

**Dec. 31, 2006**

**Colossians 3:12-17**

**By Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt**

**“What Shall I Wear?”**

Tonight marks the culmination of the party season, the crown jewel of them all. New Year’s Eve arrives tonight, with all of its parties. One of the questions for a party is what shall I wear? Is it formal, semi-formal, casual? Does a man come in a tuxedo? White or black tie? Tails? Will a coat and tie suffice, or is it okay to come in a sweater and jeans? Does a woman come in an elegant gown, a less formal dress, a blouse and slacks? It all has to do with the nature of the party, I suppose. You wear one thing to TGIF, another to a Presidential ball, still a third to an intimate gathering with family and friends. But when you’ve been invited to a party, there is always a question about how to dress, what to wear.

Hmm. What to wear? What on earth should I put on? That’s not just a question for New Year’s Eve partygoers, thinking literally about whether to wear the blue dress or the black dress. It’s a question for New Year’s Eve morning churchgoers, thinking metaphorically about how to approach a new year of life in the spirit of Christ.

In our text from letter to the Colossians, Paul (or someone writing in his name), uses the metaphor of getting dressed. This is not a surprise, given that Colossae was known for a producing a certain type of fine wool called *colossinus*<sup>1</sup>.

One could imagine that this wool might have been used to make “nicer than normal” garments, garments appropriate perhaps, for a party. Aware that the people to whom he is writing know about fine clothing, Paul encourages them, “as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with these things: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Don’t forget bearing with each other and practicing forgiveness. And above all these things, put on love.”

I often use this text from Colossians in wedding meditations. In our premarital orientation sessions, I tell couples that, among other things, marriage is a vocation, a calling from God to hard, satisfying, meaningful work. Like all genuine callings, there are times when marriage is great fun. But there are also times when marriage is not. Even in the most ideal of marriages, it takes work to be and stay married, I tell them. And then I attempt to give them some tools to help in that work.

On their wedding day, I refer back to the notion that marriage is a vocation. Having said this, I then talk about how many vocations require the wearing of a special set of work clothes. A surgeon wears scrubs. A police officer wears his or her uniform. So does a soldier or a fireman. Lawyers go to court in a suit. Construction workers wear hard hats and steel-toed boots. There are all types of work clothes out there.

Then I talk about how beautiful the bride looks in her dress, how handsome the groom looks in his tux, and what a wonderful celebration this day is. But I go on to tell them that this tux and gown are their party clothes, not their work clothes. When the tux and gown are put away, the list of garments Colossians describes gives them a glimpse into what they might clothe themselves in to be about the work of being and staying married.

It’s a list that is helpful for couples, but like the description of love in I Corinthians 13, it was not originally written to be a wedding text. It was written to help people live the spiritual life in community. It’s for all of us. So, in that spirit, when the holiday parties are over, and the New Year begins, here are some work clothes worth putting on:

### Compassion:

The first on the list is *compassion*, literally in Greek, “the bowels of mercy.” The English word compassion comes from a Latin cognate, literally meaning to suffer with or to feel with someone else. When we talk about practicing compassion, we often associate it with helping others, and rightfully so. But compassion goes deeper than surface helping. It is the ability to imagine being inside someone else’s body.<sup>2</sup> It is to feel for the baby who is so tired or hungry, she can’t help but cry, even if she’s waking you up in the middle of the night. It is to begin to understand the fear (of change, of vulnerability, of intimacy, of failure) that is causing someone to lash out or act out in a certain way. It is to get inside the skin of the older person who is coping with the pain and loss of control that aging brings. It is to see in the street person or the prisoner, not some bum who made bad choices in life, but a hurting child of God whose options were likely more limited than ours from the start. It is to start to comprehend that the person who wounded us was more than likely himself or herself wounded.

Let me quickly add that compassion means to suffer *with or alongside*, not to suffer *because of*. My mom shared that tidbit with me when I was a teenager... I wonder why? I think maybe she suffered a bit *because of me*, too!

There are clearly times when we have to remove ourselves from a dangerous or abusive situation. It should also be said that helping a person avoid the consequences of his or her actions is often not the most compassionate thing to do for that person, let alone for society as a whole. But even when we let people face consequences, we can do so in a more or less compassionate way. This means we must take the opportunity to imagine what it must like to be in their bodies, shaped by the forces that have shaped them.

### Kindness:

Kindness after compassion on Colossians’ list is the virtue of *kindness*. Kindness is the opposite of being mean-spirited or vindictive. It manifests itself in acts of gentle consideration. Kindness can be seen in a smile, a “how are you?” asked in genuine concern, a warm handshake. Kindness is bringing a blanket to a chilly person (even to one’s wife on the couch), a hug to a lonely person, food to a hungry person, a kind word to a hurting person. Visiting an elderly friend or relative, writing a thank you letter, sending a card, donating blood, making sandwiches, these are all acts of kindness.

Sometimes we forget to be kind to the people closest to us. If you’re looking for a New Year’s resolution, consider pledging to practice five acts of kindness a day, at least a few of them to people you know personally. If you would like to see this congregation become an even warmer, more welcoming group, a deeper, stronger community, vow to practice some of your kindness here. Every week, seek someone out and show them a gesture of kindness.

The wonderful thing about kindness is that it is contagious. And research shows that showing kindness also reliably increases our levels of positive emotion.<sup>3</sup> Spouses who resolve to engage in acts of kindness with each other report that their marriages grow stronger. People who reach out to others with acts of kindness find their own moods spiking in a positive direction.

The consequences of kindness are like ripples in a pond, reaching out to touch lives of people far removed from the original act. Kindness sows seeds that can only bear good fruit.

### Humility:

The next word is *humility*, from the Latin word *humus*, earth. To clothe oneself in humility is to understand that, if the creation story correctly portrays a deep truth about us, we are all made of the same stuff. We are all Adam, formed out of the same stuff as the rest of the earth. What we share in common with one another is more than dirt, but flesh and bone, blood and guts, thoughts and emotions. The CEO and the doorman, the lawyer and the criminal, the soldier and his or her enemy combatants, we are all people.

To practice humility is to think, “I put my pants on one leg at a time, just like everyone else.” (Except for those of us who jump into them from the side of the bed to prove that we’re different!). It is to think, “I am not perfect, nor can I expect to be. And because I am not perfect, I will not expect my spouse, friend, coworker or fellow church member to be.” We all make mistakes. We all fall short of the glory of God, while at the same time imperfectly reflecting it.

Putting on the clothing of humility is coming to terms with our limitations without at the same time thinking less of ourselves. Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen tells the story of how one of her colleagues learned to do this, and how it helped her connect with others.

*When I first met Jeanne, her psychology practice was barely above water. She shared offices with a group of physicians, and, desperate to be accepted and work under what she perceived as the umbrella of their credibility, she took whatever crumbs fell from their professional table. Hers was the smallest office in the complex and hers the only name not listed on the office door. It was obvious from the first how dedicated and gifted a therapist she was, and this compromising attitude troubled me. But Jeanne felt validated by the association and certain that she needed referrals from these physicians in order to have patients. She would stay there almost two more years. Jeanne was a shy person, a little apologetic and sometimes hesitant in finding the right words. She was also just the slightest bit clumsy. All this made her very endearing. You felt somehow at home with her and safe. Her patients adored her.*

*One day at lunch, she told me she was moving from her present office. Pleased, I asked her why she had decided to leave. ‘They do not have wheelchair access,’ she said. I looked at her in surprise. She looked away, ‘Rachel,’ she said, ‘I have not told you everything about myself. Years ago, when I was young, I had a very serious stroke. I was not expected to recover.’ I was astonished. ‘I had no idea,’ I said. She nodded, ‘I know,’ she replied. ‘Nobody does.’*

*I had noticed her occasional troubles with words and her awkwardness. But even with my training, I had not guessed. Jeanne was a miracle. I could barely imagine the focus and determination she had drawn upon all these years, that she drew upon still, to live her life every day. ‘But why have you kept this a secret, Jeanne?’ I asked, astonished.*

*Almost in tears, she said that for years she felt damaged and ashamed. ‘I wanted to put it behind me,’ she said. ‘I thought if I could be seen as normal I would be more than I was.’ And so she had guarded her secret closely. Neither her colleagues nor her patients knew. She had felt certain that others would not refer to her or want to come to her for care if they knew. She was no longer sure this was true.*

*“And what do you plan to do now?” I asked her. She looked down at her hands clasped in her lap. “I think I will just be myself,” she told me. “I will see people like myself. People who are not like others. People who have had strokes and other brain injuries. People who can never be normal again. I think I can help them be whole.”*

*Over the past five years, Jeanne has become widely known for her work. She had been honored by several community groups and interviewed in the newspapers. She speaks often and consults for businesses and hospitals. The many people she had helped refer others to her. For the first time, her practice is full. Her own name is on her door. All that she needed in order to serve was the courage of her vulnerability.*

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It’s amazing how Jeanne humbly admitting her limitations has helped her connect with others. We all have our weaknesses - and acknowledging them in vulnerability can be the door to wholeness and healing for us and others.

### Meekness:

The fourth word in Colossians’ list of things to put on is the word *meekness*. Meekness, according to Eugene Peterson, is the quality of being God-controlled.<sup>5</sup> It does not mean to be passive or to be a doormat. One can be meek and assertive at the same time. One can be meek and get things done. But the quality of meekness is submitting our passions to the control of God, letting God rein us in where necessary. I think of meekness when I

think of the saying I once heard, “Say what you mean, mean what you say, and don’t be mean when you say it.” Put on meekness, says Paul.

*Patience:*

The fifth word in the Colossians’ list is patience, in Greek, *makrothumia*. It is rendered in certain versions, like the King James, as “long-suffering.” It literally means to have a long fuse. The other word in the New Testament which gets translated as patience gives insight into this concept as well. *Anechomai*, sometimes rendered forbearance, literally means to put up with, or to hold oneself up against. Patience, forbearance, is hanging in there with someone, not having a short fuse. C.S. Lewis said he prayed for patience, and he got a grumpy housekeeper<sup>6</sup>, which I suppose gave him the opportunity to practice patience.

*Love:*

Finally, Colossians says: Above all of these things put on *love*, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. Love does tie all of those things together. Indeed, each of those attributes on the list is an example of love in action.

***Compassion***

is love embodying itself in understanding service.

***Kindness***

is love expressing itself in gentle acts.

***Humility***

is love recognizing our limitations and common humanity.

***Meekness***

is love submitting itself, not to others, but to God.

***Patience***

is love bearing with those God has placed in our lives.

I can’t think of a better list of work clothes for us to put on in 2007 as we seek to live out what it means that we are called by God.

References:

1 “Colossae”, The New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible, edited by Henry Snyder Gehman (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), p.181. See also the Wikipedia entry on Colossae: [www.reference.com/browse/wiki/Colossae](http://www.reference.com/browse/wiki/Colossae)

2 My wife Judith brought this to our attention in a sermon preached here in July based on “Blessed are the merciful.” The insight came originally from William Barclay, who wrote that the Hebrew word for mercy is “the ability to get right inside the other person’s skin until we can see things with his eyes, think things with his mind, and feel things with his feelings.” See (W. Barclay, The Letters of James and Peter, The Daily study Bible series, Rev. ed. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press)

3 Martin Seligman, chair of the psychology department at the University of Pennsylvania, is one of the founders of the Positive Psychology movement. One of his students, Ben Dean, PhD, has written a short article posted on a website that the department hosts. The article is titled, “Kindness and the Case for Altruism.”

[www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/newsletter.aspx?id=70](http://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/newsletter.aspx?id=70) I excerpt from Dean's article: "Sonja (Lyubimorksy) has tested whether asking people to "commit" five random acts of kindness would reliably increase their level of positive emotion. The good news is that it does." (Lyubomirsky, S., Tkach, C., & Sheldon, K. M. (2004). *Pursuing sustained happiness through random acts of kindness and counting one's blessings: Tests of two six-week interventions*. Unpublished data),

4 Rachel Naomi Remen, *My Grandfather's Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge, and Belonging* (New York: Riverhead, 2000), pp.150-151.

5 Eugene Peterson delivered a series of lectures on the beatitudes at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia. The idea of meekness meaning being God-controlled comes from that lecture. Pat Ford lent the CDs of the lectures to me. Entitled *Beatitudes: Foundations for a Gospel Spirituality* they were published by Regent Audio in 1992.

6 I heard someone mention this in a sermon once and it stuck with me. I don't know where in C.S. Lewis writings you will find this, but I suspect he did say it.