

Getting Dressed for Ministry*

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Matthew 10: 7-12

⁷ As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' ⁸ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. ⁹ Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, ¹⁰ no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. ¹¹ Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. ¹² As you enter the house, greet it. (NRSV)

Matthew 27: 27-31

²⁷ Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. ²⁸ They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, ²⁹ and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" ³⁰ They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. ³¹ After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him. (NRSV)

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Ephesians 6:13-17

¹³Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. Having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁵As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (NRSV)

I can only imagine what you may have thought when you saw the title for this address, “Getting dressed for ministry.” Who would consider fashion advice from a person who wears a get-up like this one? Even if you could forgive the medieval look of my outfit today, you may have wondered what in the world I might say. Is this going to be some diatribe about the untucked sport shirts over jeans that constitute the required liturgical dress for the contemporary worship services? Is it going to be some kind of dress-for-success advice? The answer is “no” to both of those. I don’t own a pair of jeans and any success I may have had is in spite of my dress, not because of it.

After years of seminary and graduate study, with all my funds exhausted and some educational debt on the side, I bought a blue suit to wear for worship at the congregation in New Jersey that had just called me as pastor. Given that it was the early 1970s, I am sure that it was a polyester suit, but we won’t get into that at this time. By the end of my first year in that pastorate, a deacon counseled me that I need not wear the *same* suit *every* Sunday. I took the hint, bought another suit, and became a two-suit pastor. It was one of my early experiences with clergy fashion and should provide convincing evidence that I know very little about being dressed for ministry.

The Scripture Texts

The texts that were read for this service have likely never been used for a graduation address! And, they are certainly not texts that New Testament scholarship would group together for any interpretive reason. In the first one, Jesus gives some advice about clothing as he

commissions the disciples: don't take a "bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals." (I guess Jesus did not know my deacon friend.) It is a minimalist wardrobe; the work for the disciples will be all-consuming; it will require traveling light. The other text in Matthew takes us into the tragedy that is central to the Gospel. It portrays clothes as a vehicle for ridicule. When Jesus was brought before the governor at his trial, he was stripped of his clothes, and "they put a robe on him" to mock the claim that he was a king. After the guards had made their point and had their fun, they took the robe off and put his clothes back on. The way John tells the crucifixion story, the guards got his clothes back at the foot of the cross, where they cast lots for Jesus' seamless garment. No lesson here about clothes, just the reminder that our salvation is earned by a Jesus who was stripped of his.

The third text, the one from Ephesians, is about spiritual qualities and uses attire for a metaphor. You probably thought that Paul wrote Ephesians before you came to seminary but you learned in your New Testament class that current scholarship generally concludes that it was written by one of Paul's disciples, not by Paul. (And, it would not surprise me that you are still looking for a sermon in which you can make use of that piece of information!) If you grew up going to Sunday School, you probably first encountered this text in about the fourth grade in the form of a picture of a muscular Roman soldier with helmet, armor, shield, thick belt, sword, and heavy duty sandals with leather straps tied up around the around the calves of his legs. Your task was to write "truth," "righteousness," "gospel of peace," "faith," and "word of God" in the right places on the picture. If you went to an affluent church, crayons may have been provided to color the picture, as well. These characteristics of the life of faith are exactly right, but the metaphor of military dress can be troubling for some, as it likely was for early Christians, many of whom adopted a pacifist stance in the early centuries of the church.

The texts from Matthew and Ephesians are both hard. In Matthew 10, the clothing of discipleship has no designer labels or tailored fit. It is decidedly simple and limited. In Matthew 27, clothes are put on to inflict insult and taken off to inflict death. In Ephesians, the clothing for discipleship is depicted as the defensive and offensive military dress needed for battle. Of course, these texts were not written about dress, and no decent reading of them could lead to guidance about ministerial attire. If anything, they teach us that dress doesn't count for much in ministry or the life of faith. We are to be occupied with other things.

BUT, we are all dressed up today—robes and hats and academic hoods—and this is a “commencement,” a sending service. So, what can we learn from our regalia?

A Hat of Gratitude

This academic hat—a tam—belonged to my father-in-law who lived a long and incredibly productive life of 95 years. He was a Baptist minister, served congregations in Kentucky and Tennessee in the 1940s and 1950s, and served as president of what is now Belmont University for 23 years. After he retired from the presidency, he served as chancellor for another 27 years, during which time he taught occasionally, helped raise money, and supported the work of the two presidents who succeeded him. He worked almost daily in his campus office until his early nineties. After his death several years ago, my wife and her sister cleared out his office at the university and decided to give me his tam. I was, after all, the only one in the family who would likely have the opportunity to wear it. I wore it today to remind us all of a fundamentally important lesson that he lived and taught: the centrality of gratitude in the Christian life and in Christian ministry.

During the Depression, my father-in-law left his family’s small tobacco farm near Smith Mills, Kentucky in search of an education. He was not sure if it was education for medicine, or business, or ministry, but he was sure he did not want to spend his life working tobacco. Neither he nor his parents had any money for college, but he enrolled and worked at the jobs he could get. He was soon unable to pay tuition or living expenses, and it was unclear if he could continue. A woman who worked at the college, Miss Yancey, discovered his financial situation and provided money. He attributed his ability to stay in school to Miss Yancey, and I heard him tell the story of her generosity often—the last time was a few weeks before his death.

I think that my father-in-law could have told his life story as one of those pulled-himself-up-by-his-own-bootstraps sagas, but he never did. He talked about his life with gratitude for the support, kindness, and generosity of others who had made his accomplishments possible. He was not a perfect man, but he was perfectly grateful.

Gratitude is central to a life in ministry. Its roots are in the heart of God. It grows as we understand that God has acted time and time again on our behalf, and time and time again, we have been the beneficiaries of God’s generosity. On a day like today, your gratitude

will grow even more as you remember spouses, parents, children, partners, and friends who have contributed to the achievement for which you are being recognized. While this faculty has made sure that you have worked hard to earn your degrees, they have often worked as hard as you have because they are invested in your learning. This seminary, with great effort and sacrifice, reinvented itself to provide the kind of education that has made it possible for you to earn your degree in the way that you have. You have not learned alone. Your congregations have supported you, maybe contributed to tuition and travel costs. Many of them have affirmed that a part of their ministry was making it possible for you to learn. You have had long hours of solitary study, but there have been fellow travelers in your learning. You deserve the degree; they deserve gratitude.

Gratitude is crucial for effective ministry. You haven't written the Gospel you are called to preach and you won't offer a prayer that you can answer. Successes in ministry are never achieved alone; they are always the work of the people of God empowered by the Spirit of God. If you have learned all there is to know about the Bible and theology, if you know every important name and date in the Stone-Campbell movement, if you actually read every book you were assigned, but have not learned gratitude, your ministry will be wounded and troubled. Ministry done well is hard work, has more than its share of disappointments. If you approach ministry with any sense of entitlement, you will pave a road to anger, disappointment, and possibly despair. The road of gratitude is paved with humility, marked with honesty, and traveled with attention to others. The centerpiece of ministry—and the Christian life itself—is gratitude.

A Hood for Prayer

A few years ago, I spoke at the 199th commencement of Bangor Theological Seminary. It was its last. The times had changed more than the seminary, the mission had lasted longer than the money, and the school was ceasing to function as a degree granting institution one year short of its 200th commencement. Everyone at the school had done everything possible to make this last graduation a joyful event to celebrate this last class of graduates. That evening, local pastors who had participated in the life of the seminary sponsored a service at a church to recognize the transition in the lives of the faculty, dean, and president who had worked hard for the school and no longer had a school to work for. A part of the service included a liturgy of transition

and release. Faculty members were asked to approach the chancel, and one by one, each faculty member removed his or her academic hood and placed it on a chair next to the communion table.

After the communion service, faculty members were asked to return to the chancel. Each was given a word of blessing by one of the participating pastors, and another placed a prayer shawl around his or her shoulders. The service ended with the academic hoods laying on the chair and faculty adorned with shawls that had been knitted by church members with prayer. The scene from that warm June night in Maine has stayed with me. Could these hoods—the ones you are wearing for the first time today as a symbol of academic achievement—be transformed in your private thoughts to a garment for prayer?

I find a lot of talk about prayer troubling. I am not athletic enough to be a part of a prayer team, and I am too worried about violence to be a prayer warrior. The health and wealth theology tendency to contend that the right kind of prayer either motivates or obligates God to open the treasures of heaven for our delight does not seem right to me. But we dare not let flimflam ideas about prayer deprive us from authentic prayer.

Jesus both prayed a lot and had a lot to say about prayer. He went off by himself to pray, and he prayed in the middle of crowds. He prayed before his passion, and prayed from the cross. He even taught us what to ask for when we pray. The Jesus who was forever confusing disciples with parables gets very direct and specific with his teaching on prayer, right down to the right petitions to ask. He invites us to pray, “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Imagine what that would be like.

Imagine a world where no child is ever abused and no wife ever battered. Imagine a world where life-giving good happens routinely. Imagine a world where there are no wounds caused by racism, or privilege, or pride. Would that kind of world be worth a prayer early in the morning?

Imagine a world with no hungry children, no homeless families, and no death due to disease that could have been prevented by pure water or healed by available medicine. Would that be worth a prayer at noon?

Imagine a world where no one is left unloved and no one suffers because of others’ greed or selfishness or disdain. Imagine a world where sins are forgiven and forgotten and people are freed to do good and love one another. Would a world like that be worth a prayer at dinner?

Imagine a world where evil is knocked off its pedestal, where its false promises have lost their power to persuade, where lies are exposed, and truth lights up the night sky. Would a world like that be worth a prayer at night?

Ministers encounter too much hurt, too much hope, too much pain, and too much joy not to be people of prayer. Ministry is not possible apart from days immersed in prayer. After family and friends have admired your academic hood, and it's time to take it off to go to lunch, say a prayer. The world needs all the prayer that it can get.

So, here is my fashion advice for you.

Weave gratitude into a seamless cloth and wear it like a covering on your head. Gratitude will soften hurt, strengthen effort, and sustain energy.

Make prayer a covering for ministry. Pray often. Pray the way Jesus taught us to pray. Pray for the world that God wants, for the life that people need, for the hope that binds one day to the next.

When you put a stole over a preaching robe, pray with gratitude. When you are in the woods camping with the youth group, pray with gratitude—especially when you are in the woods with the youth group! When you are on the bus with the senior adults, pray with gratitude. When you visit someone in the hospital, pray with gratitude. When you finish the Sunday bulletin or a Thursday community organizing session, pray with gratitude. When you hear children chattering in the middle of holy learning, pray with gratitude. When you have painful conversations with people who have lost their way in life, pray with gratitude. When you are about to solemnize a marriage or speak at the funeral, pray with gratitude.

“Pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). “Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you (1 Thessalonians 5:18). “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” (Colossians 3:16) (All NRSV).

I would encourage you to be a two-suit minister— one made of gratitude and the other of prayer.

Congratulations on your degrees; blessings in your ministries; thanks to all who helped you. Thanks especially for a Gospel that is worth everything you will ever learn, every pain you will ever bear, every joy you will ever experience. “...Thank God, who is always

leading us around through Christ as if we were in a parade. He releases the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere through (you)” (2 Corinthians 2:14, CEB).