

## What are you wearing?

Shortly after Joe and I became engaged, he let me borrow this shirt. I don't remember the occasion--perhaps we were going on a hike, perhaps I was going home in the evening and was cold. Whatever the reason, I loved this shirt. (I still love it--that's why I kept it all this time.) Because, you see it was his. He had worn it, and wearing it made me feel close to him. Shortly after that, at Easter vacation, Joe took his children to visit their Grandmother in Pittsburgh and I went with my brother and his family to San Diego. My sister-in-law still laughs as she recounts that I would hardly take the shirt off during the whole weekend!

When I read the Colossians passage today I thought about my shirt. Can you see why? Joe had chosen me, I was "holy", that literally means "set apart" I was loved.

And look at the way the passage begins: As God's chosen ones, holy, and beloved, clothe yourselves... God has chosen us, we are holy in God's sight, we are God's beloved. God loves us much more than Joe or any other person could even love me. I'll say more, when I got engaged, I felt different, I felt happy and more alive. But earlier in Colossians we read that in accepting Christ we have been given a new self. We don't just feel different--we ARE different. It is because we have been made new, and because that we are God's chosen, God's beloved, that Paul calls us to put on these new clothes.

In the very early days of the church on the evening before Easter, converts would be brought into a separate section of the church. Almost all, of their clothes would be removed. Then they would be baptized. As a symbol their old life had ended and their new life in Christ had begun. Then they would be dressed in new white robes and brought into the sanctuary to join with the rest of the community. Probably Paul had this ritual in mind as he wrote this passage.

And Paul seems to be saying that, just as the newly baptized Christians needed the new clothes to become a part of the community, we need these "clothes" to belong to the church, to participate in the life of Christian community. What are these garments? Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. He goes on, "Bear with one another, and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive one another." You see, he knows that, even though we're chosen, even though

**we're beloved, we aren't perfect. We'll make mistakes. We need to bear with one another and forgive one another. And then he adds the (pardon the pun) the clincher. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together. Someone has therefore called love the belt--the tie that goes around us and brings all our other clothes together.**

**Hmmm that's a pretty formidable list. For some of us, standing at the beginning of this New Year, this is an old story. We've been here before. We've tried the clothes on before. We've made new year's resolutions before. And for the first few days of the new year, we put on our clothes of compassion and kindness, but then one morning we forgot, and the next morning it just felt like too much trouble, and so it went, until they ended up on the floor in the back of the closet.**

**But notice, putting on these clothes is not a law. We don't have to put them on to be accepted by God. We're already chosen, holy, beloved. Our putting them on is a response. As Paul says, **JUST AS THE LORD HAS FORGIVEN YOU, so you must forgive.**" We put them on because of the relationship, we put them on in gratitude. Maybe if we focus on God's love, then we'll be able to respond with more grace, maybe then, we'll treat our clothes the way I treated Joe's shirt. We won't want to take them off.**

**Others of us look back and see a little progress. We may not be able to forgive that person yet, and goodness knows we're not humble, but we are a little kinder, a little more compassionate. I'm reminded of the story of Samuel. Year after year he served God in the temple. And year after year he grew. And every year his mother brought him a new robe that she had lovingly made with her own hands. Perhaps she made it a little bigger than it needed to be, so that he could grow into it. So it can be with us, Like Hannah, every year God lovingly lays out our new clothes. Maybe we have to grow into them, but with God's help we can. And we will find them to be very becoming.**

**Then Paul says a strange thing: Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. A lot of us talk about working for peace. But work is not the first thing, the first thing is to let, to allow, to make room in our hearts for the peace of Christ, and then to let that peace take over-- let it rule.**

"Silent Night," by Stanley Weintraub, is the story of Christmas Eve 1914 on the World War I battlefield in Flanders. As the German, British, and French troops

facing each other were settling in for the night, a young German soldier began to sing "Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht." Others joined in. When they had finished, the British and French responded with other Christmas carols.

Eventually, the men from both sides left their trenches and met in the middle. They shook hands, exchanged gifts, and shared pictures of their families. Informal soccer games began in what had been "no-man's-land." And a joint service was held to bury the dead of both sides.

The generals, of course, were not pleased with these events. Men who have come to know each other's names and seen each other's families are much less likely to want to kill each other. War seems to require a nameless, faceless "enemy."

So, following that magical night the men on both sides spent a few days simply firing aimlessly into the sky. Then the war was back in earnest and continued for three more bloody years. Yet the story of that Christmas Eve lingered - a night when the angels really did sing of peace on earth.

And it all happened because one soldier sang of the peace in his heart. God grant that the peace in our hearts enables us to climb out of our trenches and reach out to others.

Then Paul says, Let the word of Christ dwell in your hearts richly. Don't just think about them, mull them over, let them live with you. Let them live in you. Well, Jesus' word in our gospel text today (the very first words he utters in the Gospel of Luke), are very much to the point. His parents confront him in the temple he is only twelve and he answers them: Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?" I must be about my Father's business. I have this relationship, you see, with my Father, and it defines my life. Does our relationship with God define our lives?

Paul started out by talking about our relationship with each other in the community of faith, then he talked about peace and the word of Christ that is to dwell in our hearts. But he doesn't let us off the hook. It's not just our life together or our inner life that needs to concern us. No. He finishes up by including everything, every action, every day, to use contemporary jargon, what we do 24/7. And, whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God through him.

Some of you have heard this story before, but it sums up what I am trying to say.

My sister in law Shirley was adopted in 1943, when she was eight years old. She left the orphanage with just the simple dress she was wearing. The next day her mother took her to downtown San Francisco, and bought her a whole new wardrobe. What a sight it must have been. Remember that in those days women dressed up to go to town. Here was a woman in her fancy dress, with hat, heels and gloves, holding a little ill-clad waif by the hand. But Shirley had been adopted, she had a new life, a new family, and soon she had new clothes to show for it. So it is with us friends, we, too have been adopted, we too, have a new life, a new family. Let's not forget to wear our new clothes, and to wear them every day.