

Proper 7-C
St. Stephen's, Spokane
June 20, 2010

I have an alarming number of t-shirts, sweatshirts, hats and other clothing items that have logos on them. I brought a few along today. There's my University of Washington shirt that says something about my sports and alumni loyalties. Gonzaga, too. There is my Millennium Development Goals t-shirt that makes a statement about addressing poverty and disease worldwide. My Habitat for Humanity shirt. My 10 reasons for being an Episcopalian shirt. (My St. Stephen's sweatshirt is in the laundry today.) When I wear any of these, they say a little something about me. They all represent something I believe in. I'm willing to be identified with all of these things. I'm happy to put them on.

Maybe you have a drawer full of shirts or other gear that says something about your interests, your loyalties. Or if you have worn a uniform as part of the military, the police force, or as a staff member of some company or organization, you know that putting on that uniform says something about you, your responsibilities, your values, your loyalties.

In the reading from Galatians today, Paul talks about those who were baptized into Christ having 'clothed themselves with Christ.' Some translations read 'put on' Christ – not as t-shirt, of course. It's not that literal. He's talking more about putting on the life of faith. But the image may have come from the special clothing that people wore as they were baptized and still do in some traditions– a white garment. Eugene Peterson puts an

interesting spin on this image saying that baptism is “involved in dressing you in an adult faith wardrobe.”

We have been working our way through Galatians for several weeks now and know that it is a complex letter – not the easiest one to understand. Sometimes getting these short snippets each week is a little like walking into a theater in the middle of the movie. It’s hard to get the story line.

Basically, as Paul writes a letter to this church, he is working out what it means to live by faith rather than living by the law as one would in Judaism. He’s making a case for Jesus as the way to fulfillment and salvation. Knowing and keeping the law, he’s saying, just cannot do this. It has its limits.

Today’s reading looks at that through an illustration that would be familiar in family life in the Greco-Roman world, but a little puzzling to us. He talks about the law as our disciplinarian. The term disciplinarian really refers to a person in a first-century household called the ‘pedagogue’ who was responsible for the protection and education of the male children. Literally pedagogue means ‘child guide.’ When the children reached young adulthood they were ready to function in the adult world and no longer needed the pedagogue. We really don’t have an equivalent role in our culture. A coach or a mentor might do some of this, but the pedagogue had long term responsibilities.

What Paul is getting at is that the law, like a pedagogue, has its limits. It can only form people up to a point. Only in Christ, he says, can we live into an adult faith where we continue to be guided by the Spirit. When we ‘put on’ Christ or ‘clothe ourselves’ with

Christ we enter into a relationship of connectedness with Christ and with the community. And that connectedness also launches us into a new unity that erases the distinctions that would traditionally segment society. In that first-century culture there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. We could probably substitute some of our own cultural distinctions to re-write this for ourselves. No matter what the divisions have been, in Christ we are all one. It is revolutionary stuff. And it all begins with baptism .

Which brings us to today and the joyful baptisms of Michael and Jane – soon to become the newest Christians. The newest to ‘put on Christ.’

What do we put on when we clothe ourselves with Christ?

One thing we put on is a set of values that guide our lives. Sometimes I get to teach college students about the Episcopal Church and I often tell them that if you want to know what Episcopalians believe about how life is to be lived, look at our baptismal covenant (which we will say together in a few minutes). We repeat the Apostles’ Creed. We affirm our willingness to share the good news with others. To respect the dignity of all. To strive for justice and peace. To be part of a worshiping community. To know and partake of God’s forgiveness. To love our neighbors as ourselves. These are our norms for life together in Christ. And with God’s help, we put them on. (Maybe we should have a baptismal covenant t-shirt.)

Another thing that we put on as we are baptized is a ‘new life.’ Of course these children who aren’t even a year old, have a pretty new life anyway. But baptism is another birth. A birth that is this new relationship with Jesus. A relationship of grace and hope and

joy. We mark every baptized person with the sign of the cross and say, 'You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.' Sometimes I've said to children that the sign of the cross on their forehead is a little like having a mark in permanent, but invisible ink. It is always there. You can't wash it off. That relationship of belonging to Christ is always there as well. It is indelible. It is forever. That's powerful.

And we also put on a relationship with a community. You notice that at baptism when we affirm the baptismal covenant, we ALL say this together. No matter how many times we have said it before. We are all in this together. Being part of the community is almost counter-cultural in this individualistic age, but it is one of the essentials of being the Church.

And as we baptize children (as we are today) we welcome them into full membership in the community of the Church. And we also take on our responsibility to be their mentors and guides and coaches as we help them to grow up in the faith. Of course parents and grandparents and godparents have some special opportunities and responsibilities to do this. But all of the rest of us do as well.

We say in the liturgy that we will support them in their new life in Christ. That is not to be taken lightly. What does that mean? We have responsibilities to 'be there' for them as they grow up. We might be their Sunday school teacher at some point, or their acolyte leader or their youth group leader. But most of us will simply support them with our prayers and our presence and our example of how life is to be lived. We will take an interest in their lives. Affirm their gifts. Encourage them as they grow up. Encourage their

parents. Share something of our lives and our experience. This is part of the give and take of community.

We are a community who have clothed ourselves with Christ. We have put on a way of living, a new life of belonging to Christ forever and a new relationship with the community. Maybe we need a t-shirt for all of that, too. Inscribed with something like : We are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.

May it be so.