

Date: August 20, 2006

SUNDAY: Ordinary 20

SERMON: Project Runway (Christian version)

Text(s): Ephesians 4:17-5:2

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I've got to begin this morning with a confession that will immediately mark me as culturally out-of-step and out-of-tune with the times—un-hip even. I've never watched an episode of *Project Runway*. In my defense, I will say that I tried to. I liked the title. It's catchy. The first time I heard it, I thought maybe it was going to be about airplanes or airports, sort of like that series a couple years ago, *LAX*. So I tuned in, only to discover that it was one of these reality TV shows where amateur fashion designers get to have real models parade their creations down the runway and top-name designers judge them. Being the out-of-fashion maven that I am, I got through about 10 minutes of it before my eyes glazed over, and I returned to more satisfying fare like old *Law and Order* reruns.

In our epistle lesson this morning from *Ephesians* our author uses the image of clothing as a metaphor for the kind of moral and ethical fashions that Christians are to wear to reveal our inner character and behavior. In this treatise on Christian identity, the author has built his case that being a Christian involves a fundamental change in identity, a change that he describes with the terms "old self" and "new self." As a result of the grace which God has shown us in and through Jesus Christ, we are part of a new human community that is characterized, not by alienation, competition, injustice, and fragmentation, but by acceptance, compassion, justice and unity. He compares this new human community in Christ to the human body and, and tells us that we are "*members together of the same body. . . one body in Christ,*" and that the point of this unity is to grow up "*into maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.*" 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.

Children's play is often a kind of rehearsal or practice for being a grownup, and a lot of childhood play involves dressing up. I remember very well the different phases of those dressing-up games that our own daughters played. 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 piece of clothing was a coonskin cap, complete with raccoon tail. When I wore that cap, I *was* Davy Crockett, the great frontiersman, courageously fending off Santa Ana's hordes at the Alamo.

In our lesson today, the writer urges his readers to play spiritual dress-up. "*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 accepting us as members of the 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 a dinner party in the evening.

He gives very specific fashion advice. He lists some of the old fashions of the self that we must strip off, and the new clothing of the spirit that we must put on.

The first piece of old ethical clothing he lists is lying. "*So then, taking off falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbor, because we are all members of one another.*" Lying is inappropriate dress for Christians because it is a

form of pollution; it poisons the very atmosphere of trust and love in which we and others must mutually exist.

We're entering the electoral season for the Congressional elections in November, and already the spin-meisters are hard at work selling their candidates. "Spin" is our contemporary term for the massaged truth that politicians and their public relations people tell us. It doesn't appear at this point in our history that those running the campaigns for many candidates believe that they can get their candidate elected on the simple truth itself. We should all feel insulted by the estimate of our intelligence, I suppose, but unfortunately, collectively, we do seem to live up to P.T. Barnum's old motto that "there's a sucker born every minute."

In the midst of his struggle against British rule in India, Mahatma Gandhi discovered that his movement was in danger of losing the moral high ground because of internal dissension and the dishonest 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, as a result, 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. Gandhi understood that indeed "*we are all members one of another.*" Truth unites; falsehood divides. It's that simple.

It's significant that the writer links this exhortation about the need for 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 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 related to the "fight or flight" mechanisms that are 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 constructive action can become a powerful force for social reform, as we've seen in the case of Gandhi 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 interpersonal 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 channeling that anger into a positive force for reconciliation instead of allowing it to fester into resentment that destroys our ability to love.

While all of us can identify with our author's 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 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 by members of the church.

When this epistle was written in the latter part of the first century, many of the people attracted to the preaching of the gospel were people from the lowest classes of society—the new and growing urban underclass, for whom stealing was often a way of life in order to survive. Just because they were baptized and incorporated into the church didn't automatically change deeply-ingrained habits; those had to be changed deliberately and such intentional change takes time. It involves taking off old clothes—old behaviors—and putting on new ones.

A few years ago, a very sad event happened in Carol's home church in a small town in New Jersey. A man whom we've known for many years, was in charge of the Memorial Funds that had been given over the years to honor members of the church who had died. It was a small church, always struggling financially, and over the years, the memorial funds had accumulated to about \$30,000. Not a vast sum, to be sure, but to a small family-centered church, a very important link with those whose lives had been joined in worship and fellowship, and who had now passed on. This man, who had grown up in that church, developed a compulsive gambling habit, and an audit of the church funds turned up evidence that he had embezzled the Memorial Funds to pay off gambling debts, and had ended up gambling them away as well. The reactions of the other members who knew about it were not so much anger as sorrow—sorrow at the breach of trust and relationship that this theft had caused.

But lest we gloss over this exhortation because we don't personally need to steal in order to survive, or because we haven't had such a case

of theft in our own church, perhaps we ought to set with this injunction against stealing a bit longer. Perhaps stealing has become so institutionalized in our way of life that we don't even recognize it as such any more. While most of us wouldn't dream of personally stealing another person's wallet or burgling someone's house, there's hardly a one of us who isn't caught up in economic structures that while they may not be outright theft, come very close to being that.

We live in a world where the gaps between rich and poor are growing all the time. The economic systems that govern our lives to such a large extent, are not designed for either fairness or generosity. And the more heavily invested we are in those systems, the less we take notice of those whose lives are diminished by the impact of the same systems that are generating our own wealth. And the less generous with that wealth we become.

A member of one of my former congregations retired to Naples, Florida, after a long career with a major corporation. He's a devout Presbyterian layman, and during his working career was deeply involved in social reform programs aimed at bringing hope to the poverty-stricken mill towns around Pittsburgh that were devastated by the collapse of the steel industry. Now, in retirement, he's been trying to get the other members of his retirement community, most of them former corporate executives like him, to begin paying their housekeepers and the groundskeepers on their golf course the minimum wage. He told me, he's lost a lot of friends by his efforts. They call him a communist for wanting to pay the minimum wage to the people who make their own comfortable lifestyle possible.

That's 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 the needs of others and giving generously prevents the sort of self-centeredness that is at the heart of theft.

Generosity is what protects 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 undressing that we have to do if we’re going to reach the goal of being mature Christians. A lot of old fashions we have to take out of our wardrobes 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, 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 as the community of the new humanity, 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 model such fashions of love, if we can be such a community of truth and peace, then, more than political conventions full of meaningless rhetoric, more than bulging investment portfolios, more than the glutted and glittering windows of Bergdorfs or Nieman-Marcus, we will be the place where the world will find hope.