

Sermon – “What to Wear”
Reverend Lisa Eleck
Olivet Congregational Church, UCC
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Galatians 3: 23-28

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Luke 8: 26-39

Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me” — for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) Jesus then asked him, “What is your name?” He said, “Legion”; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission.

Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid.

Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by

demons had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.

Sermon – What to Wear

Jesus was full of surprises. His followers never knew what to expect.

He physically touched people he shouldn't have touched – ones who were considered impure. He touched a leper and healed him. He touched the coffin of the son of a widow who would have had a tenuous existence with his death. And Jesus brought him back to life. Touching that man and that coffin were acts of impurity, but they provided healing for the man and security for his vulnerable widow.

Jesus healed a servant – the servant of a Roman centurion, a Roman officer with a hundred men under him. That servant had no status in society – Jewish or Roman. That centurion was an enemy, officer in an occupying army. Neither would truly be considered worthy of Jesus' intervention, yet, that servant was cured by Jesus. Jesus healed the powerless in spite of the power of the occupying army.

He healed a man with a withered hand – on the Sabbath – to the disapproval of the Pharisees, who had been watching to see if he would actually do such a thing in the Sabbath. It did not stop Jesus.

Jesus went where it would have been frowned upon - inviting himself to the home of Levi – a tax collector. Levi would be working for the oppressors and his fellow Jews assumed that he would be lining his pockets as well. It did not stop Jesus from going to his house.

Jesus even traveled to places that Jews would normally not go. This morning we hear that Jesus went to the country of the Gerasenes – a predominantly Gentile country. So why would Jesus choose to go there, to a cemetery with tombs amidst a herd of pigs? Again, into the midst of impurity according to the law.

We don't know for sure why Jesus went there. But we do know that once there, Jesus healed a man who lived in chains among the tombs. The man had been sent there because he was possessed by demons. Today we would say he suffered from mental illness. Apparently, he was so affected that he had been a threat to others or himself. So Jesus healed him.

But the local people, rather than rejoicing at this man's good fortune and their good fortune that he could return home, were frightened. They did not understand or could not accept this miracle.

Jesus was certainly breaking down barriers in unexpected ways. But the common thread to his actions was reaching out, healing, and demonstrating the love of God. Radical and unconditional outreach, healing, and love. Jesus' way was not always understood and not always celebrated. But that was Jesus.

Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, reminds the new church that as followers of Jesus, faith in Jesus should rule their lives. Not discipline through the law or legalism. Jesus' way, the way of Love, should guide their actions.

Paul encouraged them by saying "for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

Followers of Jesus, we are all children of God, clothed with Christ. There is no separation by nationality, status, gender. All are united. All are one in Christ Jesus. What good news – for the early church of Galatia, for all who choose to follow Jesus, and for us. Jesus radical acceptance and love are there for everyone.

Just as Jesus reached out to others – who were considered impure, who were marginalized, who were enemies of the Jews, who were Gentiles and foreigners – followers of Jesus are called to clothe themselves in Jesus and follow his example. To wrap ourselves in Jesus challenges us to emulate Jesus by reaching out and wrap others in love.

Being clothed in Jesus also offers comfort those who struggle, even providing them an experience of joy in Jesus' closeness.

In his book, "Pastor, I Am Gay,"* Reverend Howard H. Bess, an American Baptist Minister, tells the story of attending a denominational conference many years ago. Its theme was "Extending the Hand of Fellowship," Reverend Bess said it was an "exercise in maintaining our skills in the welcoming of diversity in our churches." Reverend Bess noted there had been no mention of ministry to the gay and lesbian community anywhere in the conference. So he approached the organizer and was told that the denomination was "not ready to face the issue."

While Reverend Bess was disappointed, he was spurred into action by what happened one day at the end of the program. It had been a great day. A well-known Black minister gave a rousing sermon at the evening worship. Reverend Bess felt it had exemplified that "the Gospel knows nothing of barriers." However, the closing hymn got him thinking.

They sang a beautiful song, "For Those Tears I Died." The inserts with the words to the hymn did not, however, did not include the name of the woman who wrote the hymn. He knew that it was Marsha Stevens. And he knew her story. Before I share her story, let me share the words to the hymn. You can listen to it on YouTube but I can share these words because the song is included in our CCLI license. The words are a conversation between Marsha and Jesus.

[For Those Tears I Died](#)

Verse 1

You said You'd come
And share all my sorrows.
You said You'd be there
For all my tomorrows.
I came so close
To sending You away
But just like You promised
You came here to stay.
I just had to pray.

Chorus

*And Jesus said "Come to the water
Stand by My side
I know you are thirsty*

*You won't be denied
I felt ev'ry teardrop
When in darkness you cried
And I strove to remind you
That for those tears I died."*

Verse 2

Your goodness so great
I can't understand.
And dear Lord I know
That all this was planned.
I know You're here now
And always will be.
Your love loosed my chains
And in You I'm free.
But Jesus why me

Chorus

Verse 3

Jesus I give You
My heart and my soul.
I know that without God
I'd never be whole.
Savior You opened
All the right doors.
And I thank You and praise You
From earth's humble shores.
Take me I'm Yours (Marsha J. Stevens CCLI Song # 13948)

The story behind this hymn ... Marsha Stevens wrote this hymn when she was 16 years old. She had realized she was lesbian. She was rejected by her family, her friends and her church. She was so distressed that she considered suicide. Instead she turned to the One, who she believed was a loving God who would accept her exactly as she was, for who she was. The pain caused by rejection and ultimately her belief in God's acceptance inspired her to write this, her first hymn. Marsha continues to write Christian hymns. She has been clothed in and

comforted by the mantle of Christ that wraps around her. And she chooses to bring Jesus' love to others through her music.

Marsha's song is beautiful. It's ironic that she, as a lesbian author, was not given credit in that church assembly that was meant to express diversity and welcome; but not ready to discuss welcoming of LGBTQ individuals. The story of this experience is what Reverend Bess says stirred him to write his book and learn more about gay and lesbian persons so that he might better minister to them.

Reverend Bess published his book in 1995. Much progress has been made in welcoming, accepting, and affirming LGBTQI people in the community, allowing individuals to legally marry and adopt children, and in some denominations even ordain and accept LGBTQ individuals as clergy. That includes our the UCC – in which the Executive Conference Minister of the SNEUCC is an openly gay, black man.

When we listen to the stories of others, especially their struggles, we clothe ourselves in Jesus.

When we accept and affirm LGBTQI persons and families– even as legislation is passed against members of that group - we clothe ourselves in Jesus.

When we share in the celebration of Juneteenth, a piece of the story of freedom for slaves in our country, and continue to fight the ongoing battle against racism that still exists today, we clothe ourselves in Jesus.

When we welcome persons who are marginalized - refugees, persons released from prison, or persons struggling with mental illnesses, hunger or homelessness, we clothe ourselves in Jesus.

As we go about our daily lives, clothing ourselves in Jesus may look different to each of us. No matter what it looks like, when we clothe ourselves in Jesus, we bring Jesus' radical love to our world and we bring hope. So let us ask ourselves – what will we wear today?

* Bess, The Reverend Howard H. Pastor, I Am Gay. (Alaska: Palmer Publishing Company, 1995) pp 9-10.

