

*Grown-up Clothes*

A Sermon by Jeffrey P. Carlson

St. Pauls United Church of Christ, Chicago

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Texts: Luke 2:41-52 & Colossians 3:12-17 (at end of sermon)

Here we are again at the end of another year, and even the end of another decade. What was this decade called, anyway? The 00's, the noughts? I never quite got what we're calling it. It was a decade of terror and also a decade of wonders. And 2009. How was it for you? What happened in your life over the past 525,600 minutes? What are you thankful for? What was a blessing? What's been a disappointment? What do you regret? How have you changed in the past year? We have all changed, in one way or another. Change is a constant in our lives. We are all different people from the people we were a year ago at the end of 2008. It's good to reflect on where we've been and about the people we'd like to be in another year from now at the end of 2010.

Part of what it means to be human is that we are creatures stuck in time, and that means constant change. Change is inevitable, and most of it seems beyond our control. Growing older. The extra grey hairs on my head and the lines on my face. Economic downturns. Economic upturns. Accidents. Sickness. Deaths of loved ones. Senior Pastors retiring. A lot of change we can't control. But there's also change that we want and hope for – that's why we join health clubs and start diets (start diets again and again and again); that's why we read self-help books and listen to motivational speakers. It's even a reason that we come to church. There is change that we want to see in our lives. I for one am disappointed that I still weigh about the same as I did last year at this time. Clearly, something more needs to change.

What we're really looking for amid all the change in our lives is not change but transformation. Growth. Newness. We want to become better people. We want to see positive change in ourselves and in our world. I'd like to look at our readings for this Sunday after Christmas from that perspective of transformational change.

In the Gospel of Luke, 12 years have already passed since Christmas. Jesus has changed. He's no longer the baby asleep on the hay. He's growing up, becoming an adult. This is the only story in the Bible about Jesus as a youth. When he makes his next appearance he will be thirty years old. Out of those thirty years, we only have this one, short story. Jesus goes to Jerusalem from his home in Nazareth along with his family and a large group of travelers to celebrate Passover – the festival that celebrates the freedom of Israel from slavery in Egypt. Luke says that Mary and Joseph made this pilgrimage to Jerusalem every year. It was a habit for them, part of what it meant for them to be faithful. Jesus didn't just appear out of nowhere as some miraculous son of God. Jesus grew up in a family – a family that was faithful in practicing their faith. They kept rituals like this pilgrimage at Passover to help them remember who they were. It's easy to forget who we are. Rituals help us to remember. Celebrating Passover reminded

them that God chose them, and had once freed their people from slavery, and their whole sense of identity came from belonging to a God like that – a God who called them and who loved them for God’s very own. That belief was written into the core of Jesus’ self understanding, and he learned it from his parents. The most important thing we can teach our children is that they are each a chosen and beloved child of God. That’s what you are – a chosen and beloved child of God. That’s what baptism is about.

Where does your sense of self come from? Who are you? What makes you tick? Where do you find your identity? How do you define who you are? Those are all questions that we negotiate as we grow up; and the way that we define ourselves continues to change throughout our lives. At different periods in life you might be a boy, a student, a daughter, an alum of your Alma Mater, a Cubs fan, a Sox fan, a blue-collar worker, a father, a grandmother, a disabled person, a cancer-survivor, a person living with AIDS.

Our lives are defined by much that we choose and much that we don’t. We are always in the process of becoming the persons that we are. We’re always in the process of becoming, for better or for use.

After celebrating the festival of Passover, Jesus goes missing. Joe said this story reminds him of the movie *Home Alone*. The group of travelers returns to Nazareth, leaving 12-year-old Jesus behind. But Mary and Joseph aren’t concerned. They figure he’s just traveling in some other part of the caravan. It takes them a whole day to realize he’s gone missing. Imagine living in a time and place when having your 12 year old kid missing for a day is no cause for concern! Mary and Joseph rush back to Jerusalem and after three days of searching for their son they find Jesus sitting among the rabbis in the temple, listening and asking questions. And Mary says,

“Jesus, how could you do this to us!?! Joseph and I have been worried sick looking for you!”

There’s nothing quite like those comforting maternal words, “How could you do this to your mother!?” But the adolescent Jesus doesn’t seem fazed by maternal guilt from Mary. Instead he gives a cheeky, adolescent answer. “Why were you looking for me? Didn’t you know I’d be about my Father’s interests?” At that point my mother would have said, “Don’t answer my question with another question.” But always the perfect mother we imagine her to be, Mary just “treasures these things in her heart.”

Differentiating ourselves from our parents is a tricky thing. It’s one of the changes we have to go through in life if we’re going to grow up. For some of us it can take a lifetime to form an identity that’s separate from our parents and whatever dysfunction we had in our homes. Like any adolescent, Jesus is asserting his independence. This is the only picture we have of how Jesus grew up and how he developed as a young man - just this one short scene of him sitting in the temple, learning from the rabbis and being steeped in the traditions of his people.

Years later, when he's all grown up, Jesus is asked to summarize what he has learned in his life. He's asked to sum up what the most important teaching is of all. And he answers with what's called in Hebrew the *shema*. *Shema* means to hear. The *shema* is the first prayer that Jesus would have learned as a boy. They're the words that faithful Jews recite every day of their lives in order to remember who they are. Jesus says, "This is the most important teaching I've learned." He says, "Hear (that's the word *shema*); Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength."

Then he adds one more command – it also comes from the Hebrew Bible – he adds one more command to sum up everything he believes in, "And you shall love your neighbor as yourself." These words are pretty familiar to most of us, yet we still have such a hard time living up to them, don't we? One of my old seminary professors Scott McKnight calls this the *Jesus Creed*. A creed sums up the most important thing you know, your deepest beliefs about God, yourself and the world. Jesus says this is it: *You shall love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

How do you decide what's really important for you to be doing? How do you prioritize and focus your life? What will define your identity and who you really are? We will be faced with a dizzying number of choices and distractions in the coming year. And when the year 2010 comes to a close, will the changes in your life over the next year be just more change or will you have experienced transformation? The only change that ultimately matters, according to the Jesus Creed, is that by the end of next year, you and I will have grown in love – our love for God and love for each other.

The reading we heard from Colossians expresses the love focus of the Jesus Creed in a different way. It talks about clothing ourselves in love, putting love on as if it were a big wool overcoat. It's a wonderful metaphor. Colossians is a letter attributed to Paul that was written to a church. And in writing to this church Paul says "Clothe yourselves with love." Love becomes something we dress ourselves up in rather than some phony emotions we try to drum up.

This passage about clothing yourself in love reminded me of when I used to work in the men's clothing department at Marshall Fields. (Speaking of change that has not resulted in transformation, God rest Marshall Fields soul.) I got through seminary without any student loans by selling suits. I would have to work at Fields the day after Christmas every year. There would be lines of men waiting to get their suits altered, their pants hemmed, their overcoats shortened – all the clothes they had gotten for Christmas that needed alterations.

We all worked on commission in the men's suits department. There was one of my coworkers, we'll call him Dave, who had a remarkable ability of being able to disappear whenever a customer approached the department with a bag full of alterations, because dealing with an alteration would take you off the selling floor and away from the potential quick sale. That left me holding the bag and really used to steam me. Believe me, it was a challenge, while clothing

customers, to clothe my own self in love when I was consistently getting stuck in back with an alterations ticket in my hand on the day after Christmas while Dave was out front ringing up sales.

Clothing yourself in love is not as easy as pulling on a pair of pants, whether you're a men's clothier, a pastor, or whatever it is that you do. Transformation into a more loving, patient person takes determination and commitment. It doesn't just miraculously happen. It takes time.

I know that some of you regularly get chewed up and spit out at your place of employment. We live with grumpy, complaining, rude, annoying people. Sometimes we're the annoying ones. And at the end of the year we can find that instead of experiencing transformation we've become increasingly bitter, cynical and angry people.

But when Paul tells us to clothe ourselves with love, he just assumes that we are going to experience conflict. He doesn't avoid conflict; he deals with it. He says, "Bear with one another. And if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other." It's the same as our prayer week after week - forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

Remember - these words about clothing ourselves with love were written to a church. Paul just assumes that there is going to be conflict among good, church-going people. We're going to annoy each other and offend each other and tick each other off. We're going to get our feelings hurt. But if we only know how to respond with gossip, with bitterness, with complaining and with writing people off, then we're no different from any other group of people. People who follow Jesus learn the habit of clothing themselves with love. There's going to be a lot of change and anxiety at St. Pauls in 2010, with Tom's retirement. Change is inevitable, and it will test us and show what kind of people we are. That's all the more reason why we need to clothe ourselves with love every day. Just as we promise whenever there's a baptism at St. Pauls - "to show with our lives how Christians live."

I don't know about you, but I'm hoping that 2010 will be a year not simply of change, but a year of transformation. I want to be a different person, a better person, in a year than I am now. Don't you? Transformation is possible for anyone - even the biggest Scrooge alive. That's the hope of our faith. That's the transformative power of God's love working within and among us. I want St. Pauls to be a different place in a year - different in a good way: a community that has grown more and more in love for God and in love for each other. In the midst of our stressful and changing lives, we've got to keep remembering what it's all about, what *everything* is about. Love is our priority. Love is the creed Jesus gave us to live by.

I want to suggest something simple and practical that we can do this year to help us keep focused. It's a habit, just like the habits that formed Jesus as he grew up. I'm not going to ask you to go on another diet or join a gym; and it's not difficult, just a way of remembering who we are called to become as followers of Jesus. Our text from Colossians encourages us to "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." In other words, let Jesus' words get inside of you and make

their home in you. When you get up in the morning, when you're putting on your clothes and getting dressed, say the Jesus Creed to yourself: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.* When you're getting ready for bed, and taking off your clothes at night, when you're tucking in your kids, say it again. Remember who you are and who you belong to. Let the words get inside of you and allow them to transform who you are: *You shall love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.* We'll be the best-dressed bunch of people in town.

Luke 2:41-52:

Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

Colossians 3:12-17:

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. 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. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. 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. 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.