

It seems that there is now this period of lull possibly being felt as the preparation of Advent is now completed with the lighting of the candles of hope joy, peace and love, the celebration of Christmas has passed even though many of us are still eating Christmas cookies, the Packer Season will be done after today and many of us are looking forward towards New Years and 2019 with anticipations for a better year. It appears that we have placed so much emphasis on Christmas that we now ask ourselves, “now what” as we work to get back to our daily routines. Have you ever wondered why can't we celebrate Christmas everyday? The answer is “Yes, we can” and our epistle reading from Colossians provides a template for a perpetual Christmas, for the birthing of Emmanuel, God with us, all year long by joining the inner and outer dimensions of life and committing to embody Christ in every season of life.

In Paul's letter to the Colossians, a Christian community in the city of Colossae that was founded by a Colossian associate of Paul named Epaphras, in the Roman province of Asia, Paul identified many adopted virtues of the new life in the image of clothing that is ensemble into an outfit to be worn. I found a great illustration that best describes how this outfit would look like when we clothe ourselves with the virtues of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience as Paul noted. When we get dressed each day, what is the first thing that is put on; our underwear. I have heard this also called “foundation garments”, so when Paul is talking about compassion and humility, he is talking about the foundation garments of life as these two character traits are fundamental to human relationships. They summarize how we feel deep down inside about each other (compassion) and about ourselves (humility). These are our inner dimensions of life and without compassion and humility, human relationships don't work. Enough about our underwear. Next Paul calls us to put on the basic work clothes for a Christian life, kindness and meekness or gentleness. These can be considered the pants and

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shirts we wear, our outer dimensions of life that is visible to the outside world. We all know what kindness means and that simple human kindness will do more to demonstrate the life changing work of Christ in us. But we also need to put on gentleness because there is a lot of hurt in the world. I can't help but think of the vulgar image of the African American wrestler getting his hair cut off in a senseless and shameful manner so he could compete in his match that likely left him very traumatized and hurting and nobody stepped in to stop it. Shame on them! Then, each day we must put on our shoes of patience. The world is filled with problems and problems can become splits, divisions and warfare when we run out of patience in dealing with the problem. So Paul says to put on your shoes of patience and just keep walking with each other. To complete our outfit, Paul then states that we must put on the warm overcoat of love as stated in vs. 14, "Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." Paul is reminding us that God is love, the fourth candle of the Advent wreath that we lit last week to show that we as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, needs to be carried with us all year long. Our outfit is now complete, but according to Paul, we need to have "put them on" so that we live these qualities for others to see and not just "have them" so that they can hang in our closets. These are not simply suggestions to live by, but actions that Paul uses to define Christian living. Paul is also calling us as Christians to not forget that we also need to show forgiveness to one another, have peace in our hearts, show gratitude and sing, songs of praise to God. That is a lot to take into the new year, but Paul is simplifying it by saying that whatever you do, do in the name of Jesus Christ giving thanks to God through him. I wonder what the world would be like if we actually lived as Paul is telling us to do in Colossians?

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Love is that power of God that has the capacity to bind all godliness together into divine perfection. We see this love between two mothers and their sons in our other readings for today. Hannah made her young son, Samuel, a linen ephod (sleeveless robe) which she brought to him yearly at the Temple as he continued ministering to the Lord. It was love that gave Hannah the courage to let her son remain at the Temple with Eli as he grew both in stature and in favor with the Lord. We aren't talking summer camp here, but years that Samuel spent away from his home from his mother and father with his yearly reminder of his mother's love in the form of a robe. In our Gospel reading from Luke, we get a glimpse of a pre-adolescent Jesus intentionally staying behind in Jerusalem without his parents knowledge with his parents then frantically searching for him when they discovered him missing until they found him in the least likely place, in the Temple sitting among the teachers. Jesus stayed in the Temple because that was the place that he felt love, where he was clothed in love (I am in my Father's house as he said). After Mary got over her anger and fear of Jesus' actions (I wonder how Jesus was punished for this as it is not like you can take away his cellphone), she then treasured all these things in her heart that she initially didn't understand out of love as Jesus increased in wisdom and divine favor as he got older. Both of these young boys, Samuel and Jesus, felt the warmth and love from their mothers, but also the warmth and love of God, the wrap of our Christian virtues that binds everything together. That is how we need to be celebrating Christmas all year long.

When I was thinking about Paul's vision of Christian living this past week and the warmth that comes from God's love, I was reminded of the one gift that I received many years ago that I am not ashamed to say I continue to use it to this day – Introduce the Snuggie.

Facts about the Snuggie:

- sleeved body-length blanket
- designed to a bathrobe that is meant to be work backwards (I don't walk around with it on)
- First introduced in the late 2008 (10 years ago) that became a pop culture phenomenon made famous through television
- within the first year, more than 20 million were sold in the US, Canada and Australia
- there is even a Guinness World Record for having the most Snuggie wearers at one event (40,000 spectators at a LA Angels baseball game in 2010)

There have been many variations of the Snuggie since its introduction and it has since been replaced with tie blankets and adult onesies, however, we need the warmth-like love that we receive from being in relationship with each other (the love that binds everything together as Paul puts it) much like the warmth that can be received from a Snuggie.

Professor of New Testament at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary Marion Soards states that Paul's letter to the Colossians envisions a Christian community in action by providing us with characteristics for God's call to service. We are to live out our call as a church by focusing on our relationships within and outside of the church. Paul calls it "the body of Christ" which we are all apart of and reminds us of how important it is to express this reality in our love for one another and to those less fortunate. This is what the missional church should look like. I read that today there is great confusion as to the function of the church. Many congregations, whether they admit it or not, are significantly driven by fear, fear of changing, fear of not changing, fear of not having any new members, fear of having new members, fear of not making budget, fear of death and fear of the life that the church is called to be. I was a member of a such a church at one time. Paul is telling us, God's chosen ones, to not worry about these

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things, but instead let the peace of Christ dwell in your hearts and with gratitude sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God and I would add to sing them loud. The church is not and should not be about fear, but about love and relationship. We see that in a young Samuel and Jesus, both whom grew in favor with the Lord as a result of their time at the Temple with their leaders.

Christmas is a time when God tells the truth about God's self - "I am here!" as an expression of such love and relationship. How that truth gets heard might change depending on where you are, but its truth never changes because of who God is – God is love, the love that binds everything together in perfect harmony. We are reminded how important it is to express this reality in our love for one another as we see again the purpose of our coming together as a church; that we will meet Christ, recognizing him, worshiping him, hear his call and praising him. This is the center from which the Christian community will grow, the center from which love will flourish. As we clothe ourselves in Christ, we are transformed, not merely by our own actions, but above all by God's own love at work within ourselves to continue Christmas all year long. Let us pray,

Dear God, thank you for choosing me and loving me even when I forget how to dress myself. Help me not to forget that the world needs love and that you want me to carry it with me wherever I go. I want to be recognized as your child every day. Help me to be more kind, caring, peaceful, respectful and patient so that others can see your presence in me. Amen.