

**DATE:** August 10, 2003  
**SUNDAY:** Ordinary 19  
**SERMON:** The Fashions of Love  
**TEXT(S):** Ephesians 4:22 – 5:2  
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You undoubtedly know, though you may not particularly care, that the center for the world's designer fashion industry is Paris. Fashion Week, when Gaultieri and Nina Ricci and Christian Dior and all the others trot out their latest and usually totally outrageous designs for women's clothing, is a well-publicized event. All during that week, the TV news programs carry clips of the top models strutting their stuff down the runways.

We always knew that fashion week was coming up when the normally-vacant three-story apartment across the side street from our building suddenly was lit up with a staff of uniformed housekeepers busily dusting and vacuuming and window-washing to get ready for its owner to arrive. And arrive he would, chauffeur-driven in his powder-blue Bentley, which was always then parked illegally on our corner for as long as he was in town. For a number of years we watched this ritual occur several times a year, without understanding that our occasional neighbor was none other than the famous designer Valentino. He remained blissfully unaware of our existence, however, and so we never got an invitation to join the celebrities and other devotees of the fashion industry who made up the audiences.

Whether we're devotees of fashion or not, we're all at least moderately interested in what we put on. We want to look reasonably in style, and so from time to time, we spend our hard-earned money to buy clothing that catches our eye and that we hope will make us look good. . . or at least better.

But, as we all know, while putting on a new dress or a new shirt may cheer us up and make us feel good for a few moments, the old cliché, "Clothes make the man or woman," is not really true. They may make the image of ourselves that we want to project, but they don't really change who we are. Who we are

is a projection of something that lies a little deeper than the fashions that we wear on the outside.

In our epistle lesson this morning from *Ephesians* our author discusses the moral and ethical fashions that Christians are to wear – fashions that do reveal our inner character. In the earlier sections of this treatise on Christian identity, the author has built his case that being a Christian involves a fundamental change in identity. As a result of the grace which God has shown us in and through Jesus Christ, we are no longer, in his words, "*strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world.*" Instead, we "*are citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. . . a holy temple in the Lord, built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.*" He then shifts his metaphors away from the images of building to the imagery of the human body, and tells us that we are "*members together of the same body. . . one body in Christ,*" and that the point of this embodied corporate life is to grow up "*into maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.*" which he defines as "*promoting the body's growth in building itself up in love.*"

Our baptisms are the sign of this new identity; we are part of the Body of Christ, even if we are not yet fully mature members. Just as children have to learn how to dress themselves properly and appropriately, so we have to learn to wear the ethical and moral fashions that are appropriate to mature members of the body of Christ.

Any parent knows that one of the ways that children learn is through their play. Play is often a kind of rehearsal or practice for adulthood, and a lot of childhood play involves dressing up. As the father of two daughters, I remember very well the different phases of those dressing-up games. There was, of course, the princess phase, with frilly gowns and jeweled tiaras. There was the bride phase with long dress, a bath towel for a train, and a wreath of flowers in the hair. Little boys also play dress-up. When I was about eight years old, my most prized fashion accessory was a

coonskin cap, complete with raccoon tail. When I wore that cap, I *was* Davy Crockett, the great frontiersman, fending off Santa Ana=s hordes at the Alamo.

In our lesson today, the writer urges his readers to play spiritual dress-up– to practice being like Christ. *“You were taught to take off your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”*

That=s the general exhortation– to take off the old self and put on the new, and this is something that we can do because of what God has already done by making us part of the one corporate body of Christ. But it=s also something that demands a lot of practice before it becomes as automatic as getting dressed in appropriate clothing to go to work in the morning or to go to a dinner party.

He then moves from the general principle to give very specific fashion advice. He defines what the old fashions of the self are that we must strip off, and what the new clothing of the spirit is that we must put on. And it is interesting that in this series of taking offs and putting ons, he doesn=t use threats to back up his instructions, as we sometimes do with our children. He doesn=t say, “If you don’t put on a clean shirt, you’re not going to the party.” Rather, he follows each of these exhortations with a positive rationale or benefit.

*“So then, taking off falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbor, (and here=s the positive rationale) because we are all members of one another.”* Lying is an inappropriate fashion for Christians because it is a form of pollution; it poisons the very atmosphere of trust which is essential to healthy and loving relationships. And yet how comfortable we’ve grown in our culture with lying. We don’t even expect the truth from government leaders, corporate CEO’s, or even the clergy anymore. Recent opinion surveys have shown that clergy enjoy no higher level of trust than politicians and are trusted only

slightly more than lawyers. We even joke about it: “How do you know when a politician (or used car salesman or any other profession you care to insert) is lying? If their lips are moving.”

The point is, that when speech becomes polluted by falsehood, when image is given more credence than reality, when one’s word is no longer contiguous with one’s inner self, then the whole social body suffers. Life flourishes in an atmosphere of truth; it suffocates in an atmosphere of falsehood. And there is little doubt in my mind that our society is slowly suffocating under the accumulating weight of untruth.

In the midst of his struggle against British imperial rule in India, Mahatma Gandhi discovered that his movement was in danger of losing the moral high ground because of internal dissension, lying, and the inflammatory rhetoric that set people against each other who needed to make common cause against the external enemy. So Gandhi adopted the practice of fasting from speech one day a week. He wanted to witness to the necessity of truth if their cause was going to succeed. And he wanted his followers to realize how easily speech becomes polluted with falsehood and, consequently, how reality itself becomes distorted. Lying is a sin against oneself, for it fractures the unity of the social body of which we are all a part. Truth unites; falsehood divides. It=s that simple.

It=s significant that the writer links this exhortation to truthfulness to his next one about anger. *“Be angry, but do not sin,”* he says, *“Do not let the sun go down on your anger.”* Anger is one of the most common human emotions, and perhaps one of the most necessary and the most dangerous. It=s on the list of the so-called seven deadly sins. In and of itself, anger is morally neutral. We cannot prevent ourselves from becoming angry. The capacity for anger is necessary for our very survival; it=s part of the “fight or flight” mechanism that’s built into our very biological makeup. As such, anger is very closely related to fear. When we=re in a situation of danger or

threat, anger is a potent tool for galvanizing us to action. It's in what we do with our anger that the moral question arises.

Anger against injustice toward others who are being exploited, when linked with truthfulness and channeled into action can become a powerful force for social reform, as in the case of Ghandi or Martin Luther King, Jr., or the Mothers for Peace in Northern Ireland. When anger is linked to falsehood, however, it can be the most destructive of human energies. It's the presence or absence of truthfulness that separates the anger of the social reformer from the anger of the terrorist.

But it's probably the more personal kind of anger that our writer has in mind when he says, "*Don't let the sun go down on your anger.*" Don't nurse your anger and let it take up permanent residence. We know that we will get angry with other people, and particularly with those closest to us— our spouses, our children, our friends. But here again, the connection with truth is crucial. Being truthful with the other person who has provoked our anger, or being truthful with ourselves about whatever it is in us that has provoked that fear that makes us ready to flee or fight, is the key to allowing that anger to dissipate instead of allowing it to fester into resentment that destroys our ability to love.

While all of us can identify with his exhortations about the proper way to channel our anger, his next exhortations may take us a bit by surprise. "*Thieves must give up stealing,*" he says, "*rather let them labor and work honestly with their hands,* (and here comes the second positive rationale) *so as to have something to share with the needy.*"

Thieves in the church? Surely not! He must be talking in general terms about society. But no, remember that this letter is an open letter to Christians. It's a treatise on the nature of Christian identity and Christian community. If he's talking about thieves, he's talking about thievery in the church.

In the days when this epistle was written, many of the people attracted to the preaching of the gospel were people from the

lowest classes of society, people for whom stealing was a way of life in order to survive. Just because they were baptized and incorporated into the church didn't automatically change fundamental habits; those had to be changed deliberately and such intentional change takes time. It involves taking off old clothes and putting on new ones.

But lest we gloss over this exhortation because we don't need to steal in order to survive, perhaps we ought to sit with this injunction against stealing a bit longer.

Not only have we all read or heard about denominational officials who have made the headlines for embezzling church funds but most of us probably know of situations in local churches where church funds have mysteriously disappeared. It happened a few years ago, in Carol's home church, which is a very small, family-centered church that is always struggling just to survive, where a man whom we've known for many years, embezzled the Memorial Funds that had been given over the years to honor members of the church who have died. He did it because he had become addicted to gambling, and had run up such huge debts at the casinos, that he was desperate. The reaction of the other members was not so much anger as sorrow— sorrow at the breach of trust and relationship that this caused within that church family.

While most of us wouldn't dream of embezzling or personally stealing another person's wallet or possessions, we might very well wink at cheating on our income taxes, might we not?

Knowing that we have a tendency toward larceny in our hearts, may be why our author links his injunction against stealing with his statement about the goal of honest labor being to have enough to share with the needy. Recognizing and giving to supply the needs of others prevents the sort of self-centeredness that is at the heart of theft. Generosity in giving can protect us from being thieves.

Finally, he says, "*Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your*

*words may give grace to those who hear. . . cast off all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice*” That=s quite a list, isn=t it? That=s a lot of old fashions that we have to discard if we=re going to reach the goal of being mature Christians. A lot of old fashions we have to take out of the wardrobes of our souls and put in the rag bag.

*“And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore, be imitators of God, beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.”* Truthfulness, honesty, generosity, kindness, forgiveness– these are the fashions of love. These are the new clothes in which we must dress ourselves if we are going to grow up into the identity that we have been given in Christ. That is our calling, and it is not simply for ourselves alone. We are called to become in practice what we are in reality in Christ so that the world will be able to see what ethical and moral fashions are appropriate and necessary for genuine human community. If we can walk down the runways of the world, modeling such fashions of love, if we can be such a community of peace and reconciliation and truth, then, more than any political program, more than any economic system, more than the glutted and glittering windows of Fifth Avenue or the Fauborg-St. Honoré, we will be the place where the world will find hope.