



Getting Dressed

TEXT
Ephesians 6:10–20

September 3, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Jenny McDevitt

The argument of Ephesians is that we should live differently because we live in Christ, and if we take the writer seriously, what we wear is part of that. What we wear is part of who we are and how we choose to make our way in the world. On the one hand, in the abstract, that sounds more than a little superficial. It sounds like the stuff clichés are made of. You’ve heard them:

Dress for success.

Clothes make the man.

Put on your big girl pants.

Fake it till you make it.

*Dress for the job you want,
not for the job you have.*

You are what you wear.

But the most annoying thing about clichés is that they always contain at least a sliver of the truth. And the truth is, what we wear matters. Talk to the father who just returned home from his daughter’s White Coat Ceremony. Talk to the bride who will get married in this sanctuary next month wearing her grandmother’s wedding dress. Talk to the army reservist about his field fatigues, or talk to the 74 percent of Royals fans who confessed to wearing some

article of lucky clothing when our boys in blue ran all the way into the arms of a world championship. Talk to Owen Gray, who had a stole draped over his shoulders for the first time at his ordination service here this summer, or talk to the corporate CEO who insists on wearing her pajamas until at least noon on Saturdays, just because she can.

Talk to them and they will tell you: Those times when what we’re wearing matters most ... it’s not really about the garments themselves, is it? It’s more about what they represent to us, or what we represent when we wear them. It’s more about what we feel, or who we feel connected to. It’s more about what we become convinced we are capable of doing, where we are capable of going and how we find ourselves arriving there.

I rode the school bus for the first time on the first day of first grade. I thought it was the greatest thing in the world. At the tender age of five, I was getting somewhere without my mother driving me. I had achieved the mountaintop of independence. I climbed on at the entrance of my neighborhood, and climbed off when

we arrived at school. I rode that bus as if I’d been doing it my entire life ... until the ride home.

When the school bell rang, I walked outside to discover that while only one bus arrived to pick me up in the morning, during the day that one bus had somehow multiplied itself countless times over, creating carbon copies identical in every way — except for little numbers painted in the top corner by the door. And everyone knew which bus was theirs, which bus would take them back home, except for me. More than one teacher saw me standing there, frozen in place. “Which bus is yours?” they asked. “Where do you belong?” Overwhelmed, I just kept standing there. I don’t know how they figured it out — chalk it up to one more thing teachers know how to do. It took some time, but they got me on the right bus. I sat down significantly less confident than I had been that morning. And, as it turns out, significantly more tired than I had been that morning. First grade can really take it out of you.

I fell asleep in my seat. And I stayed that way, up until the point when the bus driver,

having completed her route, returned the bus to the depot. She took one last stroll up and down the aisle, checking for items to add to the lost and found ... and found a small, redheaded girl sleeping against the window.

She woke me up. "Little girl," she said, "what are you doing still on this bus?" At that point, I was ready to call it quits on school. "I don't know," I said, "I'm just trying to get home."

Now remember, this happened when I was five, and that was back in olden days, before we all carried cell phones around with us. So I was driven back to school, where my mother was called to come pick me up. I was no worse for the wear, I suppose, but for the entire rest of the semester, I was required to keep a laminated card pinned to myself. It included my name, my bus number and my bus stop, and it was exactly as cool as it sounds. I hated wearing that card. But you know ... that card told me, and anyone else who needed to know, who I was and where I was supposed to be. It stated definitively where I was going, and it made sure I got there.

What we wear matters. It doesn't always make us the coolest kid on the bus, but it does ensure that we find our way home.

The writer of Ephesians understands this. "What we wear matters," he says, "so put on the armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil, ... against the cosmic

powers of darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil."

This is language we don't use very often, but I have to admit that in these more recent days, it is starting to sound like language worth paying attention to.

Because we live in Christ, we are to live our lives differently. And when we read this letter in its entirety, we discover that this difference shows up in our relationships with one another more than anywhere else.

So it is with that in mind that I want to point out something very carefully. We are being encouraged to stand strong against evil.

We are to dress appropriately so that we will not be run over by our enemies. The writer assumes we are in conflict, but the writer is also very clear that our enemies are never other people. "For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh," he writes. Our enemies are never other people. It bears repeating again: Our enemies are never other people.¹

In her book *God in Pain*, professor and Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story of her nephew's first birthday.² "There were only a handful of us there that day," she says, "Will's parents and aunts and grandparents, plus his godparents and their 7-year-old son, Jason. After the cake and the singing and the presents were all over, Will danced, twirling around in circles. We were all gathered around watching when

Jason pushed through, put both of his hands on Will's chest, and shoved. Will fell hard. He looked utterly surprised. Then he opened up his mouth and wailed, but not for long. His mother hugged him and helped him to his feet, and the first thing Will did was to totter over to Jason, of all people, and do what he had always done: He put his arms around Jason and lay his head against the little boy's body.

"It was then," Taylor confessed, "that all my Christian conviction went right out the door. I will buy him a BB gun for his next birthday," I thought. "Iron knuckles. A karate video for toddlers. It just about killed me, to think how that sweet child would have to learn to defend himself. Only according to scripture," she goes on to say, "Will was right and I was wrong. What Will did put an end to the meanness in that room. What I wanted to do would only have multiplied it. Scripture tells us that the real enemy is not whoever pushes us down in the middle of our dance. The real enemy is whatever it is inside of us that makes us want to leap up and push back."

Our enemies are never other people. Our enemies are never other people because our enemies are much bigger than that. Our enemies are the ideas and ideals that deny, demean and diminish life. Our enemies are the cosmic powers and the forces of evil. Our enemies are the myth of scarcity, the systemic injustices, the inherent

cruelty and the overwhelming fear that lift up one person only by pulling another person down, that proclaim that we are the most important, the most intelligent, the most deserving, the most worthy, the most human, and that those who are not “us” are relegated to a second class of “lesser than.”

Our enemies answer to the names of racism and sexism, homophobia and Islamophobia, and I know there are some who are ready to stop talking about these things. There are other things going on the world, some say. Don’t give these problems all the attention. If you don’t feed the fire, it will just die out.

But friends, our history has taught us — and is still teaching us — that when evil rears its ugly head, it is not very often that it backs down without a fight. And as Christians, there is too much at stake right now for us to gamble on the off chance that this time we might get lucky.

The theologian N.T. Wright says that there are three mistakes we tend to make when it comes to understanding evil. First, we ignore it. We ignore it until it comes up right alongside of us and hits us in the face. Second, we are surprised by evil when it does. And third, we react in immature and even dangerous ways as a result.³

Ephesians wants us to act — and react — better. “Put on the armor of God,” we are told.

The writer doesn’t suggest it, ask us to do it in a certain way, or open it up for debate.

“This is what you need to do to survive these times,” he says. Period!⁴

Brian McLaren, an author and pastor, was in Charlottesville to protest the Unite the Right rally last month. Not long after, he heard an interview with Christian Piccolini, a former white supremacist, one who was recruited and radicalized by an extremist group as a teenager.

“There are so many people today with not a lot to believe in, with not a lot of hope, so they tend to search for very simple black and white answers,” Piccolini explained.

“People become radicalized because they’re searching for three very fundamental human needs: identity, community, and a sense of purpose.”

McLaren says he came to understand this: White nationalism isn’t simply an extremist political ideology. It is an alt-religious movement that provides its adherents with its own twisted version of what all religions supply to followers: It provides identity — a personal sense of who I am; it provides community — a social sense of where I belong; and it provides purpose — a spiritual sense of why my life matters. And if faith communities don’t provide these healthy, life-giving human needs, then death-dealing alt-religions are more than happy to fill the gap.⁵

The author of Ephesians is right: What we wear matters. If we are to call ourselves Christian, we are to fight back against evil in the world not by

being strong enough ourselves. We can’t possibly be. We fight back against evil by pointing to the Christ in whose strength every victory is won and every need is fulfilled. So this is what we do:

We wrap truth around our waist like a belt. We march into the battle of everyday life and the battle of extraordinary times declaring that in life and in death we belong to God, that absolutely nothing can erase the image of God that exists in each and every one us, and we let that hold us up and hold us together like belts were always designed to do.

We wear the breastplate of righteousness. A breastplate covers your heart and your lungs, and in scripture, righteousness always comes from God. It is always about God advocating on behalf of the widow and the poor, the immigrant and the orphan. When we wear the breastplate of righteousness, we cover our hearts with nothing more than a relentless concern for the most vulnerable among us.

We carry the shield of faith, not because it keeps the worst things from happening, but because it assures us that the worst things are never the last things, because it assures us that life rises, again and again.

We wield the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, because our enemies are never other people. Our enemies are everything that seeks to defeat life — fear and hopelessness and a culture of hatred and violence. And when

we struggle with these things, we need the Word that began creation, the Word that filled Mary's heart with song, the Word that called Lazarus out of the tomb, and is calling to us still.

When we don't know what to do, the prophet Micah directs us: Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with God. Start there.

When we don't know where we fit, or if we belong at all, Isaiah reminds us: "God says, do not be afraid. I have claimed you. I have called you by name and you are mine."

When we are at our wit's end and can't manage for ourselves, we can trust in this: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

When the love of God feels impossibly far off, when all is ruined and our efforts and our hope feel all in vain, Paul's letter to the Romans assures us: "I am convinced that neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

What we wear matters. So put on the armor of God.

I hated that first-grade, laminated, bus identification card. But eventually it became familiar. One day a friend from a different bus route rode home with me. "What's that?" she asked, pointing at my safety pinned accessory. "I fell asleep on the bus once," I said. "This

makes sure I don't miss my stop and end up alone on the bus again." "Oh," she said, "okay." And half an hour later, with the gentle reminder from the driver, we climbed down the bus's steps and headed toward my house.

Friends, what we wear matters. And when we dress ourselves properly ... we aren't the only ones who make it home.

May it be so. Amen.

¹This insight, and the importance of emphasizing it, comes from Rev. Sarah Wiles (Bethany Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, Washington) in an unpublished paper presented to the By the Vine preaching group, May 2017. Her paper as a whole offered direction in the shaping of this sermon.

²This story is shared in her chapter titled "Feeding the Enemy."

³N.T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*, page 24.

⁴Again, Rev. Sarah Wiles.

⁵Brian McLaren, in a column written for Time Magazine, posted online August 25, 2017. <http://time.com/4915161/charlottesville-alt-right-alt-christianity/>