our children or grandchildren when they were infants or toddlers...and then later, helped them pack up their clothes to go away to summer camp or college. Maybe we've helped a friend or sister or daughter get dressed for her wedding or some other special occasion; maybe we've taught a son or brother to tie a tie. Maybe we've helped dress sick or elderly loved ones who could no longer dress themselves. Maybe we've had to pick out clothes for a loved one to be buried in.

For centuries, the story of Adam and Eve's disobedience has often been used to explain – or even justify – inequality between men and women as well as the shame associated with sexuality. We can blame this at least in part on Saint Augustine, a scholar and Christian convert who lived in the fourth century. At that time, many Jewish and Christian theologians found this story archaic and even slightly embarrassing. Most read it as an allegory in which the garden represented the human soul. But Augustine was determined to take this story seriously, if not literally, for he saw in it the key to understanding the complexities of human desire. After years of studying this story, he used it to develop a doctrine of original sin, an idea which became a cornerstone of Christian orthodoxy.¹

Given that this story carries all that baggage and more, it easy to overlook how it ends: **after** Eve and then Adam eat the forbidden fruit and **before** they are banished from the garden, that place where God is close enough to see and hear

¹ Stephen Greenblatt, “How Augustine Invented Sex.” *The New Yorker*, June 19, 2017.
<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/06/19/how-st-augustine-invented-sex>

and touch, God *clothes* them.² And even though Adam and Eve have knowingly disobeyed God, God doesn't just throw some clothes at them and tell them to **get dressed** and **get out**. Instead, as a final act of loving creation, God *makes* them clothes and *dresses* them. This detail suggests that this story is about *much more than sin*, original or otherwise; it is about a fundamental, perhaps inevitable, **separation** between God and humanity *a separation which happens between God and each of us*, and the lengths to which God is willing to go to *bridge* that divide.

One of the signature outreach ministries of this congregation is our resale shop, called the Cache. If you've never come to the church between ten and four on a Tuesday or a Thursday, you really should check it out. There are lots of great home goods – you could fully stock a kitchen for well under forty dollars! – but mostly, there are clothes. Women's clothes, men's clothes, children's clothes. Professional clothes and casual clothes. Winter clothes and summer clothes. There are shoes, too, shoes for work and shoes for play. Although these clothes are sold for next to nothing, the fact is that when someone comes to the church asking for help, one of the ways we help them is to give them clothes from the Cache – at no cost.

I'll never forget the day that Melanie came into the office with a young woman she had passed on the street on her way to work. The woman was with her two-year-old son, whose feet were bare – in February. In the Cache was a pair of shoes just his size. Giving our neighbors in need clothes from the Cache is just one way we live into our identity as followers of Jesus, the one who teaches that if someone takes your shirt, give them your coat as well, the one who says that anyone who gives clothing to a stranger who is naked and vulnerable, gives clothing to Christ himself. *Clothing* someone, whether loved one or stranger, is a tangible way we can demonstrate the **love** and **care** of God revealed in Genesis 3 when God clothes God's beloved children.

Of course, clothes do not just serve to protect our bodies from the elements, they are also a means of communication. They communicate emotion – to wear certain kinds of clothes can make us feel a certain way: comfortable or

² For this interpretation I am indebted to the book *Wearing God: Clothing, Laughter, Fire, and Other Overlooked Ways of Meeting God* by Lauren Winner (HarperOne, 2015) and her lecture on this topic in the Faith and Life lecture series which can be heard here: <http://fig.nowsprouting.com/stphilipthedeaconlutheranchurch/media.php?pageID=7&view=mobile>

empowered, respectable or lazy. Clothes also communicate something about who we are: gender, socioeconomic status, health, profession – all of these can be revealed simply by the garments that cover our bodies. This is, of course, why clothes are often such a powerful source of conflict between teenagers and their parents. Because we communicate through the clothes we wear.

A friend of mine was recently taking part in a diversity training at her place of work. It was an intense, multi-day training, and after the first day she called me and said, “I know this sounds crazy, but I’m so stressed about what to wear to the tomorrow’s training. I’m worried that if I dress professionally people will think I’m advertising my privilege, but if I dress too casually it will seem disrespectful.” After listening to her for a few minutes, I realized I’ve experienced similar anxieties about what clothing communicates. So I asked her, *“Do you think it’s possible the reason you’re worried about what to wear is because the training is making you feel **vulnerable**, because people there are seeing parts of yourself **you don’t usually share**?”*

After Adam and Eve have eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they hide from God because of their nakedness, but what is nakedness really, other than an awareness of our fundamental **vulnerability**? And what are clothes if not a complicated system of coping with the **vulnerability** and **insecurity** we all feel as we seek to make our way in the world?

*Could it be that God’s last act in the garden of clothing Adam and Eve is not to take away that vulnerability but **protect** it, even **preserve** it?*

In his contemporary Bible *The Message*, Eugene Peterson translates our passage from Colossians this way: *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.*

In the time the apostle Paul was writing letters to the first Christian churches, clothing was a means of **communication** and **identity**. By the clothes someone wore, you could tell if they were male or female, Jew or Gentile, slave or free. Clothing was an easy way to set boundaries and establish hierarchies, which is perhaps why Paul developed the metaphor of being clothed with Christ. Paul

believed that through baptism our identities are fundamentally transformed. We are no longer male or female, Jew or Greek, slave or free, at least not in any way that really matters. In Galatians chapter 3, Paul says it this way, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ.” In other words, in our baptism, *we become **one** with Christ*. Having clothed us with Christ, God begins to transform – one might say God begins to ***fashion*** – our whole lives.

The problem is, unlike the actual clothes we wear, the clothing of Christ that transforms our identity in baptism is not something that can be seen. Which is why Paul explains that the invisible clothing of Christ is revealed, not by our outer clothing, but through our **actions**. When we act in ways consistent with our baptismal identity, consistent with our unity with Christ. Paul says, it will look like this: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, and, above all, love.

It’s been another tough week to be human. Philando Castile and Jeronimo Yanez and the racism that keeps tearing the fabric of our country; another healthcare plan that creates new problems without solving the old ones; opiate addiction which continues to take a persistent and deadly toll on families and communities; wars that seem to be never ending and increasingly pointless. How can God possibly fashion something **good** and **beautiful** out of what looks so chaotic and ugly?

Genesis reminds us that our time is not the first time that the evil in the world threatened to overwhelm the good. This story of Adam and Eve and the tree of knowledge of good and evil represents humanity’s first discovery that *there is more to life than paradise*. Although God does not prevent Adam and Eve from making this discovery, God does **equip** them for life in all its fullness by sending them into the world with clothes that both **protect** and **preserve** their vulnerability. And eventually, God sends Jesus, not to take away the evil but to show us that the way to counteract it is to slowly, surely, and steadily meet it with all that is good...including compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, and above all, love. The only way to do this is be ***vulnerable***, with God and each other.

Reflecting on the experience of being clothed by a loved one, Stephanie Pausell writes: "Several years ago, having miscarried a cherished pregnancy...I found myself seemingly screwed to my bed with depression, unable to work, read or pray. I was, however, able to talk on the phone. Day after day I wore out my friends, especially my friend Kay. The year before, Kay had left behind a job, salary and colleagues to spend a year in prayer and silence. Violating her dearly-bought solitude again and again, I cried on the phone, "I am so depressed that I can't even pray. I try to pray, but I can't." A few days later, a package arrived from Kay. It contained a simple beige jumper and a note that read, "I have prayed in this dress every day for a year. You don't have to pray. Just wear it. It is *full* of prayers." I did wear that dress. I wore it and wept in it, and cried out Why? to God in it. I let the prayers in that dress pray for me when my mouth was dry and full of ashes. And when I became pregnant again, I continued to wear that dress. Kay loves long, loose clothes, and her dress was spacious enough to accompany me nearly to the end of my ninth month. Her prayers were spacious enough, too, to gather up my fear and grief and anger. And my joy, when it came."³

God clothes us with Christ to protect and preserve our vulnerability and to equip us to be Christ-like. It may not happen all at once and there may be parts of this clothing that fit us better than others. But to choose each day to follow Jesus is not so different from choosing, each day, what clothes we will wear. To choose each day to follow Jesus is to reject the clothes of anger and frustration and fear that are often so tempting, and instead to accept the clothing God offers, clothing made just for us, by our God, clothing spacious enough to hold our fear and grief and anger, clothing that makes us one with Christ and that fills and equips us, above all, with love.

Amen.

³ Winner, Lauren F. (2015-03-31). *Wearing God: Clothing, Laughter, Fire, and Other Overlooked Ways of Meeting God* (Kindle Locations 822-831). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.