Keeping Christmas, Keeping Christ

December 30, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Len Carrell

I’ve been trying to take this twelve days of Christmas thing seriously. I’m telling everyone I see “Merry Christmas.” For the most part, everyone is pretty receptive to it. Other times, it seems I’m harassing people.

I do confess I have no idea what leaping lords or milking maids or swans a-swimming have anything to do with it — especially why anyone would need multiples of them. Except for this, they are gifts a true love brings to their beloved.

No doubt many of us are feasting in the embarrassing wealth of the season; enjoying the many new gifts we received earlier in the week from the people we call our own true loves. It is part of the joyful season, isn’t it? It is not the reason for the season, of course, but it’s part of it. We give gifts and we receive them.

Perhaps it’s a sign of how we have been given God’s gift of Christmas in the first place, and how God desires us to receive that gift of grace with joy. We don’t always get that last part right, do we? But every year, we hear the story again of how God’s love is born in the world through a child. And my friends, that’s a gift — a gift we try our best to receive, but I’ve been thinking a lot more of how much harder it is to keep.

One of our first Christmases in Kansas City, I remember my brother sending all of us penguin pajamas. Now I know my brother probably picked them up out of the $5 bin at Big Lots. So, I can’t tell you how overjoyed we were by his generosity. They were these cute little fleece combos, with a red top and green pants. On the front of the pajamas was a little penguin wearing a Santa hat, with a real pom pom sewn in.

I can’t tell you how obnoxiously thrilled I was by this gift, so I immediately tried mine on. As you can imagine, they came in a one-size-fits-all — which for me means one-size-that-will-never fit. The shirt was a crop top, at best, and the pants made me ready for the flood.

And right at that moment (can you believe this would happen?), the doorbell rings. Just as you, I was confused as to who in the world could possibly be at the door on Christmas Day.

I went to open the door, not at all thinking about what I looked like, and standing there were two Stephen Ministers bringing their favorite pastor some Christmas treats. There I was, standing at the door all decked out in my Christmas joy, for all the world to see. And the neighbors — it is an image you will never get out of your head. (You’re welcome.) It is an image that two lucky congregants will never let me live to forget.

But that’s not the point. Here I am feeling confident in my new penguin pajamas. I gather up all the other gifts and take them upstairs. I change into some casual clothes and put the other things at the top of my closet.

As the year went by, at times I remembered to get some of the new things down: a dress shirt or two, some socks, a tie maybe. But the other things, like sweaters and a flannel shirt, they stayed up there. I forgot about them, honestly, and didn’t notice them until the warmer weather arrived. Later that year, when Advent and Christmas came rolling around, I saw them up there and took a sweater down to wear to a Tidings of Joy concert, I think. Tanisha looked at me and saw the sales tag still hanging from the sweater. She said, “I see you liked my gift from last year. Are you actually going to put that on?”

I tell you all of this because there are things we put on that make us look ridiculous, and there are other things we’ve been
meaning to put on, and we forget
they’re even there.
And Paul is reminding us of
them.
This section of Paul’s letter
to the Colossian Church always
appears in the church’s lection-
ary on this first Sunday after
Christmas. It’s kind of like a New
Year’s text, if you will. And it
makes sense that as we are sur-
rounded by friends and family;
as we welcome the closing of a
year by ringing in a new one; as
we have received new things and
new people and new commit-
ments into our lives, how could
we forget the New Life of Christ
we just received at Christmas?
Keeping Christmas is keep-
ing Christ. And in order to do
that, Paul tells us we have to “put
on” Christ.
My wife asked me, “Are you
actually going to put that on?”
Paul’s language and imag-
ery of clothes is an appropriate
one. He sees the faithful com-
nunity as the Body of Christ, so
of course, we’re going to need
new clothes. And that’s the gifts
he reminds us of. He calls them
compassion, kindness, humility,
meekness and patience.
I can remember the first time
I heard this text as an adult. I
was in my early- to mid-thirties,
newly married and a new parent.
I had just joined my wife’s home
church and had been newly elect-
ed to be a deacon. I went to my
first meeting that year, around the
New Year, and this text was read
to the group. We were all asked
to reflect on it. (I wasn’t going
to say anything; I’m not crazy.)
A conversation organically
broke out around the table. It
seemed like everyone had some-
ting to say. The pastor made
eye contact with me, and I knew
I was doomed. He asked if I had
anything to add. Now I had read
the Bible before, but only by ac-
cident. I had no idea what to say,
and so I said what was obvious.
I said, “That sounds like a lot of
clothes.”
You know, the more I think
about it now, maybe Paul has
it right. Maybe these are the
prefect amount of clothes: an
overcoat of compassion, be-
cause how could we ever share
enough warmth; a shirt or blouse
of kindness, because we all need
a breastplate of some sort; pants
of humility, because where we
walk and how we walk will mat-
ter; and two shoes, the perfect
pair, called meekness and pa-
tience — shoes we all could feel
a little more comfortable in at
times. Paul is using a metaphor,
of course, but how he is using it
is important.
What we wear has an effect
on our attitude. It can play on
our outlook and our perception
of things. It has an effect on our
lives and our relationships. What
we wear — and this is what Paul
is getting at — what we wear can
have the power to communicate
what we care about and who we
want to be.
Trust me, I’ve seen it. When
I arrived in Kansas City in 2015,
everywhere you looked people
were wearing royal blue. There
was a championship to win.
And no one could deny what the
people of Kansas City had on
their hearts and minds. Today it
will be all red. The Big Red has
gone to our head.
And there are other examples
too — like when the Alzheimer’s
Association hosts a walk to end
a brutal disease, people can be
seen wearing purple t-shirts ev-
erywhere.
Or with the Susan G. Komen
fight against breast cancer, it is
all pink: mothers and daughters,
grandmothers and granddaugh-
ters, generations of women and
men all in pink, athletes across
all sports wearing some tiny bit
of pink.
We wear our colors. We wear
our love. We do it already.
And Paul is saying, if a little
Christlike love is important to
us, then we’ll find more time to
put it on instead of keeping it in
a drawer or at the top of a dark
closet. When we wear love, our
hearts and minds are on Christ
— and Christ is, literally, on us.
And when Christ is on our hearts
and minds, then God is alive in
us. And that is what keeping
Christmas is all about: recog-
nizing that God is living in the
world, and in you and me, and
in everyone. And people can see
that — especially when we see
it. And it looks a lot like this:
bearing one another’s feeling and
concerns, practicing forgiveness
and gratitude, teaching and cor-
correcting with grace and, oh yes,
singing together. Sometimes just
the littlest things, like singing
together, show the world our love
for each other.
But do you want to know
what really brings a good
wardrobe together? Accesso-
ries: a great scarf with a pop of
color; the right pendant or hat;
the perfect handbag or pocket
handkerchief. Just the right
touch can bring everything together.

Well, for Paul, we could never go wrong accessorizing with love. We can never overdo it with love as our added little something. “It binds everything together,” he says.

So you ask, what kind of pendant of love are you talking about? What do you mean by accessorizing? I like accessorizing!

Well, it’s any tiny compassionate Christlike act we do — like sharing a good chili recipe over a cup of coffee with a good friend who lost a husband, and not feeling the need to fill the silence; or honoring that monthly lunch date with a guy I’ve gotten to know in only a few months, as he is on his journey through a long treatment schedule; or offering to bring someone to church who wouldn’t be able to get here otherwise; or sewing neck pillows in the basement of a church to give to people in the hospital; or teaching, oh yes, and singing with children during Sunday school. That is what a pendant and handkerchief of our faith looks like: a pop of colorful love.

And doesn’t it make more sense to put on such love — to wear it, rather than leaving it at the top of the closet somewhere?

So wear love. Put on Christ. And on those days, you will keep Christmas. Oh, and it will feel like Christmas too.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermon-archives.html.