



Keeping Christmas, Keeping Christ

TEXT
Colossians 3:12–17

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 pompom 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 lectionary 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 surrounded 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 commitments into our lives, how could we forget the New Life of Christ we just received at Christmas?

Keeping Christmas is keeping 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 imagery of clothes is an appropriate one. He sees the faithful community 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 elected 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 something 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 accident. 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 perfect amount of clothes: an overcoat of compassion, because 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 matter; and two shoes, the perfect pair, called meekness and patience — 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 everywhere.

Or with the Susan G. Komen fight against breast cancer, it is all pink: mothers and daughters, grandmothers and granddaughters, 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: recognizing 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 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? Accessories: 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.

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