

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on Galatians 3:26-27 on May 8, 2016.

Series: The Most Important Day
Today's Focus: A Day to Claim Your Identity

What ~~Not~~ To Wear

Now that we've had a few nice days, how many of you have done some spring cleaning? One of the things I love about spring is that burst of energy that comes when you can open the windows, let in a little fresh air, and find renewed motivation to start to reclaim certain areas of the house. But then there's the closet. It's dimly lit. The air is stagnant and stuffy. What's all even in there anyway?!

How many of you find spring to be a time when you go into your closet to remove old clothes that you don't wear anymore? There used to be a show on TV about this called What Not To Wear. Any of you ever see it? Basically it was a makeover reality show. The show was about two fashion experts, Stacy and Clinton, whose job was to get reluctant and sometimes obstinate people to get rid of all the clothes in their wardrobe that are worn out, outdated or unflattering and replace them with new, appropriate, well-fitting clothes. And as you can imagine this was often extremely difficult for people. It's not that easy for a lot of people to let go of old clothes in the closet even when it's obvious to everyone but us that we shouldn't be wearing them.

Now if this was only about the clothes in our closets that wouldn't be so bad. You wouldn't need to come to church to hear a sermon about that. But the Bible actually reveals another way to think about the concept of our wardrobe. Consider your wardrobe as the labels that we wear as we identify who we are and go about our lives. What labels do you wear? Are there any labels that you're wearing that are worn-out, mis-fitting, or entirely inappropriate? Do you know what labels not to wear? And even more so today, Do you know what God wants you to wear?

I remember sixth grade as the year I first became aware of all the labels that are out there in the world and how quick we can be to slap labels on people. Some of these labels we appropriate for ourselves so that we can feel part of the "in" group or the "cool" crowd. Other labels we find out get applied to us by others and sometimes that can really sting, can't it? But even worse is that what happens sometimes is these labels end up becoming part of our core identity that we wear into our adult lives. What happens is that every bit as much as the clothes we select from our closet, we wear these labels throughout our lives.

And there are two great dangers in this. One is that we start to find our sense of self-worth in the labels that we wear or we are driven to self-loathing because of the labels we can't seem to be able to remove. Another way to think of it is that we start to take pride in a label which gives us our

sense of identity or we fall into despair when we can't seem to peel off a label that doesn't really apply. Our whole society right now is confused about what should give people a true sense of their identity. No one seems to know how to answer the question, "Who am I?"

In 6th grade I remember first learning that there were the weird kids. The nerdy kids. The cool kids. The jocks. The cheerleaders. At first it seems that labels are just a convenient way to think about people, but soon we learn how devastating they can be when we are forced to wear a label for life. "You're a cheater." "You're a fraud." "You're a failure." "You're a freak." "You're a bully." "You're a punk." "You're a piece of work." "You're a quitter." "You're a liar." "You're a loser." "He or she is a loner." "How can anyone love that jerk?"

Every stage of life we find ourselves running into new labels too. Sometimes this catches us by surprise. "We're not those young newlyweds we used to be." "Yikes I'm 40." "All of a sudden we've become empty-nesters." "I never thought I'd be divorced." "Wow, I can't believe I'm unemployed." "Here I am now a widow." "Here I am a cancer patient."

And in our politically charged world, quick and convenient labels can be very misleading—even well-worn labels like "conservative" or "progressive" or labels like "Republican" or "Democrat." What do these labels even mean anymore? Are they helpful or do they often hurt?

Friends, what labels have you been wearing that maybe you shouldn't be wearing? What labels have led you into a false sense of your identity or have caused you great grief? In a way, the apostle Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians to help them take off some of the labels they had been wearing and to discard them like old clothes for something far better—being clothed with Christ.

You see the Galatians were proudly wearing a few labels of their own. One such label that they took pride in was being part of the "The circumcision group." Now I know that sounds kind of strange at first, doesn't it? I mean that's not a label that anyone would today ever think of applying to themselves but for them it made a certain amount of cultural sense. You see many of the Jewish people at the time of Jesus took great pride in the fact they were circumcised because that was the outward sign of the covenant God had made with long ago with their ancestor named Abraham. So over time many people of Jewish descent started to think, "We're the children of Abraham because look at how we try and live. We're the chosen ones. We're the circumcision group. That's why God loves us."

And so even those Jews who became Christians sometimes struggled to let go of this kind of thinking. And what happened as they wore this label of "the circumcision group" is that not only did they start to think that this was the reason why God loved and approved of them, but that they had

good reason to look down upon those who were different and to whom they therefore assigned different labels.

And this is what wearing the wrong labels does. When the wrong label becomes a person's primary identity it can lead to a warped kind of pride. We're the "in" crowd with God because of who we are or what we've done. Or it leads to despair. "I could never be in with them because I could never live up to that." This is why some of the most dangerous labels can be religious ones. Because even good labels can become dangerous if we find our primary identity in them as if God loves me because I'm a member of this church or as if God loves me because I was confirmed Lutheran or as if God loves me because I'm WELS.

So what's the solution? Let God's Word today show us what labels not to wear, so that we can see what God has given us to wear. That's what we find in these two short verses today from Galatians 3:26-27: **²⁶So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ²⁷for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.**

Friends, there are old clothes that no longer fit us. Our sins, our shortcomings, our faults and our failures as well as our successes and achievement plus all the labels that the world has slapped on us...these things no longer define us. We don't need to wear them. We are free to discard them. Why? **For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.**

Through the water and word of holy baptism you have exchanged the filthy old rags of your sins and the mis-fitting labels that you wear for the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ your Savior.

That's why you can rightly consider your baptism as the most important day of your life. And to remember your baptism is to reclaim your true identity. And what is it? What's your true identity? Friends, it's neither your successes nor your failures. It's the fact that you are a child of God! **²⁶So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ²⁷for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.** In other words, we find out who we really are, children of God, when we understand that we've been clothed with Christ.

So what does this mean...that you're clothed with Christ? **"I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness"** (Isaiah 61:10).

To be clothed with Christ is to be covered with the robe of Christ's righteousness. This is a beautiful metaphor describing what we receive through faith in Christ. What is Christ's righteousness? It's the beautiful, unbroken record of Christ's obedience to God. It's his perfect life lived without any sin or stain. It's his perfect track record of holiness given to you and me as a gift. It's the reason why God

can look at you and me and he doesn't see a dirty, rotten sinner, but instead he sees his beloved son or daughter. Baptized in Christ, you and I stand righteous in God's sight.

And because you're righteous, you know what that means? It means you have God's approval. Not partially, but completely. You see Jesus didn't kinda-sorta-like pay for sins on the cross. He paid for them in full. That is what he meant when he said, "It is finished." Your debt is paid. Your guilt is gone. And in the light of his empty tomb on Easter the whole world now can see that God has declared us Not Guilty. Friends, you don't have to earn God's approval because in Christ Jesus you already have it! And you can't improve upon it, nor can you tarnish it.

Today of course is Mother's Day. And in terms of human love, often the love of a mother is I think the purest kind of love that you see. But that's not always the case. Sometimes it's hard to live up to a mother's (or father's) demands. Sometimes it's hard, even unattainable, to win a parent's approval. But with God, dear friends, we already have his approval...in Christ!

So what will you wear tomorrow? What labels have you been wearing that you can now happily discard in order to claim your true identity as a child of God?

I'm going to get super practical with you today. The ushers are going to hand out labels. As they do this here's what I'm going to suggest. Write on there what your true identity is: Child of God. And go ahead...you can slap that label on your chest right now. But when you get home here's my suggestion. Don't throw it away. Take this label that says Child of God and stick on the bathroom mirror or slap it on the door to your closet. So when you get up and you go to pick out your clothes to wear...you'll be reminded what God wants you to wear: your true identity, who you really are, a Child of God, for you've been clothed with Christ.

Take Home and Apply

Think: What labels have you been wearing that you can happily discard in order to claim your true identity as a child of God?

Share: "I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness" (Isaiah 61:10).

Apply: Remembering your baptism is a way to reclaim your true identity. Ask: Who am I...really? I'm a baptized child of God! Write with a marker on a sticky label—Child of God. Stick it on your bathroom mirror or closet door. When you go to pick out your clothes, be reminded of what God wants you to wear—your true identity—Child of God!