

“Let’s Play Dress Up”

Romans 13:8-14

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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Did you ever play dress up? As I kid, I loved to play dress up. If that sounds strange for a boy, so be it. A railroad outfit—of course—and a Halloween costume for the masked crusader “Zorro” come to mind, but I especially remember the cowboy outfit I had at about age six: jeans, yoked cowboy shirt, hat and, best of all, the pretend Colt .45 in the hip holster. Yahoo!

Some would charge, in this outfit where I dress like “mother” but they call me “father,” that nothing’s changed!

But before we discard dress up too quickly as “child’s play,” look with me again at this morning’s text from Romans. “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ” the apostle Paul exhorts the faithful in Rome (13:14). I almost called out some slang from the 1960’s and ‘70’s and titled this message “You’re Putting Me On” but it seemed a bit too irreverent for my taste.

Nonetheless, both images—playing dress up and putting somebody on—make the point. Christians live by imitating Christ.

Thomas a Kempis, a cleric in Holland over 600 years ago, said as much in his work The Imitation of Christ. The revival of the Body of Christ occurs every time so-called ordinary Christians take it upon themselves to live in Christ’s imitation, to “put him on” as one might “put on” a suit of clothes or a special outfit. The modern challenge “WWJD,” “what would Jesus do?” is of this genre. It is not without its problems, for there are times when we cannot know the specific act or ethical counsel that Jesus might provide about every particular situation. Yet there is much of value here, for it pushes Christians back to our foundation, to Christ, and to the self-examination that comes in living as his servants in the world.

We live in a time where “putting on” too often means something quite different. The old slang “You’re putting me on” means, at best, “You’re kidding, right?” Somebody can be putting us on by being hypocritical, intentionally or not; and the worst is a sham, an intentional attempt to deceive and defraud. The cataclysmic events of the last week, and the general tenor of the time in which we live, make these responses more frequent and more expected.

So Paul’s admonition that begins this passage—“to love one another” (vs. 8b)—and the means by which we accomplish it—to “put on...Christ” (vs. 14a) is given to we who are increasingly hard of heart and hard of hearing.

Which brings us to Paul’s little zinger. Having already reminded the saints in Rome that they know the law and that love is the fulfilling of the law and that Christ is the way to love, he reminds them:

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; the night is far gone, the day is near.

Paul’s image is of the end of time, true in fact for us when we die and metaphorically true for so many who face the adversities of weather and health concerns. Life, and life as we know it, can be snuffed out in an instant. One does not need to worry about the end of the age or the rapture or the second coming of Christ. One needs only to look at pictures of rain-soaked middle America or the beheading of American journalists to know the truth revealed in this ancient prayer:

Since we know not what a day may bring forth, but only that the hour for serving thee is always present, may we wake to the instant claims of thy holy will, not waiting for tomorrow, but yielding today.” The Book of Worship, 1964, p.38

So how ought we to play dress up? Consider three images. Note that they all have to do with our neighbor. We cannot “put on Christ” in isolation.

First, we come to the table of the Lord. “Communion” is not only something we do with God but with one another. My home church pastor always said, “If we wait until we are worthy, few of us will ever come at all.” Accept Christ’s invitation to be fed. That is one way of loving yourself, which is what love of neighbor depends on: “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Second, we share the love of the Lord. There’s an old story about the difference between heaven and hell. Hell is a huge banquet, a long table spread with sumptuous food; wonderful delicacies laid out, bowls filled to the brim. There are ample place settings with room for all at the table. The problem is the utensils. They are strapped to the forearms and long, too long to reach one’s mouth. The banqueters in this hellish hall are gaunt and starving, tortured by the feast in which they cannot partake.

The picture in heaven is much the same: banquet hall, sumptuous food, ample places: and utensils strapped to forearms. Yet there is feasting and laughter because heaven’s residents know that the oversize utensils are long enough to feed each other!

Last, we see the Lord in each other. It isn’t always easy. But the Lord is there. John and Adrienne Carr tell a story about a monastery that had fallen on hard times. People had flocked there as a place of spiritual renewal in the past, but now the embers cooled and few people came. The monks began to worry: “What shall we do?” they asked in increasing desperation.

One of the monks remembered there was a wise rabbi who lived as a hermit in the deep woods. The monks designated one of them to inquire of the rabbi what they should do. When he asked “What shall we do?” the rabbi paused and said, “I’m not sure I can tell you what to do, but know this: the Christ is among you.” The

monk hurried back to the monastery and told the brothers breathlessly "The rabbi says one of us is the Christ." Now that is not quite what the rabbi said, but it did get the conversation going! "Is it Brother Andrew?" they asked. "Surely no one is more spiritual than Brother Andrew!" "Or Brother Francis?" another group wondered. "No one is more committed to justice and mercy than Brother Francis." "It must be Brother Bartholomew," said others. "Hear the eloquence of his prayers and his witness." "Yet perhaps Brother James," said others. "He is ever quietly doing kindnesses many never observe." And so their conversations went.

They never quite figured out just who among them was the Christ. But as they pondered the matter, and treated each other as if they were speaking to the Christ, the texture of life in the monastery changed. Before long, people began to return to the monastery for spiritual renewal. Now the monks expected to meet Christ in each other, and that made all the difference.

It can make all the difference here, too. Come to the table of the Lord. Share the love of the Lord. See the Lord in one another. Let's play dress up. Put on Christ. For, truly, he lives among us. Amen.