



CHURCH of
the SAVIOUR

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“Our New Wardrobe”

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Colossians 3:12-17 (CEB)

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Sanctuary Worship Service

What did you put on when you got dressed this morning?

For those of you in the room, I can see what clothing you chose – a dress, slacks, a sport coat, a sweater. If you’re worshipping online, you may have gone for something more casual and comfortable – joggers or yoga pants, a favorite sweatshirt, maybe still in your PJs. We put on different clothing for the office, for working in the yard, for going out with friends, heading to the ballgame, or curled up with a good book. We put on different things for different situations. Those choices are driven by factors like purpose, comfort, setting, and self-expression.

In this season of rapidly changing weather conditions, we know the importance of dressing appropriately. I was reminded of the dramatic temperature swings of fall in Ohio a few weeks ago when I headed out to Eliot’s soccer game. It was a pleasant evening, in the low 70s. The horizon was just beginning to glow with pastel oranges and pinks against a pale blue sky. I was wearing shorts, a golf shirt, and sandals when I grabbed my stadium seat and headed out to Mayfield. For much of the first half, I was comfortable, other than needing to shield my eyes from the sun. As the sun descended behind the clouds, I was relieved not to have to hold my hand over my eyes or squint through my sunglasses. But with the retreat of the sun also went the source of warmth. By the end of the game, my teeth were chattering. The post-game huddle took an eternity as I waited impatiently to meet up with Eliot and escape to the warmth of the van. He had fared no better in his uniform on the sidelines than I had in the stands. What we wear (or don’t wear) on the outside can determine our condition on the inside.

The writer of Colossians uses this image to teach who we are to be as followers of Jesus. “Put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.” Other translations read “Clothe yourselves.” What a helpful image for how we should adorn ourselves for Christian living. We are to “wear” *compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience* – a good list of admirable qualities. Those also happen to be qualities that are in short supply these days, particularly during election season. That’s the whole idea behind our *Be Campaign*: to remind us what God expects of us as people of faith and to bear witness to our faith in a divided world. Micah tells us that God *requires* us to be just, kind, and humble.

But it’s not easy, is it? I’ve had people say to me, “Pastor, it’s all well and good to talk about compassion and patience and humility in your sermons, but it’s not practical. Some people just don’t get it. If they’re going to provoke an attack, what am I supposed to do? I just *can’t* be patient and kind to *those* people! I mean, sometimes you have to fight fire with fire.” Sorry. The Bible makes no such distinctions, no qualifiers or out-clauses. Compassionate, kind, humble, gentle, and patient. That’s how we’re supposed to engage with the world. Even with – maybe *especially* with – those we find hard to love. No exceptions.

Today we’re focusing specifically on one of these traits: kindness. It’s one of the qualities with which we are to clothe ourselves in Colossians, and it’s also the second of the three requirements in Micah 6:8. *What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God?* The Hebrew word translated as *kindness* in Micah is *hesed*, which means loving-kindness or faithful love. It appears some 247 times in the Hebrew scriptures, describing God’s love for us and the way we are to show love in community. God’s loving kindness is evident in the covenant God made with Abraham and Sarah, with Isaac and Jacob, renewed in Moses and David and fulfilled in Jesus. God is patient and forgiving, keeping covenant when we break it, offering second chances and providing for us even when we are ungrateful or undeserving. That’s not how most of *us* show kindness, at least not on our own. Our kindness is conditional, changing, fickle. We choose to whom and in what ways we will be kind, who we deem deserving of our time and attention and who we will avoid and ignore or harbor grudges against. But God wants us to learn to be kind as God is kind, to be steadfast and patient and generous – not with a few select, deserving people, but with everyone.

The Greek word employed in Colossians is *chrestotes*, which is translated the same but has a slightly different connotation. It is a kind of *useful* kindness, the kindness that responds appropriately to a specific need in a specific circumstance. It’s kind to offer someone a glass of water, but if they haven’t eaten today, that may not be the most helpful gesture. Giving a sandwich to someone who is actively bleeding would not be a particularly useful expression of kindness.

Telling someone you'll pray for them falls short when what they really need is a friend to listen – even though prayer is important and also needed.

Jenn used to remind our kids in their elementary years, “Be kinder than necessary.” We never know what someone is going through at any given time. Sometimes what we read as being inconsiderate or just plain mean is a reflection of what they're feeling on the inside, the result of hurt or neglect or negative self-image. One person who goes out of their way to be kind can make a big difference to someone who is hurting. That strikes me as good counsel for all of us at any age.

The writer of Colossians says we are to “put on” kindness, like wrapping ourselves in a garment that we wear wherever we go. On some level, we get that. But we also sometimes confuse kindness with being nice. It's possible to be *nice* without being *kind*. Being outwardly polite but seething with anger on the inside (and often ranting to others later). Feigning friendship but avoiding that person like the plague. Projecting an outward demeanor that makes us appear more magnanimous than we actually are. If kindness is a warm coat, niceness is like a windbreaker – thin, superficial, putting on a show that conceals the way we *actually* feel. I've been guilty of that, and so have you. Unless our outward expression matches our inner posture, we're just faking it. Admittedly, sometimes being nice is better than being outright hostile – transparency isn't always the best thing. Still, it's better to be genuine than fake.

Another way to think of the distinction is that being nice is a set of outward behaviors that may or may not reflect one's heart. But kindness is an inward posture, a quality that comes from within and is expressed genuinely. That raises a question: if kindness is a quality that we're supposed to put on, but it is something that comes from within, how does that work? How can we both *put on* kindness and embody it *within* us?

While the writer of Colossians says we are to clothe ourselves with kindness, it isn't as simple as pasting on a smile and accentuating the positive. No, for our outward expressions to be genuine, we must be changed on the inside. “The peace of Christ must control your hearts... The word of Christ must live in you richly.” Other translations read, “Let the peace of Christ *dwell* in your heart.” The truth is we're incapable of expressing God's loving kindness on our own. It is simply not in our nature. This is Spirit work, something that must come from God at work on our hearts. Unless we allow ourselves to be changed on the inside, we cannot become the people God wants us to be.

But our outward action *can* create the *conditions* for inward change. When I put on a sweater to go to a soccer game (maybe a heavy coat today!), the result is that I am warm on the inside. Two things happen: I put on a coat and I feel warm. But the only part of that I control is putting on the coat. Warming happens as a *result* of putting on the coat, but I don't actually make myself warm. By “putting on” compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, we create the conditions for that inward change to happen, the space for Christ's peace to abound. And the letter goes on to tell us, “Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” When love surrounds everything we are and everything we do, the love of Christ can dwell in us, affecting both who we are on the inside and what we do on the outside.

I don't have a surefire method to keep you from getting angry at the campaign signs in your neighbor's yard or the untended leaves that keep blowing onto your freshly raked lawn. Election ads will still spark anger or outrage. At least they do in me, when I forget to mute the TV or leave the room during commercials. Being kind doesn't mean lowering our standards or being tolerant of injustice. Sometimes we have to speak up and speak out in order to be faithful. But we don't have to act solely on emotions, reacting to provocation. We can choose to focus on substance, addressing the issues or the merits of a particular position on policy. We can and should redirect misinformation when we uncover it. We do that by putting on those other qualities, too – compassion, humility, gentleness, and patience. (I'd advise keeping a closet full of patience in this season.) The kind thing may not be trying to convince someone whose mind is already made up – to keep our words to ourselves and let our loving kindness speak for itself. It may not be natural for us to be kind – *usefully* kind – especially in the face of opposition. But we know what it is to be shown grace, to be loved and cared for even when we don't deserve it. The cross of Christ reconciles us to God, the God who never stops loving us, despite our many faults and failings. Our kindness toward others is a way of expressing gratitude to God for the grace we have received. We can show loving kindness because we have been recipients of it.

As followers of Jesus, we should carry our faith with us to the polling place. But we should also carry it with us in the days leading up to election day (and every other day, too). So, friends, particularly in this season, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. And above all things, put on love. No matter what noise invades the peace we seek, keep the faith and act with integrity. That's what God requires of us. Kindness is a powerful witness to our faith in a divided world. Amen.