

Eighth Station of the Cross: “Jesus Is Stripped of His Garments”

John 19:23-25a

Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.

Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church

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When I was in seminary, I attended a special exhibition of a highly controversial work of art. Now art is SUPPOSED to be controversial as GOOD art forces us to see aspects of truth and beauty often from an entirely different perspective. THIS piece of art, however, was MORE CONTROVERSIAL than most. It was a sculpture created in 1975 by Edwina Sandys--the granddaughter of Winston Churchill--for the United Nations Decade of the Woman. Prior to coming to Berkeley, California (where I was then attending school), it had been on display throughout Lent and Easter at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City where it TOO had created a stir. The title of this provocative sculpture was “Christa” and it represented Christ as a woman nailed to a cross. But what made it DOUBLY shocking was not simply that Jesus was depicted in this manner- as a woman with full breasts and rounded hips. It was because THIS figure dying on that cross was completely naked. There was no modesty in the piece, no cloth strategically placed around the loins as we customarily see in most depictions of that scene.

Now understand this, crucifixion in the ancient world was intended to be the most painful and humiliating death one could experience. It was meant to put fear into the heart of the average citizen and served as a severe warning to any who tried to break the law or rebel against the Empire. Not only was it excruciating, but all the victim’s clothes were removed and given to the soldiers to divide among themselves as a kind of reward for presiding over the execution. Thus the practice was meant to provoke SHAME and HUMILIATION as well as the most intense suffering in the victim.

Certainly our clothing performs many functions for us. It has the practical effect of keeping us warm and protecting us from the elements. We also like to stand out and make a personal statement concerning our status through the things we wear. During my first pastorate, I can still recall a conversation I had with another Presbyterian minister who I’d occasionally run into at the local YMCA. Regarded by many as something of a snob, he wanted to impart some “wise” advice to his new and unrefined colleague. He took me aside and said, “David, now that you’re starting your new life as a Presbyterian minister, you need to look the part. You ought to find your way to our local men’s shop and buy yourself a smart-looking Brooks Brothers suit--that’s all I ever wear.” I thanked him for his laughable suggestion but told him I don’t “dress to impress.” I assured him that my dungarees would do the job, and that unlike HIM, I was nothing but a poor commoner- like the REST of my flock.

Now I’m not above making fashion statements. Like a lot of teenagers growing up in the mid-1960’s, I TOO was inspired by the Beatles to walk around in a Nehru jacket and a pair of “granny glasses”- those small rectangular little glasses that came in all shades of color--orange, green, blue, etc. It was all the rage back then and of course I TOO wanted to fit in. It made us all feel chic and stylish and yet REBELLIOUS at the same time. But through our clothing, we can ALSO demonstrate quite the OPPOSITE- we can express CONFORMITY such as when we

don special uniforms for our work or when we're on duty in the military. However, when I hear of ministers like the traveling evangelist I once saw who showed up at a church service with his name and fancy title emblazoned on the sides of his shiny new Cadillac and who bragged how he had a different colored Bible to match the color of each of his suits, I want to go hide under the closest pew.

Just this past week, I came across an article entitled "Preachers and Their \$5,000 Sneakers: Why One Man Started an Instagram Account Showing Churches' Wealth." It told how Ben Kirby, sickened by the crass materialism he sees infecting the modern church, inaugurated a social networking site that attracted over 100,000 followers within the very first MONTH. He said, "At the beginning, it was easy for me to make jokes about it. Some of the outfits are absurd, so it's easy to laugh at some of the designer pieces. The price tags are outlandish." On it, he posted pictures of Pastor John Gray--a megachurch pastor from Charlotte, North Carolina--sporting a pair of Nike Air Yeezy 2 Red October gym shoes that sell at retail for more than \$5,600, Seattle pastor Judah Smith's \$3,600 Gucci jacket, Dallas pastor T.D. Jake's \$1,250 Louboutin fanny pack, and Miami pastor Guillermo Maldonado's \$2,541 Ricci Crocodile belt. Kirby began asking, "How much is too much? Is it okay to get rich off of preaching about Jesus? Is it all right to be making twice as much as the median income of your congregation?" He said that clergy persons are no longer content being shepherds to their flocks- they now want to be famous celebrities with a host of adoring fans.

Of course, probably the GREATEST reason we wear what we do is to hide the sagging lumps and cellulite that develop over time. Psychologists and sociologists tell us that most of us are rather uncomfortable with our bodies, especially when we are constantly forced to compare ourselves with all those slim beautiful models we see on television or in the newspaper advertisements. And so our clothes give us psychological comfort by helping us to cover up a terrible sense of inadequacy over who we are and how we appear to others. It is often said that "clothes make the man (or woman)." If there IS some truth to that, then if you take away a person's clothing, you essentially rob them of more than just an item of wear- you take from them their very IDENTITY and SELF-ESTEEM; you steal from them a large part of who they ARE and how they want to be SEEN by people.

When they took Jesus' cloak away from him and divided it up amongst themselves, they took from him what was the ONLY piece of property he owned- quite literally the clothes that were on his back. Thus, when the scriptures tell us that Jesus was rendered physically naked up on that cross for all the world to see, they are saying that he was made completely and totally empty and poor and vulnerable in EVERY sense of the word. His cloak signified far more than the apparel he had on his back- it symbolized every attachment he had come to rely on in this side of life, on anything that had given him support and sustained him and defined who he was. He now had NOTHING to hide. Even a POOR person must have some friends; even a POOR person may have a job, if not a high paying one; even a POOR person may have SOME kind of wardrobe, though they'd probably consist of hand-me-downs or bear a K-Mart label rather than one saying Lord & Taylor. But Jesus didn't even have THAT! Thus, the symbolism of that cloak being taken from him is that he was forced to die with absolutely NOTHING to his name- there were no friends in attendance, no job to go back to, no money in his account, no books on his shelf, no clothes in his closet, no house to relax in, no ANYTHING he could call his own so

that in the end, he had NOTHING left but his integrity and his GOD!

In Shakespeare's play *Henry VIII*, Cardinal Wolsey, who has become one of the most powerful men in the government, has used and abused his position to punish his enemies and become a very wealthy man. In the process, he has earned the enmity of many influential people. However, due to a series of mishaps--including his refusal to sanction the king's divorce from his wife Katherine in order to marry Anne Boleyn--he is disgraced and ultimately imprisoned. When confronted with the evidence of his malfeasance and all the goods and treasures he has illegally amassed, he knows he's been exposed. In a final soliloquy before he dies, he tells his friend Thomas Cromwell to fling away all greed and ambition. He says that if by that sin the angels fell, then how can MAN hope to win by it? He is left to ruminate about his life, about what was and what may have been, about what he had gained and what he has now lost. He concludes his speech with this lament:

*There take an inventory of all I have,
To the last penny, 'tis the King's. My robe,
And my integrity to heaven, is all
I dare now call mine own. O Cromwell, Cromwell,
Had I but serv'd my God with half the zeal
I serv'd my king, He would not in mine age
Have left me naked to mine enemies.*

After having experienced the height of human power and then subjected to all its depths, Cardinal Wolsey is confronted with what is permanent, and what is ephemeral or fleeting. He had been more interested in serving the King and advancing his OWN ambitions than he was in being true to God and doing what was right. Now that he has reached the end of the line, now that he has been stripped of everything that had ever been important to him, he is left "naked to his enemies" for them to do as they wish. How pathetic that must be, to one day discover that all we had fought and sacrificed for, all we had striven and ultimately achieved is worthless in the final analysis, that it is never going to do us one bit of good as far as eternity is concerned.

You see, regardless of how much money we spend on clothing for ourselves and trying to remain every bit chic and stylish, when the end finally DOES arrive, when the sand in the hourglass has at last run out and death comes knocking at our door as it INEVITABLY WILL, we must all leave this life the very same way we ENTERED it- if NAKED we came into the world, then NAKED we shall leave it. Regardless of how much real estate we amass or educational degrees we have earned or how large our bank accounts may be, NONE of it will ever count for much when it is time to stand before God and give an account of ourselves.

The pharaohs of Egypt could never grasp this. They filled their burial tombs with boats and chariots, with clothes and furniture and even their favorite pets which they hoped to take with them into the next world. Alas, as the archaeologists have shown us with each new discovery, their goods were never able to make the journey with them. They thought they could build massive monuments to immortalize themselves. They were thirsty for everlasting fame so they broke the backs of millions of slaves in order to satisfy their own massive egos, their tremendous pride. They carved enormous statues of themselves and raised obelisks that recorded their honors and marvelous deeds, but over time their tombs have long been scavenged

and their monuments reduced to tombstones to a long dead civilization.

One of America's greatest preachers and most influential teachers of preaching was the late Fred Craddock, formerly of Candler Seminary in Georgia. Preachers all across the world hold Craddock in their debt for helping to restore the authority of preaching and the pulpit to our worship services. He tells us in one of his books of an experience he had over fifty years ago, around the time of the Second Vatican Council. In the early 60's, Pope John the 23rd began instituting a number of radical changes in the Roman Catholic Church which liberalized many of her policies. Those changes opened up the Church, making it more accessible and understandable to everyone such as now saying the mass in English rather than in Latin and introducing folk music into the worship service. But not everyone was pleased.

He explains that though a Protestant, he was asked by a Jesuit priest friend of his to accompany him as he visited a number of church gatherings explaining what these changes were and the kind of impact it would have on everyone- both clergy and congregants. The priest, Father Gene Monihan, was a dear friend and a great shepherd to his flock and he knew he couldn't say no to him. Writes Craddock:

I remember our first session. I was just sitting in the front row because I was to take part in the discussion. I had no formal presentation that day. Out onto the platform came Father Monihan, who was barefooted. He had on a pair of little white-washed trousers and a T-shirt, an undershirt, and that's all. He looked out at the priests and said, "I am fifty-four years old. I have spent most of my adult life with my back turned to the congregation as I ministered to the altar. Now my church says, 'Turn around and face the people.' I have spent most of my life hiding among the incense pots and the candles, doing my work as a clergyman, and now the church says, 'Come out and be with the people.' I have spent most of my adult life saying the mass in Latin, and now my church says, 'Speak English, so the people will understand,'" and on and on he went, describing the changes. When he came to the end, he said to the priests that were gathered, "As you can see, I have been stripped of almost everything. All that I have left is God." I sat there in a pool of tears.

What Craddock is trying to say with this anecdote is that it's not all that bad to find oneself completely bereft of everyone and everything IF WHAT YOU'RE LEFT WITH IS NOTHING BUT GOD. You see, our family, our friends, our jobs, our education, our possessions, all those various attachments we ultimately rely on for our security can more often than not IMPEDE true faith rather than assist it. Let me give you a clear illustration from the Bible.

The gospels give an account of a rich young ruler who comes to Jesus inquiring what he must do to have eternal life. Jesus says, "Well, you know the commandments: Do not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother." "Yes," he replies, "All these I have observed from my youth." Then Jesus says to him, "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have, distribute them to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; THEN come and follow me." But when he heard this, he became sad, for he was very rich."

On the face of it, it seems somewhat absurd. Here a man with all his wealth and education and prestige comes to Jesus with the prospect of putting a large chunk of his assets at

Christ's disposal and Jesus is not phased in the slightest. This is because he knows that the young man's possessions and position have been more an impediment to him than any kind of help. You see, Jesus sensed that what he REALLY wanted was an eternal life insurance policy. He had all the benefits anyone could ask for on THIS side of life- all the money, status, health, and power anyone could ever ask for. He also knew the day would come when he would have to confront his own mortality and surrender it all, and so he thinks that Jesus can somehow help him enjoy those things on the OTHER side of death, well on into eternity like those Egyptian rulers I mentioned. However, Jesus' prescription is to tell the young man the OPPOSITE of what he wants to hear. He tells him to give away everything he has to the poor and THEN come back to him- empty, poor, halt, lame and blind-like the REST of his followers-and then he'd be in a position to become TRULY rich- for only Christ can make a rich, young ruler. As Jesus instructed his disciples, "What does it profit someone to gain the entire world and yet lose his soul in the process."

What I think Craddock's story and Jesus' encounter with the rich, young ruler share in common is that not only can it be all right if we find ourselves in Jesus' position, with our cloak and everything else taken from us so that we are left with nothing else but GOD. But they seem to be saying that REAL faith can't begin in our lives until we DO divest ourselves of so much that clutters it, until we DO strip ourselves of everything that claims our love and support over and above our commitment to Christ himself. It's not that as Christians, we love Jesus and don't love the world, nor is it that we love the world and don't really love Jesus. The fact is that we love Jesus VERY MUCH, that we TRULY and SINCERELY love him, but we also love so many OTHER things IN ADDITION to him that our faith is diluted, that allegiance to him becomes adulterated. He is therefore forced to compete against so many OTHER things in our lives whether it be over our time, our commitments, our finances, or our relationships. When he asks for some small commitment of our time, we find we're much too busy to give him any of it. After all, who has time for church when the house has to get painted or there's a golf tournament to play in. When he asks for some small contribution of our finances to help somebody in need, we clutch our wallets even tighter and say that we have higher utility expenses because the winter's been so cold. And thus we offer up one excuse after another until we are Christian due to our church affiliation only.

This account of Jesus being stripped of every last vestige of clothing and property remains so brutally terrifying. Here he is completely "naked to his enemies" and yet he still had his Heavenly Father to cling to. That picture of Christ up there alone has to become a picture of OURSELVES if we are to learn the meaning of TRUE faith. REAL belief can only begin when we discover how in spite of everything else we may presently own or may have achieved, they are all ultimately worthless in the eternal scheme of things. We can only learn the meaning of trust when we know that OUR Heavenly Father is there for US, even when everyone else is not, and that his grace is sufficient even after everything else has been taken from us. Let us pray...

Heavenly Father, we are privileged like few persons in the world, like few persons in all of history. We are blessed with an abundance of goods and health and security and yet we must learn that our greatest blessing is to know you and to make you our sole support. Help us not to be distracted but to keep our eyes on you, looking to you as the source of every good gift in our lives. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.