

Pentecost 5C + June 19, 2016

“Clothed With Christ”

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What was the nature of your upbringing? Let's talk about our fathers for the moment, since it's Father's Day, but you can substitute whoever was, or is, primarily responsible for raising you. Was your father a stern disciplinarian? Or were you allowed to pretty much do as you wanted? What effect did this have on your life?

I was raised in Southern California in the 1960s and '70s. That tells you a lot right there. My parents, and all those in their circle of friends, were casual where discipline was concerned. They would say, “We trust you to make your own decisions and do the right thing.”

I dearly loved my parents. On the surface, that kind of upbringing might sound attractive to some kids. It wasn't a problem for me during my childhood, because I really liked school and did as well as I could. But the long-term effect was that for years after college I had a hard time finishing things. A great regret is that I did not complete my doctoral dissertation (although I still could), and it's still a great topic. Unfortunately my adviser was like my parents in terms of discipline. He let me go at my own pace and never pushed me. But also, I never pushed myself.

If I'd finished that degree, my life would have gone in a different direction and I certainly never would have met my husband Bill or gone to seminary. But oh, how I would have benefitted from a disciplinarian in my life during those years. In the wonderful passage in Hebrews 12 about how God lovingly disciplines his children, we read: “Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been brought up with it.”

For those of you raised in stricter households, the law may have been held over your head constantly: “Do this, don’t do that...and if you don’t, or do, there will be serious consequences.” That is the law of the Hebrew Scriptures, which we find in the Ten Commandments. Right after listing those, Deuteronomy 6 continues: “Hear, therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you.” This tells us that if we fail to keep these commandments, it will NOT go well with us – and no one wants that.

But that wasn’t the end of the story, for Jesus Christ changed everything. “Now that faith has come,” we just heard in Galatians 3, “we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.” We already know that we are God’s children. But what this really means is that we are *clothed* with Christ, just as Paul goes on to say. Martin Luther taught that we are to remember our baptism daily – “when you wash your face, remember your baptism.” Just as if we were coming up out of the deep pool of our baptism, God has clothed us in the garments of Christ, clothing that identifies us as God’s children. So when people see us, by means of who we are and what we do, they also see the living Christ—he who was himself created in God’s own image.

This is not simply a matter of appearances, because who would dress like one thing and behave like another? A perpetually mournful clown? A prim university professor rocking out at a heavy metal concert? Our standard attire embodies who we are. So what does the clothing of Christ look like and what do God’s children do? A couple of chapters later in Galatians we hear that people know us by the fruit of God’s Spirit: love, joy, peace; patience, kindness, generosity; faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Our strange, even bizarre reading today from Luke 8 show us, at the extreme, what it looks like when someone is NOT clothed with Christ. Jesus has crossed the Sea of Galilee and entered Gentile territory for the first time in Luke. Right away he's confronted by a man horrendously possessed by demons who is most definitely not clothed with Christ. In fact, he has no clothes at all. The man had been running around the city, crazed, out his mind, shouting at the top of his voice, and undoubtedly scaring everyone in sight. He'd been restrained with chains many times, but somehow he'd always broken loose and run wild all over again.

When Jesus arrives on the scene this man has been banished to the countryside. By this time he's scarcely human at all, living in graveyards and going around naked. Yet, when the man sees Jesus, he falls at Jesus' feet. Now, since the demons speaking through him apparently know who Jesus is, wouldn't they have wanted to get as far away from Jesus as possible? Instead they take a defensive posture when Jesus commands the evil spirits to come out of the man. But Jesus knows who they are: "Legion" – which in Roman military terminology denoted a regiment of 5,600 soldiers. So they know they're done for, and beg Jesus to let them enter the herd of swine nearby. That's the end of them.

But notice what then happens to the man. Luke tells us that he is now "clothed and in his right mind." This tells us that he not only somehow found clothes to put on but is also "clothed with Christ." He is now a passionate disciple of Jesus! He begs to be allowed to accompany Jesus in his ministry, but Jesus gives him an even more important assignment: He is to return to his home and proclaim how much God did for him. So, here on Jesus' first missionary voyage into Gentile territory, he has also commissioned his first missionary!

On this Father's Day, let us give thanks for Our Father in Heaven, who in his great love disciplines us with love and clothes us with Christ. Deepening our relationship with God in Christ through prayer, we learn to trust God so that, under his tutelage, we do not let our demons run away with us. Instead, we learn to name them and fall on our knees before the living Christ, so that he may heal us in just as miraculous a way as he healed the demon-possessed man. "Cast your burdens upon the Lord," Psalm 55 tells us, "and he will sustain you."

This is good news for God's people. Amen.