

Put Away The Old; Put On The New

A sermon based on Colossians 3:12-17

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This week I came across a letter purported to have been written by Martha Stewart to Erma Bombeck. Martha wrote:

This perfectly delightful note is being sent on paper I made myself to tell you what I have been up to. Since it snowed last night, I got up early and made a sled with old barn wood and a glue gun. I hand painted it in gold leaf, got out my loom, and made a blanket in peaches and mauves. Then to make the sled complete, I made a white horse to pull it, from DNA molecules that I had just sitting around in my craft room.

By then, it was time to start making the place mats and napkins for my 20 breakfast guests. I'm serving the old standard Stewart twelve-course breakfast, but I'll let you in on a little secret: I didn't have time to make the tables and chairs this morning, so I used the ones I had on hand.

Well, I must run. I need to finish the buttonholes on the dress I'm wearing for breakfast. ... Hope my breakfast guests don't stay too long, I have 40,000 cranberries to string with bay leaves before my speaking engagement at noon.

To which Erma Bombeck replied:

Dear Martha, I'm writing this on the back of an old shopping list, pay no attention to the coffee and jelly stains. I'm 20 minutes late getting my daughter up for school, packing a lunch with one hand, and holding the phone with the other. I'm on hold with the dog pound, seems old Ruff needs bailing out again. Burnt my arm on the curling iron when I was trying to make those cute curly fries....

The smoke alarm is going off, talk to ya' later.

Today is the last day of the year 2000, a natural time to pause and reflect on the past year. No doubt your year had its "Martha Stewart" moments, when things went eerily well, but it probably also had its "Erma Bombeck" moments, when cold reality hit glamorous notions of life smack in the face! We all can recollect moments that we would just as soon forget.

Personally, I would just as soon forget the last week of this year. Our car stalled several hours out of Ottawa on a very cold Christmas Day. Fortunately a cold but Good Samaritan gave us a boost. We got to our destination, but unfortunately, the motor threw a rod. Fortunately we found a garage open on Boxing Day. Unfortunately, the mechanic gave us a choice of fixing it up for an exorbitant sum, or selling the car to him for a paltry sum. We sold the car, but fortunately, I'm a member of the Canadian Automobile Association; unfortunately, my policy doesn't cover car rentals. Fortunately Dorothy's brother drove us back to Ottawa. Unfortunately, Dorothy forgot her purse, which

extended the trip by an hour. Fortunately, we have another car. Unfortunately, the driver's seat chose this week to seize up in an almost horizontal position. Fortunately I had some time to tinker with it, but unfortunately, I broke my glasses just before Christmas, and trying to fix electrical things under a dark dash on an overcast day with prescription sunglasses is extremely frustrating!

Fortunately, a new year begins tomorrow, and while there is no reason, rationally, to expect a new year to fare any better than the old year, I find a new year comforting and hopeful. It's a new start. A new beginning. If nothing else, it's another chance to grow in patience as we cope with the things that can go wrong, and do.

Put Away The Old

The Apostle Paul talks about the old and the new in Colossians, chapter 3, comparing it to a change in wardrobe. Paul talks about the "old self" (3:9) and the "new self" (3:10), suggesting in our reading that we "clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness," and a number of other spiritual garments.

When we put on a new shirt, we generally take the old one off first, and indeed, earlier in the chapter Paul says that there are certain things of which the Colossians must strip themselves before donning new apparel. Paul is using a baptismal image; at the time baptismal candidates ceremonially stripped off their old selves with their old outer clothing, and then, after emerging from the baptismal waters put on a new, fresh garment.

Paul is quite specific about some of the clothes that should be thrown out. Some of them, like "fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed" (Colossians 3:5) are things that not only wreak havoc on relationships, they also reveal a lack of personal discipline and self-control. Paul also fingers some other clothes in our closet that should be thrown out, like "anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language" (3:8), most of which have to do with sins of the mouth!

The new year before us beckons like a journey, and if you imagine packing a suitcase to carry into the new year, some garments might just as well be left behind. In fact, it wouldn't be so bad if some of our luggage from this year and the more distant past got lost! Got a flight bag filled with resentment? Let it go! A handbag full of animosity or jealousy? Let it go. Carrying a few extra pounds of grudges around? Let them go. If you enter the new year with bags bursting with grudges, resentment, or unforgiven acts, chances are your next year will be much like the last.

Some things are hard to let go. A little like the bachelor farmer who went to see the doctor in the spring about a most unusual problem. When the weather got warm enough the bachelor decided it was time to take off the long underwear he'd been wearing all winter, only to find that his chest hair had grown through the underwear, making it very difficult and painful to remove!

Likewise, it may well be time to change some of our relational and attitudinal garments! We would do well to divest ourselves of these old garments, for failure to let bygones be bygones can sour future relationships. A prominent person on his deathbed said of his detractors: "I forgive them but God won't." We need to let go of the past. Like the guest in T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* advised, "Don't strangle each other with knotted memories."

Some of us may be obsessed with getting the past right, like the person who confessed he was bothered whenever he watched runners run the hurdles, because when a runner knocked some of the hurdles down, he thought they should go back and straighten them up! It brings out the Martha Stewart in us, wanting to have things nice, and neat, and in order. Runners who win gold medals, however, don't look back; they ignore the fallen hurdles and keep on running toward the finish line. Like the Apostle Paul said, "...forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on...." (Philippians 3:13-14)

Let the old garments go! Or, as Paul says in our text, "get rid" of them! (Colossians 3:8) That old shirt of anger no longer fits your new robust spiritual self. Aspects of the faith you developed in Sunday School as a ten-year old look a bit tight on you. Get a bigger size! That old cloak of selfishness you're wearing is no longer in fashion among believers. Those old shoes of impure desires no longer go with your new wholesome self, and the sleeves on that old greed garment are far too short for you now that your arms have grown as they reach out in compassion.

Put On The New

There's a whole new wardrobe waiting for you, says Paul, and he suggests a full complement of garments and accessories, a 12-piece wardrobe, in fact. Don't worry, I'm not going to preach a 12-point sermon. And though Paul's suggestions are not a 12-step program, it wouldn't be a bad idea to pick one of the 12 pieces for each month of the new year, and to work out in that outfit.

The new Christian line of apparel includes the garments of "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience." (Colossians 3:12) It also includes forbearance, an old word that bespeaks a tolerant and patient character. Then there is the garment of forgiveness, which goes with everything and clashes with little. "Above all," says Paul, "clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." (3:14) In the new wardrobe fit for every occasion and circumstance you will also find "peace" (3:15), gratitude (3:15), and "wisdom". (3:16) And finally, to top it off, the mantel of praise. (3:16-17)

Don't worry if some of these garments seem a little big for you; you'll grow into them. Our Old Testament reading tells us that young Samuel "continued to grow both in stature and in favour with the Lord and with the people." (1 Samuel 2:26) Similarly, our Gospel reading tells us that "Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour." (Luke 2:52) Jesus too had ups and downs. He too had to grow, to learn, and to mature, and some of his maturity came from suffering. Some old paintings picture the baby Jesus like some magnificent infant Pope, bestowing blessings on everyone while still in his crib! The thirty or so years between his birth and active ministry, however, were not a running on the spot by a perfect spiritual athlete just waiting for the right date to perform! At Christmas we sing that the "little Lord Jesus no crying he (made)", but such notions beg the integrity of the incarnation. The Scriptures tell us that "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are...." (Hebrews 4:15)

The clothing metaphor may not appeal to you. It certainly has its limits. For one thing, clothing fashions come and go, while the Christian virtues they represent are eternal. For another thing, the Scriptures caution us about looking on the "outward appearance" (1 Samuel 16:7). Also, while one of the easiest things we can change about ourselves is

our clothes, interior changes require hard work, discipline, and a willingness to let the Spirit of God do its work within us.

The clothing metaphor has its limits, and likewise the new Colossian line of spiritual apparel has its limits. It won't make the new year heaven-on-earth. It won't prevent car problems, financial problems, relational problems, and the host of other things that will frustrate you in the year ahead. It certainly won't make you more like Martha Stewart. Thank God! It will, however, help you deal with your Erma Bombeck-ness and help you deal with your problems with more spiritual grace.

Unlike most clothes, which are designed to express our individuality and to set us apart from each other, the new Colossian line of apparel, custom-made by the Creator with His label on it, makes many of our distinctions obsolete. Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, insider and outsider, refined and uncouth, rich and poor, Mennonite and non-Mennonite – these human designer labels are passé. Thanks be to God! For Christians the new year will be shaped by our vision of a new heavens and a new earth. As a poet wrote:

When the song of the angels is silent;
When the star in the sky is gone;
When the kings and princes are home;
When the shepherds are again tending their sheep;
When the manger is darkened and still;
The work of Christmas begins
 To find the lost
 To heal the broken
 To feed the hungry
 To rebuild the nations
 To bring peace among people
 To befriend the lonely
 To release the prisoner
 To make music in the heart.
(Ann Weems, Kneeling at the Manger)

Amen.

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.