

Sermon
14 Pentecost—Proper 18-A-2
St. Andrew's, Methuen
September 6, 2020
William Bradbury

Ezekiel 33:7-11
Psalm 119:33-40
Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 18:15-20

In Romans today Paul's teaching has a pattern to it: Do good things, like, "Love your neighbor as yourself." And don't do bad things—adultery, murder, steal or covet".

In the next paragraph he says, "let us live honorably and stop doing things like "reveling, drunkenness, debauchery, licentiousness, quarreling, and jealousy.

He sums this pattern up in the last verse by saying: ""Put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires".

Or as the New Jerusalem Bible puts it:

"Let your armour be the Lord Jesus Christ, and stop worrying about how your disordered natural inclinations may be fulfilled."

I assume, however, we've all heard more from preachers and parents about the evils of the flesh, than about how to put on the Lord Jesus Christ, so let's look at what Paul might mean by this.

It's a perplexing image if we think of Jesus in human terms, as the Jew from Nazareth. It's hard to imagine slipping him on like a raincoat, or body armor. Is there a Jesus costume like there is for Superman and Batman?

It's also perplexing if we conceive of Jesus as an intangible reality. How do you put on a cosmic mist?

Of course, these problems come from being too literal. Another way to look at this is found in Anglican priest J. B. Phillips', New Testament in Modern English written in the 1950s. He translates this verse: "Let us be Christ's men [and women] from head to foot, and give no chances to the flesh to have its fling.

"To be Christ's men and women" is to share in Christ's service as ambassadors of God's Kingdom, where we work for God's purposes and not our own.

I watched again the 2015 movie “Selma” the other night. In our own Black Lives Matters moment I found it even more powerful, as it presents the march from Selma to Montgomery, across the infamous Edmund Pettis Bridge. They tried this march three times: the first time was when the state police attacked with full force and violence, fracturing John Lewis’ skull, and beating unconscious Amelia Boynton, one of the leaders.

Then several days later Martin Luther King was leading the march. When they were told by the police that they could freely march across the bridge, King kneels down, prays for a moment, and then leads the marchers back the way they have come. It makes no sense—except when you realize that when King is praying, he is listening for direction, which he follows, even though it upsets his followers. That night white supremacists murder civil rights activist [James Reeb](#), a UU minister from Boston.

Two weeks later, the 54-mile stretch is completed as 25,000 marchers with the protection of 1900 National Guard troops under federal command enter Montgomery. Shortly thereafter, Lyndon Johnson sends to congress the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

King, Lewis, Boynton, and the others had put on the Lord Jesus Christ. They are following **Christ’s will and Christ’s way, in Christ’s presence.** They aren’t protected from violence to their bodies, but they receive protection for their souls.

This dramatic example inspires us. But since we don’t see the years of spiritual work that precede the march, we may be tempted to imagine **there is a shortcut to soul-work.**

Soul-work takes what Eugene Peterson calls [A Long Obedience in the Same Direction](#), which is the title of his classic book on spiritual formation.

Peterson is best known for his fresh paraphrase of the Bible called [The Message](#). I highly recommend [The Message](#), especially if you have trouble making sense of your Bible. He wrote this week by week as founding pastor of Bel Air Presbyterian Church in Maryland, so they could get the meaning in a form related to their actual lives.

In [A Long Obedience in the Same Direction](#), Peterson writes about his role as being pastor of that church:

“My primary pastoral work had to do with Scripture and prayer. I was neither capable nor competent to form Christ in another person, to shape a life of discipleship in man, woman or child. That is supernatural work, and I am not supernatural. Mine was the more modest work of Scripture and prayer—helping people listen to God speak to them from the Scriptures and then joining them in answering God as personally and honestly as we could in lives of prayer. This turned out to be slow work.”

He said he often got it wrong whenever he tried to speed up the process for people used to instant results.

Finally, he said: "after a while it always seemed to be more like meddling in these people's lives than helping them attend to God. More often than not I found myself getting in the way of what the Holy Spirit had been doing long before I arrived on the scene, so I would go back, feeling a bit chastised, to my proper work: Scripture and prayer; prayer and Scripture."

My father modeled this slow work for me when I was a teenager. Around 9 pm I'd walk through the living room to the kitchen to get a snack and I'd notice his end of day ritual: he would put down the mystery he was reading, turn off the radio, which was carrying the Braves game, put out his last cigar, and pick up a ragged King James Bible with the words of Jesus in red and read a page or two. He never once talked about this practice or suggested I do it.

 As we know, it is possible for clergy and people to sit in church year after year and never grow in their life in Christ. If we pay attention only to ourselves and our material needs, treating God as a cosmic bellhop, **then our souls become buried under the weeds and the junk of our lives.**

We might ask ourselves in this time of pandemic and struggle for racial justice, if we are being called to go deeper in our soul-work, so we can be more faithful ambassadors of God's kingdom of love?

 One final word: **we can only put on the Lord Jesus Christ, because Jesus Christ first put us on himself: in his incarnation he puts on our flesh, on the cross he wears our sin, in his resurrection he transforms us with his immortality, and in his ascension, he takes our humanity to the right hand of God.**

Christ fills our being with all the fulness of God.

As Paul writes in Galatians: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me. 2:20 KJV

We don't clear away the junk to convince Christ to come, but to uncover his Living Water that is always flowing into our souls. We gather with two or three in his name, not to make Christ show up, but to meet Christ who is always there, seeking to wake us, so we can put on the Lord Jesus Christ.