

PUT ON CHRIST



Alice Fleming Townley
September 6, 2020
Romans 13: 8-14

⁸ Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹ The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

An Urgent Appeal

¹¹ Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹² the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³ let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴ Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. (Romans 13: 8-14)

Pictures of the first day of school have filled my newsfeed these last few weeks. Some of our church kids who were entering preschool and kindergarten not so long ago are entering high school, or even finishing. Whether posted or not, my heart scrolls through the years with awe. And our teachers are posting so many hopes and fears. We all know, this year is like no other. Many virtual classrooms include kitchen tables and bedroom desks. Schools in our area from preschool through college are entirely online this year. Across the state and country, others are hybrid or in person, but still effected by the pandemic as the children come in masks and space carefully, or not. Anxiety, aspirations, and tears flow freely.

Part of going back to school always involves what to wear. A certain shirt picked out, changed for another, and then back to the first. And for those online a certain freedom as the tops do not have to match the bottoms this year. My daughter and I smile with understanding at all the leggings being advertised in the Land’s End Kids catalog. At least one local district sent out an email recently asking for no pajamas in virtual school. Others are just relieved when everyone gets connected.

When my kids were wee ones, we enrolled them in a co-operative preschool. The volunteer school board of parents rented a church basement and hired one teacher, beloved Mrs. Fazio, and then all of us parents took turns being her aide. In other words, we went to preschool too. I have fond memories of morning circle time with Mrs. Fazio. After greeting and naming each one, she would talk about the date, the season, and the weather. She had a little paper bear that she would dress accordingly. She had a little paper hat and umbrella for the rain, shorts for the hot days, and a warm coat for the chilly ones. Like detectives looking for cues, those wise wide eyes looked around for what to wear each day.

Clothing covers us. Our clothes often come with stories about who made them or gave them to us. A sweater Jonathan wore often in preschool was made by a widow at my parent's church for the United Methodist Women's fall bazaar. Each year these women would raise thousands of dollars for mission support, feeding families, supporting tutoring, and more. My Mom saw the little blue sweater left behind at the bazaar and bought it, not knowing if she would have anyone who might fit it, but wanting to support her friend and the cause. To see him wear the sweater, was to see him clothed in the compassion of both of these women.

Paul was writing to all God's beloved in Rome, while the bitter winds of division and strife howled. In first century Rome, clothing and indebtedness signaled the separation of Jew from Greek, male from female, slave from free. To the emperor they 'owed' allegiance, to their benefactor money and possessions. Wives owed submission, slaves owed their lives, and so on. When Paul said 'owe' no one anything except love, he was re-ordering the system.

Paul continued, "love does not do wrong to a neighbor. . . Wake up. . . Put on the armor of light . . . Let go of quarreling and jealousy and harming bodies. Put on the Lord Jesus Christ." And with that reference, came a reminder of their baptisms, and emerging from the river dressed alike in baptismal gowns and claiming a new way of living.

New Testament Professor Israel Kamudzandu, says the message of this love to which Paul calls us to is complicated by the history of the church in colonization. Loving one another, then involves learning and acknowledging what harm has been done. Loving one another involves working towards truth and reconciliation. Kamudzandu wrote, "While hate and oppression dehumanize others, love, if well done and exercised, will give birth to a new world order."ⁱ

We are called to look, listen, and love in a way that changes systems. Andrea Denney, from Fourth Presbyterian, reflected, *Love is action rather than avoidance. . . This is the difference between claiming I am not a racist and actively working to be antiracist. It might be easy to avoid racist language and KKK rallies, but it is definitely harder to work on dismantling racist systems. If*

*you only avoid something, you consent to its existence. Working, learning, disrupting, protesting, and voting are all active words. These things aren't the passive, soft side of loving my neighbor. . . It will be hard, gnarly, infuriating, brave. That sounds exactly like love.*ⁱⁱ

I close my eyes once again I am sitting with Mrs. Fazio asking what we should wear now. It's back to school time and everyone is trying their best. We have lost our daily rituals and the playbook and maybe even the calendar. Covid has revealed debilitating divisions. We are overwhelmed by day to day demands, and systemic injustices. As the weeks go by, losses mount, anger rages and tears flow.

What do we wear for these times? In Paul's words, we put on Christ. God clothes us with God's own incarnate self. We are clothed in love and peace and light. And in such we are held, comforted, and warmed. And putting on Christ, we gaze at another with Christ's eyes and heart, not with jealousy or greed or harm. With Christ covering even our eyes like glasses, we see the struggle and pain of our neighbor. And what we wear at home, school, work, and in the community. In these clothes we learn history, speak truth, and challenge wrong. We participate in God's work of birthing new life. "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility . . . Above all, clothe yourselves with love." (Colossians 3:12-14)

Hear this blessing:

In the cross fire

In the cross contamination

At the crossroads that call

you forward but give you no sign

May peace become you, Beloved,

In the seemingly impossible

In the human tragedy,

In the unworkable situations of division and strife.

May peace become you, Beloved,

And courage carry you

When you cannot see the road ahead,

nevertheless take one more step in the direction of love. ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Israel Kamudzandu, "Commentary on Romans 13: 8-14, *The Working Preacher*, September 6, 2020, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4567

ⁱⁱ Andrea Denney, Daily Devotions, September 6, Fourth Presbyterian Church, <https://www.fourthchurch.org/devotions/2020/090220.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ "May Peace Become You," <https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/>