



“CHRISTMAS SWEATER”
SCRIPTURE: COLOSSIANS 3: 12-17
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
Sunday, December 26, 2021, Online Worship
The Rev, Dr. Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Pastor

Colossians 3:12-17

3:12 As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

3:13 Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

3:14 Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

3:15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

3:17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

The Word of the LORD.
Thanks be to God.

I hope that your Christmas was joyful and peaceful and gentle and beautiful.

And I am realistic enough to know that Christmas can be lots of things for us. There are beautiful parts to this season and there are hard parts. Lots of us are carrying some hard things right now that don't go away during Christmas.

You can list some of those things you or those you love are carrying in the chat.

I know many of us are carrying health challenges, relationship challenges, anxiety about what's going on in the world, weariness about COVID, fatigue, grief, and challenges to our faith—to what church is all about anymore, or where you fit in to the world, to this community.

Those things don't get erased at Christmas. And sometimes they deeply impact our capacity to be able to receive the gifts of Christmas.

I figure it's not a stretch for me to assume that all of us have gotten gifts we really didn't want for Christmas before.

Feel free to share those in the chat.

I have for sure. I know this one sounds cliché, but one of the gifts I got many years ago that I really did not want was a sweater.

It sounds innocuous enough. But it was loaded for me.

It was from someone who at that time in my life I really wanted to build a relationship with—someone in my extended family. Often gifts from this person seemed to be more suggestions for how I needed to change, than something they thought I would really like. You know how when someone gives you a gift and it's really more about them than it is about you.

The opposite of that feeling is when someone gives you a gift and it really shows that they are paying attention, that they notice and celebrate what makes you smile and how you move in the world.

So back to that sweater. It was really about more than the sweater, it was about our relationship.

This person wanted me to be something that I am not. This person wanted me to embrace a world I did not want to embrace—status, expensive clothes, exclusive clubs. John and I were in a world full of people who embraced that world, but I didn't want to embrace it. That sweater felt like a message—this is who you should be—this is the uniform you should wear, this will make you acceptable, palatable.

Down deep the sweater hurt because it felt like this person didn't want to see me, but wanted to see me be different than I wanted to be. But up closer to the surface of my emotions, the sweater made me mad.

As I look back on that sweater it was a turning point for me and this person. The sweater still had its tags on it (to be sure I knew how much it cost), so I did something I had never done before. I took it to a store that sold that kind of sweater and returned it. I never told this person I did that, but they may have found out from an unhelpful third party who decided that would gain them some points with that person.

The truth is that I was struggling with the world John and I were inhabiting. It was weighing on my conscience, but I couldn't make the break. I wanted him to do what he loved, but I am sure there was also a part of me that wanted the economic payoffs of it all, too, and the social capital that a person gets when they are involved in professional sports (especially when you win games). I returned that sweater as an act of resistance to what this person wanted to see me be, but it was also a way to push away my own inner conflict about who I was becoming.

It's a sordid tale really—all because two people couldn't really talk to each other and honor each other and be a support to each other. There were lots of reasons why—not because we didn't care for each other, but because it is hard to be honest sometimes about what we struggle with deep down inside of ourselves.

Christmas sweaters are iconography for the ways we project things onto each other. The ways we try to camouflage our own identities in the uniforms others want us to wear. They are iconography for the ways we guard our hearts even when it comes to the gifts God gives us in the Incarnation.

This beautiful and powerful passage in Colossians is about the new outfit God gives us at Christmas—the new way we present ourselves to the world.

(quote some verses)

3:12 As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

NIV says gentleness instead of kindness

3:13 Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

3:14 Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

But it's also about a new way of understanding ourselves underneath all the clothes—underneath the new outfit, the new way we present ourselves.

Our hearts and souls and spirits and bodies are changed by the incarnation—Christ consciousness changes us—its most radical impact is that it changes the way we are in relationship with each other and with ourselves.

(quote some verses)

3:15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

3:17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God through Him.

Church is supposed to be a place where we practice these ways of being together. A place different than other spaces in this rough and tumble world.

The truth is, we're projecting things onto each other all the time—it's hard to trust that people really see who we are and they are not going to use it against us. It's hard to trust that people really care about us enough to stick around when the going gets rough.

White dominant churches are especially tough places to be vulnerable sometimes. We're not supposed to be messy people—we're supposed to be fine, we're supposed to have it all together, we're supposed to be perfect—the ones who help others who don't have it all together.

The truth is that there is no such thing as having it all together, there is no such thing as always being fine or perfect. All of us have lives that are complicated—and all of us carry things that make our hearts feel heavy sometimes. It's ok. It's ok. It's not that something is wrong with us—we're just human, that's all.

And we're exactly the type of people Jesus came to be with—to call family, to get close to us and to our lives and to our complications. The fact that Divine Love seeks us out this way—well that's what changes us from the inside out.

That's the inner capacity—the flame of Christ within us—that we draw on to practice together—to practice and to grow and to be transformed together. That's why we stretch with each other in ways we might not want to sometimes, that's why we work to reframe how we understand discomfort and tension—because we know God works through those spaces to bring new integrity to our lives. That's why we commit to each doing our own inner work—so we do less projecting our stuff onto others, and more investing in deeper relationships with each other.

Christmas tells us that every moment in life carries with it a healing opportunity—the life we live in these bodies is sacred and worthy of love and capable of transformation and right relationship.

“We are made for goodness. We are made for love. We are made for friendliness. We are made for togetherness. We are made for all of the beautiful things that you and I know. We are made to tell the world that there are no outsiders. All are welcome: black, white, red, yellow, rich, poor, educated, not educated, male, female, gay, straight, all, all, all. We all belong to this family, this human family, God's family.”

— Archbishop Desmond Tutu

That's why we want to lean into the gift of the new world God is calling us toward. It's not a gift to be resisted or returned, it's exactly what we need, Grace Covenant. A gift that may be hard to receive at times because it asks us to change, but it is a gift that keeps on giving us new reasons to believe in the power of love.

Thanks be to God.