

Nineteenth Sunday after Holy Trinity

Ephesians 4:22 – 32



The Clothes Make the Man!

22to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, 23and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, 24and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. 25Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. 26Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, 27and give no opportunity to the devil. 28Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him

labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. 29Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. 30And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. 32Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

An acquaintance of ours dreamed of becoming a flight attendant. She had successfully passed the first two interviews and advanced to the third and final stage. According to most accounts, this last interview was a mere formality, and the job was all but guaranteed. This final step also went well—until the very last question: "Do you have any tattoos?" As it turned out, she did have a tiny tattoo on her arm. That was the deciding factor. The airline did not permit staff to have tattoos, no matter how small. That was the end of the matter, and she didn't get the job. To this day, dress codes and outward appearance are taken very seriously in the professional world. A doctor in a white coat conveys competence to provide medical help. A stockbroker wearing a tie and a Rolex projects an image of financial savvy. A firefighter dressed in red, with bulging biceps, conveys that he is capable of saving lives. And on it goes. How people look influences our perception of them. Yet, outward appearance is not always a true reflection of a person's inner self. As Goethe has Mephistopheles say: "Don a wig with a million curls, put on shoes with towering soles—you remain, in the end, exactly what you are."

Jesus, too, repeatedly focuses on the inner self rather than outward appearances in his teachings. "It is what comes out of a person that makes them unclean," he says, for instance, to the Pharisees who insisted on their rules of ritual purity. At first glance, however, Paul seems to take a different approach. As Christians, he says, we ought to put on the clothing that befits our Christian identity—garments that, much like a doctor's coat or a firefighter's red suit, serve as a mark of who we are and what we are capable of. Yet, this outward expression of our Christianity stands in contrast to our inner Christian identity. The question is whether or not this constitutes a conflict.

First, we must acknowledge that any attempt to prove our Christianity through practical living inevitably lapses into legalism. We cannot prove our faith. Period.

And yet, a conflict certainly does exist: the new self in Christ is inherently at odds with the old self. We possess two identities that compete and struggle against one another. For the identity born of our flesh, our experiences, and often our culture is the exact opposite of Christ's nature. It does not surrender itself; instead, it seeks its own advantage. It looks for ways to deceive, outwit, or manipulate others. We know this nature all too well. It is alive and active in our society and in our private lives alike. It often disguises itself within us, leading us to believe we are on the right path and engaged in a seemingly righteous battle against evil. All the while, however, we are increasingly drawn into the pull of our own flesh. In our society, I see an intensifying polarization where everyone believes they are on the "right" side. People are pigeonholed based on their political views, culture, or background. Battle lines are drawn, and there is no room for compromise, because people are convinced they are "right." They fight against one another to the bitter end. This tendency is beginning to emerge within our Christian communities as well. We are not untouched by the worldviews and influences of our world, and unfortunately, these sentiments often penetrate the congregation and the church.

Demands come from both the left and the right. Some want to transform beautiful old churches—with their superb acoustics—into venues for booming rock concerts. Others want to return to the Middle Ages.

How urgent, then, is the Apostle Paul's exhortation: Clothe yourselves with the new self in Christ! This does not mean drawing up a long list of rules for how we ought to live as Christians. It does mean, however, that we consciously look to our origin—to Christ himself. When He gives Himself to us, He gives Himself completely and envelops us with His own person. The white baptismal garment symbolizes precisely this: my own identity is enveloped and embraced by Christ. Initially, this is something that originates solely with Christ; yet it penetrates the person and transforms them.

The overarching theme for the Apostle Paul is the renewal of our minds according to the mind of Christ. This is the starting point—what takes place within. But it extends beyond that, touching upon the very practical aspects of our lives. Truth is one of the first things to be included here. We know that the Fall began with a lie. Thus, we are never far from Satan when we speak a lie, and never far from God when we speak the truth. Next, Paul speaks of anger. Anger, according to Paul, has the capacity to give the devil a foothold. We know this all too well. When bitterness takes root in the heart, it spreads like cancer and destroys one's entire life. Paul acknowledges that anger is sometimes unavoidable. Yet, he offers pastoral counsel: do not let anger take root in your hearts by allowing the sun to go down on your anger while it festers and circles endlessly in your thoughts. Furthermore, the Apostle speaks of the former lives of the Christians of that time—among whom there were certainly thieves. Instead of stealing, they are now to do good through their work so that others may be helped. Here, we likely find the early seeds of diaconal care. In the remaining remarks, the emphasis lies squarely on the words we speak. In his commentary, Martin Luther likened such idle, foul talk to a belch. Just as a belch spreads a foul odor and ultimately achieves nothing, so too are words that rise from the depths of the human soul only to spread a toxic atmosphere; they lead only to ruin. God's Word stands in stark contrast to this. God's Word creates life and brings grace to those who hear it. It is a solemn warning from the Apostle Paul when he states that our very words can grieve the Holy Spirit of God. We know from human experience, too, just how hurtful words can be. An unkind word can feel like a punch to the gut, leaving us deeply wounded in our feelings. To use the Apostle's words: the Holy Spirit, too, is deeply grieved when His temple—that is, you yourself—speaks such words. Throughout all this, Paul repeatedly turns to the subject of Christ. Christ is the point of orientation by which we steer our lives. Just as a compass needle always points north, my life is now aligned with Christ. And whenever I am distracted by my emotions, I allow Him to realign me. So, when Paul speaks of "new clothing," he speaks from the perspective of Christ. And it is through Christ that it becomes clear who we are and what our true identity is. Nowhere is our identity more clearly revealed than where God takes us seriously as individuals and—precisely for that person—goes to the greatest possible lengths to save us. Jesus's path is one of total devotion to *you*—to you personally! Here is a God who proves through His love that He is there for you completely. Without reservation! That is the source of our identity. Yet Paul is well aware that the "old self," with its natural traits, persists until the Last Day. That is why "putting on Christ" is a conscious decision—one that can truly shape one's entire life. During my vicarage, my supervising pastor once said to me: "When you put on your clerical robe, it is more than just changing clothes. It is a deliberate act. You are expressing that you are setting aside your own self, putting on Christ, and speaking in His stead."

And that is precisely what happens to all of us Christians whenever we attend worship, hear God's Word, and receive Holy Communion. We arrive in our "old clothes" and then put on Christ anew. We receive Christ within us and then consciously carry Him out into the world. It is a conscious decision that permeates our entire lives. Of course, we also find ourselves repeatedly caught in the tension between the old self and the new self—situations where we do not know which decision is the right one, or where we let ourselves be carried away and act contrary to our nature in Christ. Yet it is precisely at these moments that it becomes clear why we exist as a church, and why it is necessary to continually seek out the warm cloak of our Lord Jesus and allow Him to clothe us. Amen.