

Formal Fridays

Matthew 18:15-20

Romans 13:8-14

In late April, Jim and I were beginning to feel pretty cooped up at home. We had what I call Zoom Zombie syndrome from way too many online meetings. The weather was slightly better than the frigid winter, but you still couldn't really stay outside for hours like you can right now. And we had hardly seen anyone in the same space as ourselves for weeks.

You likely can relate, right? Wearing pajama bottoms while at meetings was a meme because it was just more comfortable while working at home. In fact, yoga pants and pajama sales skyrocketed during that time and no wonder. Perhaps some of you have your pajamas on right now – no judgement.

During this time, Formal Fridays were really popular and so were Zoom dinner parties. Remember those? Jim and I joined in on the fun a couple of times. At those

dinner parties, we put on our best, took time to prepare a fancy meal, and met with friends online as if we were at a formal dinner event. It felt humanizing for a time to do this. We put on more than some fancy clothing. We were attempting also to put on some normalcy, some joy, and some fellowship with others.

In a wedding that I officiated last summer, in my homily I spoke about how the beautiful couple before me had gone through great pains to dress that day. In the process of preparing for just those 45 minutes of their lives which was the wedding service, the bride had chosen a specific gown that had meaning for her, the groom a tux with a specific color. Everything from the flowers to the attendant's dresses – well, they were all chosen with great care.

But, why would they do that? They didn't have to have any of those details to have a wedding. There are no expectations on my part that they have their hair done or wear any certain type of

clothing. No, they chose to put on something special because that day signified something more important than clothing, they were also putting on unity in marriage and a blessing from God, who actually was the true host of the wedding vows that day.

In his letter to the Roman church, the Apostle Paul in today's first reading instructs the Roman Christians to "put on the armor of light...and to put on Christ" - as if it was clothing. I have always found it interesting that Paul speaks this way as if it's like putting on a garment. To put on Christ is like putting on your wedding gown or your formal wear for a dinner. You take special care, attend to the details, and consider the immense joy and duty to wear this garment of Jesus with intention.

We hear about this in Holy Baptism, when the newly baptized comes from the font, they put on Jesus Christ. It's as if Christ is sewn onto them, grafted with the tracing of the cross on their

forehead. The wounds of Jesus Christ become their garment, dying to sin, drowning to old life and rising to the new daily.

To symbolize this, often a special garment that perhaps even the parents once wore, is worn as the newly baptized sibling joins the church universal. So, too, I wear a garment today to symbolize Holy Baptism for all the people of God. This garment is worn every Sunday expressly for that purpose as a reminder that all of us put on Jesus Christ in all that we are and do. This alb is a baptismal garment. And, yours today may not be clothing, but the garment of baptism is upon you nonetheless.

But, what does it look like to put on Christ with intention and care as if we are dressing for an important day every time we awake? Well, Paul sums it up in the reading here, too, when he says, "any of the commandments are summed up in these words, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no

wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”

Easy, right? Of course, Jesus knows that it is not easy for us. In fact, looking around the world today, clearly we are having a hard time putting on the armor of light for the sake of the neighbor. Which is why in today’s Gospel reading, Jesus reminds us that a community who puts on the armor of light is also a community that works through conflict well.

Easy said than done, as we can verify from the way we all work through conflict as individuals – which is generally not very well. Now most of us are conflict avoidant people. In fact, I would have loved to skip this text in Matthew altogether if I could have, but alas, Jesus wants to remind us of how to live in community better and without harm to each other.

And, we all can attest to feeling hurt by others because we are all in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. Misunderstanding and talking

past each other happens all the time, but in this Gospel for today, it is clear that Jesus knows that we have a hard time with resolving conflict. And, we especially don’t want to work towards mutual reconciliation. As is true for just about every faith community, much of conflict stems out of indirect communication, as in whispers to third parties, passive aggression and gossip, which is not only unhealthy, it’s detrimental to everyone and can actually cause much more harm.

Now, this isn’t new stuff. Jesus actually is quoting the law from Deuteronomy 19, where it says, *“A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrongdoing... Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained. If a malicious witness comes forward to accuse someone of wrongdoing, then both parties to the dispute shall appear before the Lord, before the priests and the judges... and the judges shall make a thorough inquiry. If the*

witness is a false witness... then you shall do to the false witness just as the false witness had meant to do to the other. So you shall purge the evil from your midst."

Sound a bit familiar? Clearly, Jesus is smoothing out some of the intention of the law found in Deuteronomy by reframing it for the Christian community. Here, Jesus is reminding his disciples and us that we are to deal with conflict in a way that reflects well upon the neighbor who has offended, even when we are hurt by that neighbor.

By directing one to go straight to the person who offends, Jesus reminds his followers that conflict is to be dealt with directly, with love so as not to embarrass, but also with a process that all parties may be able to listen and speak. Clearly, if you look around in this culture and even or in the church, we still don't do this at all well.

I don't even think I really need to explain it either. We all know that unhealthy

conflict, the kind characterized by indirect communication and not to the one, who has hurt us, often undermines and tears down. In fact, it always makes things much worse. Healthy conflict, on the other hand, is capable of building up in such a way that relationships are not only restored, but renewed and deepened. It's just that direct, open, and honest conflict is harder while as indirect conflict is easy.

To put on Christ then, means to take seriously the robe of righteousness that we have been given to wear through Holy Baptism. And, as a community of believers, to constantly go back over and over again to the love of neighbor when we look to dispute with them. Without that, we cannot live well in community together.

Did you notice that Jesus ends this teaching today with the phrase that we followers often love so well – 'where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'? Now, taken out of the context of conflict, we tend to

think that this phrase Jesus says is about worship, that when a couple of people show up to gather, there Christ will be. And, of course, Chris is with us always. But, these words of Christ are not there to cheer us when only two or three come together in Christ's name, but they are there as the example of what reconciliation looks like in the name of Christ. It has its roots not in worship, but in forgiveness. Where two or three are gathered, there forgiveness may dwell.

This is good news for us today as we consider the neighbor in this world of great conflict and strife. Therefore, as the newly baptized one puts on Christ, let us also take great pains to dress ourselves as followers of Jesus, and as followers dressed with the armor of light for the world. Amen.