

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship  
Anita Rediger  
August 9, 2009

### **The Beloved Community**

Of all the household chores that there are to do, laundry is my favorite. It's been a good thing, too! A household of men & boys combined with our life on the farm (a farm with livestock – to be sure!) has afforded me opportunity to do a lot of laundry! I'm grateful for the automatic machines which make this chore nearly painless. My Amish neighbors with gasoline motors on their wash machines remind me to be even more appreciative of my trusty machine in the laundry room – one hooked up to electricity and water!

When it comes to drying the laundry, however, I still prefer the so-called “Amish” method of hanging the clothes on the clothesline. When the clothesline is filled with clean laundry I have to stop from time to time simply to look at it, watching the towels and sheets fluttering in the breeze. I like the clothesline to be well organized with jeans on the back line, socks all together and then the row of underwear and t-shirts! It stirs something happy within me when I look out at it... and then...ah... the scent of “fresh-air” when the air-dried laundry is brought in to be folded and put away! Yes! What a contrast to the sweaty, smelly, crumpled, heavily-soiled clothing that I had started with! (remember, this is the farm!)

Over the past three weeks, we've been carefully reading the book of Ephesians. In our study we've come across many references to “body-language.” Last week's reading from Eph. 4 describes the church as the body of Christ, a body with the capacity to grow and thrive – a body compared to our physical bodies with ligaments and other anatomical parts moving smoothly in response one to another. The verses of chapter 4 celebrate the healthy body's ability to be joined and knit together as each part works to build itself up in love- a very beautiful kind of “body-building” imagery. (Eph. 4:15) This growth and health, however, doesn't happen in any old, happenstance way. Wholeness and health come as a result of “speaking the truth in love.” I would call this a “bare-bones” reality of personal and communal health – for we all know the futility of trying to “trick” our own bodies! (In my library I have a fine book entitled, *The Body Remembers*) Dishonesty in our own being, finds ways to tell the truth through the cells of our physical bodies. Our bodies, the body of Christ – always seek to “speak the truth” whether we want to admit it or not!

The imagery of today's text takes a subtle shift. Instead of “body-language, in today's reading we find metaphorical language regarding the “clothing” of this “body.” Instead of “body-language” I might call it “laundry-language.” In the verses just prior to Deb's reading for this evening, we hear the challenge to “strip off” the old in order to “clothe” ourselves with the new. “You were taught to put away (strip away) your former way of life, your old self...(vs.22). Followers of Jesus are invited to discard corrupt and deluded

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ways of being and are invited to be clothed with a new understanding of self; a self which is “created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” (Eph. 4:24)

This is not clothing that is layered over old, constricting garments, rather it is raiment which instead fits better than anything one has ever tried to alter by hemming up or letting out! This “clothing” fits freely & comfortably and best of all it is revealing. Could we say that it’s SEE THROUGH??? Being clothed in the likeness of God reveals a re-discovered identity, a true identity, a one-of-a-kind body-building identity! Think about it for a moment...try it on... imagine a look in the mirror...is it really possible for us to see ourselves afresh, alive, beautiful...no longer self-conscious or uncomfortable and restricted by ill-fitting, ill-suited clothing. Instead we begin to see ourselves as persons now dressed in the glittering garments of God...! This really matters; it’s a very important starting place for...

Discovering *ourselves* clothed in the “likeness” of God allows us to see *ourselves anew*. Seeing *ourselves anew* allows us to see *others in surprisingly new ways!!*

Tonight’s reading begins:

“Therefore, (in light of this new wardrobe) put away the lie” or “so then ‘strip off’ all falsehood.” “Falsehood” is to be discarded like worn-out, ragged items of clothing. But what is this “lie?” “The lie,” well...it’s in contrast to the “truth!” So then, what’s the truth????

The “little t” truth is that many, many factors in our lives condition us to live an “inauthentic existence.” Our culture and maybe even the church encourage this life of lies...we seek to live as if we are self-sufficient and invulnerable, never “needy” and certainly -nearly-always appropriately “perfect!” With these “beliefs” as foundational “undergarments” we soon find ourselves struggling to be truthful to ourselves or with others. Clothed in these kind foundational “undergarments,” *outward* signs of our *inner* distress sooner (or later!) become evident. We have anger that we don’t know what to do with, we find ourselves saying unkind things about one another, we are burdened with bitterness and wrath, wrangling and slander...all kinds of malice. (Eph.4:31) Hostilities emerge and walls of division begin to grow. (My mother taught me that good, supportive “undergarments” were very important for the fit of the “outer garments!! Poor undergarments “show” on the outside!)

So, what does this mean for us? We say we are seeking to be the body of Christ. Yet, are we ready to be stripped down to our undergarments? Are we willing to get rid of “clothing” that really doesn’t fit? As we seek to be a body that “is working properly, building itself up in love” do we recognize that without authenticity true community

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fails? Do we realize that we are “fooling *ourselves*” if we are not truthful with one another?

In contrast, when the old ways have been shed and replaced with the new, a beloved community is born. Now... “let everyone speak the truth with their neighbor!” What a risk! Yet, I hear Paul saying that if we are not truthful with one another we are not even being truthful with our own selves. If we’re not truthful with ourselves, our “body part,” how does the greater body ever have a chance for health? Now, that’s really risky!!

In my mind’s eye, I see the wacky, mad-scientist type contraptions of an old Disney movie- wasn’t it in the movie, *Mary Poppins* where the old man created a machine that received the egg from the chicken and after many levers, pulleys, cables and trapdoors ended up with a perfectly fried egg on a plate at his place at the table!! “We are members of one another!” and each one matters! Otherwise the egg ends up under the table...just ask Mary Beth about this!

If the “little t” truth conditions us for an “inauthentic existence,” the “capital T” truth is that we dare to be “real” with one another. “In Christ Jesus we have become members of the same body, and sharers in the promise of God’s grace”(Eph.3:6, 4:25). **How do we risk this?** The way to risk being real members with one another is to live by faith in the way of Jesus- living lives of humility and gentleness, patience, bearing with one another in love... (Eph. 4:2) **Where do we do this?** We do this in the “crucible of Christian community.” (I love this quote from Jamie Clark-Soles, “The church is not a gladiatorial event.”) The church is not a stadium for the contests of ancient Rome where different animals (and people) were brought together to see who could devour whom. No, in the body of Christ, we engage one another with kindness, being tenderhearted and forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven us. (Eph. 4:32)

Last week I witnessed and shared in a wonderful sense of “beloved-ness and belonging” among us. In our study hour, which we call “Sojourners, we gathered in a circle to talk with another about the practice of baptism. Our circle was open to everyone – everyone... men and women, some younger (14!!) and some older (93!!) and every age in between! For me, it was one of those wonderful times – a “kingdom come” time.

Why? Because as we found ourselves seated in the circle of chairs we were *encircled* in a spirit of community, we became aware of God presence among us. By the common call of Jesus we recognized one another as sojourners together- none more special than others, none less important than others, each one at their own place in the circle. We sensed a shared commitment to following in the way of Jesus- in contrast to any other way. Baptism itself, we mused, is a public statement of our decision to keep turning toward the Light of Christ in the company of others near to us. It is a testimony to our intentions to be (continually) stripped of the old self and clothed in the likeness of God. We recognized

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that the decision by Mia, Joel and Alex to be baptized gives the rest of us occasion to remember and to reconsider our own baptismal experiences and commitments. Yes, this was one of those beautiful, gathered times which we will always treasure.

Yet, we know that as a fellowship we won't always find ourselves seated in a circle sharing the joy and anticipation of baptism and celebration. Our life together may bring us into jagged places of hurt and misunderstanding. We may disappoint one another. We may let each other down. We may realize that we're wearing some really old clothes! As Deb noted in our discussion time last Sunday morning, even when we intend to follow Jesus, sometimes we just don't get it right.

Jamie Clark-Soles writes, "Christians aren't inoculated against sin. If they avoid it, it is through practice and the crucible of Christian community, not through some new state of "goodness." Whatever circle we find ourselves in – be it in times of joy or in times of sorrow, let's be honest with ourselves. Let's also be honest with those around us, believing and trusting that...whether we always like it or not we "belong together."

Offering ourselves into one another's care – in joyful times and in challenging times is a tangible way for us to give ourselves as a "fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." Sharing our lives together, knowing that we are beloved children gives expression to our call to be "imitators of God." (Eph. 5:1) "Imitating God" means living in Jesus-like ways – in "a grand gesture of love" and not only "in the sanctuaries we find ourselves in, but in the global village and on the front lines of human relationships." Richard Ward *Imitating God* means wearing God's very finery – every single day! AMEN

STJ #38 "Beloved, God's Chosen...Put on as a Garment."

- "I love mankind, it's the people I can't stand." Charles Schulz
- "It is well to remember that the entire population of the universe, with one trifling exception, is composed of others." John Andrew Holmes
- "There is a great deal of human nature in people." Mark Twain