

A SERMON BY REV. MARTHA M. SHIVERICK
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Text: Colossians: 3:12-17
Sermon: Dressing for Success in 2007
December 31, 2006

Don't you just love the end of the year? Today is the day we indulge ourselves in looking at the past and weighing it and also looking toward the future and deciding what we want it to hold for us. It allows us the opportunity to stop and assess our lives and to plan for what should be different in the New Year. Are we on track for where we want to be in our lives? Are there things that need improvement or are we comfortable with where and what we are? What do we think about our weight?... Our physical condition?... Our financial health?... Our career path?...

What about our friendships and family relationships? Have we built on the positive and tried to change relationships that were damaged in the past? Have we done well on working on the character traits we vowed to change at the beginning of last year such as harboring grudges or our short tempers? What about the commitments we have made to our church and community? Did we follow through on those? Should we have given more of our time and talents than we did? And what about our relationship with God? Obviously some of these resolutions we made about this last year are easier to measure than others and some are easier to own up to in terms of our shortcomings.

But the beauty of December 31st is we all get to come to the end of the year and say.... NEXT YEAR THINGS WILL BE DIFFERENT. I WILL WORK APON WHERE I AM NOW AND BUILD FROM HERE. NEXT YEAR WILL BE BETTER. We do not need to be tied down by our shortcomings but can begin a New Year resolved that things will be better. And no one knows it better than the Christian. We who come to church every Sunday and confess our sins knowing that in doing so, we are given the opportunity to change ourselves with God's help and be forgiven by God for what ever we have done.

December 31st is all about wrapping things up and moving on. The New York Times Magazine this morning has wonderful articles on influential people who died this past year. I got sucked into reading a few of them this morning before I realized that I had better get going to church or I would be

late for this mornings worship service. We here at Fairmount lost wonderful people as well. It is important to recognize that as we move into the New Year. And it is also time to evaluate how things went in this world this past year. In the Wednesday's Plain Dealer, Dick Feagler's editorial was about how happy he is to see the end of 2006. He listed the ills he saw in this year from the Brown's awful record to the ongoing war and crisis in the Middle East. Yes, there is plenty to be disgusted about in the year 2006 but there was also much that was good. The challenge is as we assess the past is that we are able to take with us the good, while shedding the bad.

Another theme in the media this week has been asking what the big news story was in all topics. One morning I was tuned into NPR while driving and the topic was "what was THE political story of 2006?" Was it the political scandals? Was it the November election and the democratic sweep? Was it international politics or national politics? The same question was raised in yesterday's Plain Dealer when they asked what the big news story in religion was? Listed were the new religious leaders who will hopefully take their denominations and religions into this new millennium by strengthening them and teaching them to keep their faith while respecting other religions in this increasingly small diverse planet. Also listed was the inevitable argument about sexuality and faith and the topic of politics and religion.

As I read the article, what surprised me was that the religious news story that I feel was the most important faith based news did not make the list at all. The story I list as the most important has nothing to do with leadership, sex, or politics but it taught me a huge lesson in living theology and our Biblical understanding of God's commandment to forgive and the connection between grace and forgiveness. You all remember. It happened in the aftermath of one of the saddest days of 2006. This past October a man entered the West Nickel Mines Schoolhouse and gunned down five Amish school girls. What a nightmare. He did not know the girls and had no particular reason to gun down that group of children. But even in that gruesome story there was beauty. The response of the Amish was a lesson in true forgiveness. Donald Craybill, a professor of Antibaptist Religion at Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania described that the blood was barely dry on the floor when the parents of the girls sent words of forgiveness to the family of the one who had slain their children. If you remember the story, not only did they send words but they also followed it up with action. Of the 75 people who were in attendance at the funeral of the killer, half of them

were Amish. The gesture even went further than a graveside presence when the Amish also set up a fund for the assassin's family. The Amish take Jesus' call to turn the other cheek, to love your enemies, and the forgiveness clause in the Lord's Prayer as a way of life. This is what they practice. And to me it was a lesson to take with us into 2007, a lesson to try and adapt to our own faith practice and life.

The scripture passage from this morning's lectionary reading lists qualities necessary for living in this new Christian Community formed by Paul and the early Christian leaders. In the list, forgiveness is a virtue all Christians should wear. Paul tells the Colossians that as Christians they are God's chosen people. And just as the Jews are described as chosen, they too are set aside by God and must live by different virtues. Paul described these new virtues as articles of clothing. They must strip off the old and put on a new person who clothes him or her self in Christian virtues. Paul describes 5 of these. The Christian must wear compassion and kindness, must wear humility and meekness, must wear patience, must wear forgiveness and above all other virtues, as a Christian you must clothe yourself in love.

Exegetical discussions on this passage state that Paul was speaking from the reality that groups of people in close community inevitably have clashes, complaints, and grievances with each other. Paul sees the solution to this to be to bear with one another and to forgive one another. Bearing is fully accepting people for what they are, fully accepting them in spite of their weaknesses and faults, and allowing that they all have a certain worth. Paul believes that forgiveness comes because we know we have been forgiven and this knowledge releases a generosity in us which is required to forgive others.

And what if we decided to try on some of these spiritual articles of clothing in the New Year? What if we say that in our dress for success world, we want to be clothed in Compassion and kindness, in humility and weakness, in patience, and in forgiveness and love? I personally think the hardest article of clothing for us to put on is the one of forgiveness. Do we really want to wear it? Perhaps we can take those other nice virtues and leave the forgiveness one in the dressing room and not even try it on. Miroslav Volf, professor at Yale University discussed the importance of these virtues in an article called "Letting Go" which appeared in the Christian Century Magazine two weeks ago. He said that many Jews have argued that we must not forget evil. And he is right about that. If we forget, we run the risk that

evil will happen again. But Mr. Volf says that it is important to forgive as when we forgive those who have wronged us, we make God's miracle of forgiveness our own.

But forgiveness is a two way street. That is pretty clearly spelled out to us in the Lord's Prayer. Forgive, as we have been forgiven. And as Mr. Volf described, "Do we not long to be accepted as we are, warts and all? Could not the world of perfect love be such a world in which we are loved notwithstanding all our imperfections? We do long to be accepted unconditionally? But we also want others to see past our warts and to concentrate on what is beautiful about who we are. I hope that both these longings will be satisfied. At the transition from the world as it is to the world to come, all of our imperfections will be known, and we will be loved nonetheless – and therefore forgiven, reconciled, transformed. And then in the world of perfect love we will shine in all our beauty, our warts completely cured."

So, today as you spend a little time assessing your past year and then making the inevitable resolutions about what 2007 will look like, think of shedding personality traits that are not positive as if they were articles of clothing. They are not right, so let's take them off. Then put on the virtues that Paul describes as appropriate for those who are God's chosen. Let's try and dress for success by being kind, by having a proper sense of self worth, by being gentle, by bearing with each other, and forgiving each other, and above all, let's clothe ourselves in love. Happy New Year! Amen.

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