

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer
August 23, 2009
Isaiah 61: 8-11; Colossians 3: 5-17; Ephesians 6: 10-17
Peace with Justice Sunday
“Clothed in Righteousness”

Over the years, my collection of school/city team affiliated paraphernalia has grown. I have Mogadore Wildcats sweatshirts celebrating Mogadore’s football state championship victory in 1996. When I moved to Streetsboro, those had to go in the closet because Streetsboro and Mogadore were fierce rivals -- and so during Alex’s high school years I wore Streetsboro Rockets tee-shirts to his football games. Then Grace moved up here -- and we had black and gold Heights Tigers tee shirts to wear. In the meantime, I also had Earlham College Quakers sweatshirts to wear-- one when Andrew ran cross-country, and then another when Alex played football. Now there will be new Beloit College Buccaneers stuff to buy and wear. It is fun to wear the clothing associated with one’s team, isn’t it? On the professional level, for most of us here, it’s Cleveland Indians and Browns and Cavaliers shirts and hats we proudly wear -- but we do have some Boston fans, and some Texas team fans, and I imagine even some Pittsburgh Steelers fans in our midst. We wear the clothing -- and it’s fun, and we support the teams we like to support.

My closets and dresser drawers are filled with all different kinds of clothes – for all different purposes and occasions. Church clothes and casual clothes. Serious clothes and fun clothes. Wool for winter. Cotton for summer. Some new clothes. Mostly older clothes. Some on the more expensive side. But most not so expensive. Clothes for everyday. Clothes bought for special occasions: the pretty yellow dress I bought for Andrew and Lauren’s wedding, and the pretty green dress I bought for Alex and Abi’s wedding. The fancy black skirt and white blouse with sheer sleeves I wore when I preached the wedding sermon at my dad and Marilyn’s wedding. And so on. You know what I mean. We are all people who have more than one set of clothes. We all know what it’s like to have different clothes for different situations. We all pay at least some attention to what we wear.

Even the robes and stoles I wear on Sunday mornings (when it’s not too hot) have special meaning for me. My black robe was my parent’s gift to me when I began preaching in my first appointment as a pastor. That was 25 years ago. The green Pentecost/Kingdomtide stole was also a gift, from clergy friends when I began my first appointment. The red Pentecost stole was made by my mother-in-law for my ordination as an elder in 1987. The white robe I bought myself, but the pockets inside it were added by a woman in the Mogadore church when I discovered too late that the robe came pocketless and there was no place to put the microphone. The blue Advent stole was made by members of the Streetsboro church worship committee. The children of the world stole was a gift from my brother-in-law in Memphis one Christmas when he drew my name for the gift exchange. The white multi-colored stole was made in

Guatemala and given to me by my parents. The butterfly Easter season stole was given to me the Christmas after my mother died. The red/gold autumn leaves and the purple/orange stoles were gifts from the Hollands for my 50th birthday. The multi-fabric stole representing the continents of the world was presented to me by you, on my first Sunday here at Church of the Redeemer. Each robe, each stole has meaning. Each one evokes special memories. Each one is worn at its own time and for its own purpose.

As is most of the clothing we wear. Whether it's a prescribed uniform for work, or the comfortable clothes we wear around the house, our wardrobes are put together to cover a variety of purposes. We know that we need different clothes for different reasons. And we also know, whether it's exactly right or not, that what we wear matters. To us, and to others. Common sense and good judgment are required.

Is it that way for us in our Christian faith? Is there a Christian dress code? Do we have to wear a certain kind of clothing to be a Christian? Do we have to go out and buy a new wardrobe?

Listen again to the Scripture readings for today – as well as some others I have chosen for our consideration:

From the prophet Isaiah: “I will rejoice greatly in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robes of righteousness....”

From the Letter to the Colossians: “As God’s chosen ones....clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience....Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.”

And also from Ephesians, chapter 4: “You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”

As well as from chapter 6: “Put on the whole armor of God...Fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace...take the shield of faith...take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”

Remember, too, these words from Galatians: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ.”

And these words from Revelation: “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?”...Then he said to me...“These are they who have come out of the

great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

The garments of salvation. Robes of righteousness. Belts of truth. Shoes for proclaiming the gospel of peace. Shields of faith. Clothed with Christ. Clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience and love. And washed, not in laundry detergent like Tide or Cheer, but in the blood of the Lamb. This is the Christian’s wardrobe. Nothing we buy at the department store or order on-line. Nothing we can hang on the hanger and put away in our closet. Nothing we can neatly fold and lay in our dresser. Nothing to charge with our credit card and pay for later. Nothing we can make a deal on at a garage or thrift store sale.

The Christian’s wardrobe isn’t about status or price or style or any of those things we think matters. No, what we are to put on is Christ. We are to be clothed in righteousness. We are to wear compassion and patience and kindness and love.

And isn’t that a good thing? Because it means that all of us can be clothed in the Christian wardrobe if we want to be. There’s nothing so expensive here that only a few of us can afford to wear. There’s nothing so trendy here, either, that only a few of us the right age or the right size would look good wearing. No, this is a wardrobe that fits all who would put it on. This is a wardrobe available to all who would want to wear it. Instead of the latest several hundred dollar shoe promoting LeBron James or any other professional athlete, we are to wear whatever shoes will assist us in proclaiming the gospel of peace. *Instead of clothing fashioned for today’s popular lines like* [get input from congregation] *we are to wear the clothing fashioned by God for God’s people according to God’s design. Salvation. Righteousness. Love. That’s what we wear.*

So how does this clothing stuff tie in with our Peace with Justice theme? Like this: The way of peace and justice in our world is not an impossible task. All Christians have what they need to be peacemakers. All Christians have what they need to work for justice. Peace and Justice are not trendy concerns for only a few while the rest of us just do other things. Peace and Justice are not just concerns for special occasions, either. They are an essential part of our Christian faith and witness, and all of us are expected to be involved. When we put on Christ, when we are clothed in Christ, we are wearing the garments of peace and justice. When we live in righteousness, when our faith in God and our actions as God’s people are woven together, then we will be makers of peace and doers of justice. When we clothe ourselves in compassion and kindness and love, won’t the way of peace be in front of us? Won’t the demands of justice be clear?

These are choices we can make every day. I think of it like this: Every morning when I get out of bed I decide what I’m going to wear that day. A dress or a suit? Blue jeans? Something dressy or something casual? Every morning I decide what outward image I will display for the day. Serious or fun. Professional or informal. I know when I wake up that some kinds of clothing will be appropriate for that day and some won’t. I don’t

wear shorts and tank tops to the office or to the hospital for visitation. I don't wear a dress and high heels when I'm staying home on my day off.

Well, we make similar choices, I think, as people of faith. Every day when we wake up, we can decide if we are going to put on Christ, and thereby conduct ourselves that day according to Christ's demands and expectations, or not. To be clothed in righteousness means to live as righteous people. To walk uprightly. To love God in all that we say and do. To obey God's commandments. To demonstrate God's love through our own actions. To wear garments of salvation means to live as saved persons – and that means to take off our old selves and put on our new selves, forgiven and redeemed. Such salvation ought to show itself in how we live and how we talk and how we treat other people.

As we heard in the letter to the Colossians: "Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: impurity, evil desire and greed (which is idolatry)...These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things -- anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouths. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all."

So every day when I get up in the morning I can decide to put on the shoes that will proclaim the gospel of peace, or I can wear shoes that stomp on other people's hopes and dreams and smash them down with my anger and hatred. I can choose to be clothed in righteousness, or I can be clothed in selfishness and greed. I can say yes to the clothing of compassion and kindness and patience and love, or I can say yes to the clothing of indifference and ignorance and irritability and injustice.

These are not unreasonable or impossible alternatives. A lot of people in the world are greedy and selfish and hateful and violent and immoral and unfair. We know that. But we also know that we ourselves don't have to be that way. It is not impossible to live in such a way that Christ is reflected through us. We can choose to put on Christ. We can choose to wear the clothing of Christian love. We can decide to let our outward actions match our inner convictions. Those robes washed in the blood of the Lamb are available to all who walk the talk.

A Peace with Justice Sunday story called *Making Things Right* fits well here. "A father was minding his son while trying to study. The boy simply would not leave him alone. In desperation the father thought of a plan. Thumbing through a magazine, he saw a map of the world and explained to his son that this was a picture of our hemisphere. Tearing the picture into pieces, the father said if the boy would put it back together, he would reward him with a surprise. The father left the room, confident he would not be disturbed for the rest of the afternoon. Imagine his surprise when his son soon called him to the other room to see the finished puzzle. "How did you do this?" The

astonished father asked. “You don’t know what the world looks like.” “No, Daddy,” the boy replied, “but when you tore it out of the magazine, I saw a picture of a man on the other side. I know what the man looks like, so I put the man together. If the man was right, the world would be right, too.” (Archived Stores – Peace with Justice Sunday – www.umcsgiving.org).

If the man was right, the world would be right, too. If we as men and women are right, the world will be right. That’s the truth of it, isn’t it? If we do our part, the pieces will come together.

Every day presents opportunities for making peace. Every day there are situations that call for justice. Do we love Jesus? Are we clothed in righteousness? Are we willing to wear the garments of our salvation, and thereby demonstrate to others who really is the Lord of our life?

The prophet Isaiah foretells the day when all creation is transformed: “...until a spirit form on high is poured out on us, and wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest. Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness in the fruitful field. The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever. My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places.”

So does the Psalmist: “Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky. The Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps.”

So, brothers and sisters in Christ, clothe yourselves in righteousness. Do justice. Practice mercy and kindness. Love God and your neighbor. Forgive each other. And let peace dwell in your hearts. Amen.