

“Turning in our Costumes”

Galatians 3:23-29

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost: June 20, 2010

A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden Copyright: 2010, I. Peden

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William Shakespeare wrote: “All the world’s a stage and all the people in it merely players.” A Danish theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, once said that life is like a huge play. We all have certain roles, and we have certain costumes that we wear. In that play, there are the rich and there are the poor. There are the powerful and there are the weak. There are the beautiful and the not so beautiful. But one day the play will come to an end. When the play is over, we will all have to turn in our costumes. At that point, Kierkegaard explained, we’ll finally realize that underneath our costumes we’re all the same. We’re all children of God.

On the stage, in a theatrical context, masks and costumes help us not only to tell a story, but also to experience a story in the “skin” of its characters. That’s surely one reason why our children loved dressing up for their drama, *David, the Boy who wanted to be King*, earlier this month. That’s why children and adults alike love a Christmas nativity play or an Easter pageant.

Plays, pageants, and pantomimes allow us to transform ourselves – even if only for a moment – to cast ourselves in roles we might not normally get to play. Costumes allow us to become someone else, to play “let’s pretend” as many of us did when we were little, and our children still enjoy playing today.

More seriously, costumes – whether literal or figurative – also provide us with an opportunity to hide, to protect ourselves, or to don an alternate *persona* to present to the world. So costumes fulfill a dual function: they both conceal an identity and reveal an identity. They can be a lot of fun and, at times, they can be rather scary. When we are wearing costumes it is not always easy for us to truly see or to hear each other.

Speaking about costumes today reminds us about looking at ourselves, both as we see ourselves when we’re wearing our various individual and collective masks, and as we are when we look beneath them – a little closer and deeper. It also reminds us about how we see others in their roles: how we view their costumes; which people wearing which costumes we choose to recognize and which people we don’t; and judging who is a really important player and who is

not. What are our personal and collective costumes in our story in this place and time in history ...in Memorial's small but most significant part of the huge Christian play? How do we see ourselves? And how do we see one another? Who are we as followers of Jesus and who do we want yet to become?

Within the Memorial church family we experience the joy of celebrating our diversity; we also experience moments when that same diversity gives rise to some discomfort and apprehension. The Christian story contains all of this: the joy and the fear: the fear that causes the concealing or masking of identity, and the joy of revealing a new and vital identity. Some questions we should still be asking today are: Who are we as followers of Jesus Christ, when we're wearing our costumes and when we're taking them off? How can we see and hear each other better? How do we become authentic, true, transparent players in the drama of the Christian life? In my opinion, the answer to the last question is this: when we turn in our costumes. Let me explain

Costumes and masks may be marks of anonymity or disguise, worn deliberately and literally during plays, or masquerade balls, or fancy dress parties, or on certain holidays. But at the end of the drama, or parade, or party, or holiday, we have to turn in our costumes. By analogy, that is what we will have to do if and when we want to know ourselves better and be drawn more fully into the heart of God. It is only when we are unmasked and turn in our costumes that we truly become who we are meant to be: God's children ...God's beloved. And all this is possible because when we turn in our costumes we are offered a new garment – a gift from God.

The Apostle Paul introduces the image of a new garment in Galatians chapter 3: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ as a garment." In other words, we put on the clothes of Christ, and we are counted as righteous. We become Christ-like.

When the early Christian church baptized new believers, they would separate the men and women into two rooms. They would disrobe and then be baptized. As they came out of the water, they were clothed in a white robe, symbolic of putting on Christ. Hear again the apostle's words: *As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ as a garment.* That is why many babies are brought to be baptized in white clothes, sometimes called "Christening gowns." That is also why at death, we drape the casket in a white pall. The pall

symbolizes the clothes of Christ, the white righteousness of Christ as we celebrate the newness of life given in God's grace to the loved one who has died.

What we as Christians celebrate is a startling new reality: a reality of God's sheer grace. We come into the presence of God undeserving. There are times when we have been rascals; times when we have been deceitful; times when we have compromised our faith; times when we have denied, or worse still, betrayed our Lord. There is no way we can lay claim to God's blessing by anything we do. "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," writes the apostle in the Letter to the Romans, "but now we are justified by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." All we had to bring were dirty rags, but they have been exchanged for the white robe of Christ's righteousness.

It is God who invites us to dress in the garment of Christ. In faith we accept this garment of Christ as it is placed upon us, and as God freely bestows on us the blessing that belongs to Christ: *You are my beloved child ...with you I am well pleased.* God looks at our sinful selves, but God sees us clothed in Christ's righteousness, and God extends a blessing.

As I mentioned earlier, within our church family we celebrate the joy of discovering and valuing human diversity. When we look beneath our costumes ...or, more accurately, when we turn in our costumes ...we recognize that we're all the same ...we're all God's children. Symbolically, as mentioned, that is what was happening when a baptized convert in the early church was brought up out of the water and given a white robe to wear – a robe that was the same as that given to everyone else who was baptized. In this symbolic ritual the old clothes (our costumes) that distinguished and separated people from one another were set aside, so that those who were baptized would not focus on the differences between them, but that they might now focus on what they all had in common – faith in Jesus Christ.

In this third chapter of Galatians the apostle wants his readers to understand very clearly that when we become Christians, all the divisions that we thought were so important, don't matter anymore. As he says, in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek. In other words, putting on our nationality, citizenship, and ethnic heritage is a thing of the past ...we have to turn in those costumes. What matters is not that we are Americans or Mexicans or Australians or Africans, but that we're Christians. Paul goes on to say there is neither slave nor free. In other words, economic and social classes don't matter anymore. We also have to turn in those

costumes.

Then Paul even proceeds to say that in Christ there is no longer male or female. By that he means to challenge the stereotypes we brought with us from the past of what men and women should be like. As Christians, we have to turn in those stereotypical costumes because they simply don't fit anymore. The reason they don't fit is because Jesus has given us a new set of clothes to put on, a new identity, and that identity is that we are all members of God's family. There is an amazing opportunity that awaits each one of us ...possibly for the first time ...or a renewed opportunity: the opportunity is to turn in our old costumes – as much as they have given us a sense of identity, security, and even belonging – and to try on a new set of clothes.

I wonder what show you have been acting in ...what play you chose to be in ...and what costume you came to church wearing. I have no idea, but I do know one thing: in the words of a British preacher, John Stott, "Every show comes to the end of its run, when we must lay aside the costumes and step off the stage, into another, larger world." God's kingdom, salvation, liberation, new creation, heaven, eternal life? Whatever words I may use to describe it, I would call it the "huge play," wouldn't you? And I am so pleased that we are all invited to have a part in that huge play, aren't you?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.