

The Stripper

I hope that at least some of you took note of the title of this sermon announced in the weekly newsletter and in this morning's bulletin and wondered, "What on earth is that lunatic up to now?" I really am going to talk about strippers this morning, although perhaps not entirely in the way you might think. I am going to talk about taking it off, taking it all off, but also about dressing up. I'm going to talk about a couple of famous strippers and, believe it or not, about how we should follow their example. After all, as a reward for coming to church on a beautiful sunny summer day, shouldn't you leave with something to talk about?

Let's start with one of those famous strippers – Jesus of Nazareth, whom we call the Christ. You weren't expecting him, were you? But, hey, in many of the world's artistic representations of him he's either a little baby naked as a jaybird or a grown man wearing less than would be socially acceptable in our society. Of course, in those latter pictures, he didn't give up his clothes willingly. Instead, he was stripped by Roman soldiers in preparation for being scourged and then crucified, executed as the most vile kind of criminal in a way that was abhorred by Roman and Jew alike. His involuntary stripping in that incident wasn't for purposes of entertainment but to humiliate him and to frighten those who would follow him. He died naked, in agony and alone, by most reports, abandoned by all his closest friends, except perhaps by a teenager too young to be taken seriously by the Roman guards and by his mother. Even his Heavenly Father, it seems, forsook him. And yet, Paul reminds the Colossians, he is seated at the right hand of God, where he remains our great example, calling us to keep foremost in our minds the things which he taught and lived.

Why is it important to remember the humiliation of Jesus as well as his glorification? I suspect that in Colossae, just as in countless communities today, there were plenty of preachers running around teaching that the blessings of God equated to things that society valued, that if you were really in tune with God, really righteous, then you would be the recipient of obvious wealth, proud owner of the First Century equivalent of a fat stock portfolio, two Beamers in the garage of a nice house with a Sound view, and a lobster in every pot. We know it now as the Prosperity Gospel and it is popular in more places than just North America. But Paul reminds the Colossians (and us) that we are to keep our minds on heavenly attributes and not on the rewards to be found in this life. After all, he says, we have died to those things and our true lives are hidden with Christ in God. Those who do not see with the eyes of faith will not be able to see our riches when we live in Christ. We may seem as humble, even as humiliated, to them as one forced to walk around mostly naked. But if we truly live our lives in Christ, then those who recognize true value will see us in all the rich glory of the love and compassion that mark us as followers of Jesus.

Paul calls us to strip off our old selves and all that went with them before we committed ourselves to living life in the way of Jesus. I'm reminded of another famous stripper, one who took this calling quite literally. Many of you probably know the story of Francis of Assisi. Born into a life of wealth as the son of a rich cloth merchant, he turned from his life of ease and indulgence after a shattering war experience as a young man. He began making free with his father's profits and merchandise to feed and clothe the poor and to restore an abandoned chapel. When his father hauled him to the public square to have the local spiritual and temporal authorities pass judgment on him for these acts, Francis responded by renouncing his inheritance and all that he had heretofore received from his father, going so far as to strip naked in that

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public place in order to return to his father the clothes that he had received from him. It was an extreme act, which is why we remember it, and not one that we are called to reenact but we are called to strip from our lives all that is not of God, ridding ourselves of every selfish action, of everything that we do that places our own desires ahead of the needs of others. We are to strip off behaviors of lying, anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language. We are to completely rid ourselves of any action in which we demean others or ourselves or in which we fail to give God the honor due our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

Paul's language of stripping off and putting on would have had deep resonance with the Colossians whom he had begun by praising for their faithfulness to Christ. Their early church experience of baptism was one that would have shocked our Twenty-first Century sensibilities. Taking their cue from similar ceremonies in other religions common in their day, they stripped completely of their old clothes prior to immersion and were clothed in new robes of white to symbolize their new lives when they emerged. We still see this custom reflected today in the white baptismal robes used by many Christians. It was the inspiration for the white "Good Shepherd" golf shirts I gave to Karl, Ben & Kym when they were baptized last summer. Those holy strippers of the First Century were not left naked by their brothers and sisters in Christ, no more than believers of any time are left naked by God. Instead, we are clothed in the Spirit of Christ and urged to clothe ourselves in his attributes. It would be dangerous for us to stay spiritually naked. As Jesus taught: "When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting place, but it finds none. Then it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' When it comes, it finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and brings along seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and live there; and the last state of that person is worse than the first."

In teaching about "putting on" such attributes as compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, Paul is following in a rich Biblical tradition. In his commentary on Colossians, Peter T. O'Brien cites no fewer than ten Old Testament passages that speak of "being clothed with moral and religious qualities," and also points to an extensive use of this metaphor in rabbinic literature that is very close to Paul's admonitions to the Colossians. Paul uses the metaphor of putting on clothing as a way of describing our new life in Christ in most of his letters. It's an image that may have less impact for us today than it did for Paul's original audience. After all, we change clothes at least daily – I've seen my wife don three or four different sets of clothes in a day as she progressed from jammies to "work-around-the-house" clothes to "go to the mall" clothes to party clothes. But most folks in Paul's day would have had one set of clothes, washed when possible, mended when needed, until they were threadbare. In Paul's time, the old saying "clothes make the man" would have been especially true. You could tell a person's social status and probably their profession by their clothing. Really, this remained true until quite recently. Now, you can't tell a blue-jeans-and-Gore-Tex-wearing CEO from her janitor.

So, for Paul, the image of the clothes you wore would have been revelatory of your core identity. He's not talking to the Colossians in this passage about slipping on a costume to play a fictitious role. He's telling them and us how to conform our lives to the life of Jesus. All of the positive attributes that Paul mentions here, "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" are traits that he elsewhere in his writings ascribes to God, Father or Son. Paul understands that by consciously adopting these attitudes, they will slowly become our natural response to others. I'm

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reminded of two of my favorite pieces of literature. First, in Shakespeare's great play, "Hamlet," the prince says to his mother, "Assume a virtue, if you have it not. / That monster, custom, who all sense doth eat, / Of habits devil, is angel yet in this, / That to the use of actions fair and good / He likewise gives a frock or livery, / That aptly is put on... / For use almost can change the stamp of nature, / And either tame the devil, or throw him out / With wondrous potency." The idea of assuming external virtues until they change you internally is the whole theme of Max Beerbohm's delightful short story, "The Happy Hypocrite." The story tells of a rake named Lord George Hell. In the midst of his dissolute life, he encounters a pure young woman and falls completely in love. He attempts to woo her but she is repulsed by his evil appearance, for his face is twisted with his life of crimes and misbehaviors, and tells him she will only have a man with the face of a saint. Lord George Hell disguises himself with a mask of a handsome and innocent face and successfully courts her under the name of Lord George Heaven, reforming his behavior to ensure winning the young woman. They marry and, out of love for her, George commits himself to a morally upright life, repaying those he has cheated and giving the bulk of his misbegotten fortune to charity. When his past catches up with him in the form of a discarded lover and he is forced to strip off his mask, he is astounded to find that his face now matches not only the mask he wore but also his new life of love and selflessness. He and his true love live happily ever after.

Part of the conversion of Lord George Hell comes from the love which is extended to him by the young woman. Paul points to a similar impact upon us by the love which we receive from God. We are God's chosen ones, he writes, set apart by God as God's own people and beloved by God. It is so important for us to be secure in the idea that we are loved if we are to grow in love, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience ourselves. The Australian theologian William Loader comments, "The author is addressing people who should understand themselves as "chosen, holy and loved". This is not just an appeal to status - as if then to shame people into behaving in a way consistent with that status. Rather these people have an extraordinary starting point: they know that they are valued and loved. If only this could sink into their awareness fully, they would be finding that it would generate a whole new set of attitudes and behaviours and enable them to leave other (behaviours) aside as irrelevant... When we begin to take seriously that we are 'chosen, holy, and loved' by God, then we begin to value ourselves and not need to embark on the array of strategies which keep people busy trying to make themselves special. This kind of change does not happen overnight, but is part of our development in maturity as people."

Perhaps with the kind of maturity that Loader is talking about, we will be able to help facilitate our society in doing some stripping of its own. I'm thinking now about the stripping of barriers that Paul talks about when he envisions the renewal of our knowledge in the image of our Creator. "In that renewal," he writes, "there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!" It's important for our understanding that we hear some of those terms the way the Christians in Colossae would have heard them. In those days when Greek was the international language of trade and culture, much the way English is today, those in the cultural majority mocked those who couldn't speak Greek by shouting nonsense syllables at them: "bar-bar-bar-bar-bar." This led to the coining of a new word for ignorant or unsophisticated people – Barbarian. It is an unfortunate and chauvinistic attitude that still crops up today. I have been appalled recently to see a number of

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folks on Facebook whom I know to profess Christ, nevertheless “like” a site that proclaims “What do you mean, ‘Press one for English’? This is America!” Obviously for these Christians, a few seconds of their inconvenience is more important than embracing those whose grasp of our common tongue is not yet secure. Likewise, when Paul refers to Scythians, he is referring to a particularly despised group of immigrants who originated in what are now Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Belarus, southern Russia and southern Poland. These extremely uncultured barbarians were considered the worse of the lot. Perhaps the Colossians and their neighbors considered building a fence to keep them out. Paul reminded them that in Christ, they should not make these distinctions. He might well have said that the Colossians should judge them not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. The Colossians needed to be stripped of their attitude about their new neighbors; their society needed to be stripped of its barriers against those who were different. Are we participating in stripping away these things today? The Lutheran scholar Robert Paul Roth writes, “The story of Colossians tells us that everything and everyone in this world is bound together under the loving lordship of Christ, and therefore we can exclude nothing and no one from our care. Moreover, this care does not involve a mystical escape from the body but rather a practical concern for all the goods of this world and for every neighbor far or near, friend or enemy, rich or poor, male or female, first world or third world.”

Paul encourages the Colossians to “let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.” It’s always worth noting, I think, that peace as described in the Bible, shalom, is far more than the absence of conflict. In his book, Colossians: Christ Above All, my late teacher, Dr. Harold Songer, cited the Greek writer Epicurus as how *not* to understand peace. “The absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the mind,” is how Epicurus defined peace in the third century BC. That is not the same as shalom, the peace of Christ. Dr. Songer, it always seemed to me, knew something about shalom. With his white hair and wire-rim glasses, his gentle Appalachian-inflected voice, and his customary dress shirt, tie and cardigan, he was the very picture of a scholar. Yet he exuded a relaxed confidence that was inspiring to his students. “It’s easy to be laid back when you’ve got something to lean on,” he used to say. He gave every indication of being a man who had learned not to worry about the little things that God has promised to provide, who knew how to lean on God. He seemed to don shalom with that cardigan every morning.

In Peaceteacher: Jesus’ Way of Shalom, Stephen D. Jones, the former pastor of Seattle First Baptist, writes, “When Jesus spoke of peace, he used the Hebrew word, shalom. To the Jews, shalom is holistic. It isn’t only about nonviolence or cessation of hostilities. Indeed, there could hardly be a more positive word. ‘Shalom is an iridescent word, with many levels of meaning in Hebrew Scripture. The base denominator of its many meanings is well-being, wholeness, completeness.’ To translate it as ‘peace’ fails to capture its fuller meaning in Hebrew. Shalom certainly includes an absence of war and commitment to nonviolence, but it also has to do with personal wholeness and societal harmony. It has to do with seeking the well being and personal fulfillment of everyone. Shalom embraces justice and peace with oneself, with others and with God. Shalom is a word of hope, describing the emerging Peace of God. Shalom has to do with living God’s way with others, with society and with the created order.” Again, the emphasis on what Paul is teaching is not on our individual desire for peace, for the cessation of pain in the body and trouble in the mind, but on how we participate in the creation of God’s shalom for all

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humankind. In leaving behind petty, selfish concerns, in putting on the virtues characterized by love and forgiveness, we show that we are seeking the things that are above, where Christ is.

In the putting on of our new spiritual clothing, Paul makes sure we remember to include gratitude. “Be thankful,” he writes in verse 15. “With gratitude in your hearts sing psalms,” says verse 16. And he concludes with “whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” It is a beautiful concept but a difficult one. There is so much in life, in what we have to do, that is hard to be grateful for. It’s hard to be grateful for rush hour traffic. It’s hard to be grateful for ungrateful and rude people. For some, it may be hard to be grateful for a job that seems like a dead-end, or where one’s contributions are not valued. For the students in our midst, it may be hard to be grateful for classwork that seems irrelevant to our goals, even though we parents may preach the opposite. It is hard for us to get up in the morning and put on gratitude like a garment. But that is exactly what Paul is suggesting here. I am always amazed, inspired and a little abashed at stories of those saints who are able to deck themselves in gratitude on a daily basis. I try to keep in mind the teachings of a slender volume called The Practice of the Presence of God by Brother Lawrence. Brother Lawrence was a monk, an obscure lay brother in France in the Seventeenth Century. We remember him for his little book in which he revealed the secret of the joy and gratitude for which he was well-known. Brother Lawrence practiced focusing on the presence of God wherever he went, whatever he did. For him, peeling potatoes was as holy a moment as taking communion. He was grateful for all things; whatever he did, he did in the name of the Lord Jesus.

My sisters and my brothers, we have been raised by God with Christ, our souls ransomed from the power of the grave as the Psalmist foresaw. Our Loving Creator, who has given us along with all of Creation the innate beauty that allowed God to call all things good, has given us the power to strip from our lives all the things that make us unlovely and to put on the attributes of Jesus: kindness, humility, meekness, patience and, above all, love. Let us joyfully and gratefully strip off those things which separate us from God and from our place in the redeemed Creation and humanity for which Jesus came and died. Let us live all the hours and days of our frustrating, wonderful, simple, amazing lives for him, taking the name of Jesus wherever we go as our hope, our joy and our gift to the world.