

2006-2-26 Clothes
Mark Belletini

Opening Words

We are here

to worship on a cold morning in late winter,
rejoicing in both the crisp air and tender shoots.

By weaving words and wisdom

in the loom of our hearts,

and donning the brightness of song and silence,
we begin our week clothed in hope. And so,

Mindful of the responsibility our freedom presses into us, blest by the beauty of the world, and drawn by a vision of a community known for its honesty, generosity, depth, love, and justice-work, we focus our time together by the kindling of light.

Sequence

The walls of this room are silent, and yet they speak of laborers, and designers, and the physics of weight and support. The plants on the chancel are silent, yet they preach fine sermons on evolution, on transformation, as well as lovely homilies on growth and oxygen. The flowers and branches on the painted boxes are silent, yet they offer pep talks on opening and closing, on reaching and stretching, on color and astonishment. The painted boxes are silent, yet they prate on about their elegant grey-haired designer, Lilian Frank, their builders, and even the lumberjacks who cut down the trees from which they are made. The purple chairs in this room are silent, yet how they give testimony to the history of furniture through the ages, and to the human quest for both comfort and satisfying elegance, and to fund-raising luncheons arranged by Myra Hine which enabled us to purchase them. The glass in the clerestory windows is silent, yet how eloquent the windows are about the fire that forged them, and the glaziers that secured them there. The clothes we wear are silent, yet how they tell stories, and sing of

memories and association. The people in this room are silent too, yet how that silence speaks of community, trust and concern and rest.

silence

The silence of this place is peopled with memories and hopes, faces old and young. Establishing our sense of communion with the world outside this room, may we remember the large communities which overlap this present one, family, work, circles of friends, all of whom live in our hearts from moment to moment helping make us who we are. Let us call them to mind, the sick and healthy, the sources of pride and worry, naming them in a whisper, or naming them in continuing silence.

naming

The flute is silent until it is played, and afterward too. Each note of music in a piece is surrounded by the swiftest beat of silence, for music cannot exist without silence. Let the beauty of music and silence together fill this place with thanksgiving and gladness.

Readings

The First Reading *comes from the book Dress Codes, by the author Ruth P. Rubenstein, a professor of sociology at the Fashion Institute of Technology, State University of New York.*

Social scientists take it for granted that an individual's clothing expresses meaning. They accept the old saw that "a picture is worth a thousand words" and generally concede that dress and ornament are elements in a communication system. They recognize that a person's attire can indicate either conformity, or resistance, to socially defined expectations for behavior.

The valid interpretation of clothing images depends on awareness of the social and cultural context within which the images appear. Take the fashion industry in the fall of 1993 for example. Since religious themes

characterized the clothing and jewelry, media observers concluded that the message was one of “spirit-uality” and “piety.” Reminiscent of religious habits, crosses were worn on filmy, often see-through black robes. These were presented in the grunge style, the untidy, unkempt look. But the social and cultural context was that of continuing economic recession. The reduced buying power of the public, and the loss of talent to AIDS, could not have gone unnoticed. The new U.S. president, young and untried, could not offer a full measure of security or comfort. But within Western culture, crosses and other religious jewelry have always offered a protective measure; they make the individual feel less accessible to harm. Thus, the spiritual theme in fashion is more likely an attempt to overcome the sense of vulnerability, discernable in much of contemporary discourse; *in health care, for example.*

The Second Reading comes from the *Gospel According to St. Matthew*, a book put down by an anonymous author, sometime toward the end of the first century. It was probably written in Syria. The author used other sources, including the one called *Q*, from which this passage comes. The Scholars of the Jesus Seminar are convinced that this particular sentence comes from the lips of the Galilean teacher himself, and thus the Latin technical phrase *Ipsissima Verba*, the authentic words of the son of Mary himself.

If anyone would sue you to take away your coat, why not give him your underclothes too?

Sermon

I once met a hermit. An honest-to-God hermit.

This is how I met him. It was about twenty years ago and I was driving through the twists and turns of the two-lanes webbing the slopes of Mt. Tamalpais in Marin County, the prosperous county across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco. I was driving home from officiating at

a pretty nifty beach wedding that afternoon, and was looking forward to getting the sand off my feet with a nice hot bath once I got home.

Suddenly I saw a hitchhiker along the side of a road. He was a man dressed in many layers of clearly well-worn clothes, jackets, jeans, sweatshirts, pullovers. Odd, perhaps, but it *was* a pretty cold day, come to think of it.

The hitchhiker had a beard longer than Karl Marx or Walt Whitman, tangled and salt-and-pepper. And very long hair, pulled into a pony-tail. On a simple yoke made from an unpeeled branch which he balanced over his shoulders, he had two very large plastic water bottles, each clearly capable of holding many litres of water apiece.

Such an image was too amazing to pass up, so despite all the warnings against picking up hitchhikers, quite common at the time, I picked him up. He told me his name, and I told him mine, and he tucked the empty bottles and yoke in the back seat and asked me to drive him three kilometers down the slope where there was a clear, cold creek running off the mountain. There he would fill his bottles.

Boy, did he smell terrible. And to make matters worse, he had been chewing (for health reasons, he said,) some raw garlic cloves, which really almost pushed me over the edge. I had to roll down the window so as not to get woozy. But I did drive him down the road.

I asked him the obvious question, which was where he was going to bring the huge water bottles once he had filled them up.

“Back to where I live,” he answered, “close to where you picked me up, but deeper into the forest.”

“Is that where your dwelling is?” I asked, using the word ‘dwelling’ deliberately, since I knew there were no ‘houses,’ in any ordinary meaning of the term, on the slopes of Tamalpais.

And that's when he told me his story. He had been a stockbroker in San Francisco. Had lived in a million dollar home in Marin, near exclusive Mill Valley. He was married, but had no children. He worked hard, had a closet full of Armani suits, and shoes imported from Milan. One day his wife left him for another man, and he was devastated. So he began to question his life, the rat race at work, and began to study ecology, simple living and spirituality of all sorts. His spiritual reading asked him to discern what was really important in his life, and asked him to sort through his habits and assumptions to see if there was anything among them which really fed him, really fed his soul.

He realized that none of it mattered any more. He felt that he had bought a bill of goods about the meaning of life. "So," he concluded, "I decided to be happy, instead of empty. I sold my house, sold my car, gave up most of my library, and best of all, I gathered up all my Armani suits and Gucci shoes, which I myself had bought along the Via Montenapoleone in Milan, and gave the whole lot of them to St. Vincent de Paul. Then I bought sturdy flannel clothes, cotton pullovers and jeans from a used clothing place, and moved out here into the woods, where I have been living for ten years now. I eat what I can catch or gather, I sleep in a little cave, and I keep to myself. I find that the sun and moon are my best companions, and the local animals are my friends."

"Where did you get the garlic?" I asked, knowing full well that garlic cloves of that size don't grow wild.

"Oh, I have friends from my old life who drop by to see me and they often bring me things from the store. I eat pretty well, actually."

By the time he finished his story, we had reached the spot where he wanted to get some water, and I dropped him off.

But inside, I never *really* dropped him off, and have been carrying him around to this very day. Today, I am going to leave his odd but interesting story with you.

What I remember thinking about after I dropped him off was that he spoke of his car, his house and his books, but he never told me what kind of car, what sort of house, or the names of any books. But he *did* name his Armani suits and Milanese Gucci shoes. He even remembered the name of the street where he bought them. I think that's because he was aware on some level that of all the things he mentioned - houses, books, and cars - the most clearly symbolic parts of his life were his clothing. He got rid of his name-brand clothing, and that signified, more than anything else, how he changed his life completely. And, he told me he was happy.

As I read about clothing this week, I understood why he might have focused on them as the primary symbol for expressing who he had been, and who he was now.

For clothing is the language we speak before we ever break the silence. It is the vocabulary of the soul even more basic than poetry. It is the argument some human beings make, the protest others offer, the conformity many desire, the discipline a few crave. Clothing, I'm saying, *symbolizes* things far more clearly than it keeps us warm, or shelters us from the summer bugs.

Take the robe I am wearing today. It was the robe I had crafted for my ordination 27 years ago. It was not the traditional black so-called Geneva gown worn by many ministers in Unitarian, Universalist, Reform church, Congregational and Presbyterian history. Nor was it the white alb worn by Episcopal priests and Methodist bishops. It was grey, neither white nor black, and it has on it, embroidered, a symbol I designed which expresses my theology.

Many of my colleagues were confused by it because it was unique. It was not the black gown (the graduation gown at many universities, as you know) proclaiming my education and the intellectual rigor of my sermons, which was the historical Unitarian expectation. "What kind of a robe is that?" many colleagues asked me when I wore it to Installation

and Ordinations ceremonies. It didn't fit the received custom. For me, it symbolized the grey gown worn by some of our religious ancestors in sixteenth century Poland, but I know that's not a very *obvious* symbol.

Now, in every church I have served, there are those who would like their ministers to wear a robe all the time, and those who would be just as happy if their minister wore "ordinary street clothes." (Presumably they don't mean fringed surfer shorts and a torn thread-bare t-shirt with a Budweiser logo on it.) But why would people have such strong opinions about such things?

Because some were raised Baptist, where the preacher often wore a suit and tie, more like the banker down the street than the priest up at the suspicious Episcopal church. Or because some grew up in a Unitarian Universalist Fellowship where no one wore a robe, and so they don't want it now. Or because their childhood Unitarian minister *always* wore one, and they want me to do it now. Or, they were raised Episcopal, and don't want to be reminded of the vestments of their youthful religious experience. Or, conversely, they DO want to be reminded of the worship robes so they don't feel like this is some weird social club, but a genuine religion like they remember, with official garb, candles and everything.

My friend Jane Rzepka sometimes calls church vestments, like the colorful stole I wear every Sunday, "party clothes," even though she personally prefers not to wear them.

Does wearing certain clothes set you apart, or worse, above, making you not "one of the folks," as some fear? Well, yeah, and so does standing in the pulpit instead of sitting in the rows of purple chairs. Myra is set apart, too when she plays the piano. Les faces the choir, and is set apart from it. I confess I have never much understood the argument that wearing a vestment is somehow undemocratic. After all, we are all set apart from each other on Sunday, since, as far as I can tell, no two of us wears the same clothes, the same jewelry, watches...or tattoos, for that matter. Uniqueness is just the human condition, in or out of clothes.

Oh, I know the other arguments, namely that clothes *are* sometimes associated with certain kinds of authority, and authority makes some folks anxious. But personally, I like it when my doctor comes in, and that she is wearing a white lab coat. I like it when the police officer comes to my home to take a report after a theft, and is wearing a crisp dark uniform. I am sure the doctor and officer could be more, well, comfortable in other clothes, but I am not sure I would trust them as much if they did their professional work in frayed jeans and pink t-shirts. But why would certain cloth on their frames make that much difference to me?

Because, as our clothing sociologist, Ruth Rubenstein suggests, clothes proclaim things. “Social scientists,” she affirms, “take it for granted that an individual’s clothing expresses *meaning*. They generally concede that dress and ornament are elements in a communication system. They recognize that a person’s attire can indicate either conformity, or resistance to socially defined expectations for behavior.”

But then she goes on to explain that what clothes “communicate” is not necessarily that obvious. Nor is it a conscious meaning. Back in the nineties, for example, she reminds us that many people (perhaps influenced by the singer Madonna), were wearing crosses, even if they weren’t Christian. These large crosses were simply fashion statements. On the surface, they seemed to suggest American society’s increasing interest in spirituality. But, on further study, social scientists began to see these crosses as symbolic signs of protection, amulets against insecurity and uncertainty, kind of like a boxer crossing himself before a match. This is a much deeper analysis.

In fact, I realized, after my sermon last week, that the symbolism of clothing figured heavily in that sermon too, as I spoke about the beautiful, well-tailored clothes worn to a service at one of the historic black churches, as compared to the more informal wear worn in churches that are historically more white. And I realized that it’s not just the clergy who make decisions about what vestments to wear on Sunday,

but that everyone makes decisions about what vestments they will wear when they come to worship.

Clothes have figured throughout history to denote class, authority, rank, or gender. Gender especially, can be confusing. Comedian Milton Berle wearing a polka dot frock on his old television show was considered hilarious, but “comedienne” Wendy Lieberman wearing pants is not. Elizabeth the First of England was called Rex, or King, not Regina, or Queen, back in her day, yet she wore elaborate women’s clothes, which King Henry, her brutal father, would never have worn, though they shared the exact same status and title, politically.

Elizabeth wore unique dresses to express her authority and identity, but uniforms are clothes too, and they are not unique but all the same. So they often betoken a sense of group authority or shared identity, whether we are talking about white parochial school blouses, or the spit-polished boots in a Marine camp.

But the most significant expressions involving the social symbols called clothes seem to revolve around issues of justice and class. Some of our own Unitarian ancestors in Poland wore simple grey gowns instead of fancy lace at the throat, popular in those days, to indicate that they were trying to extricate themselves from the stratified class system of their day. Franciscans a few hundred years earlier, did something quite similar; monks used to wear very simple grey wool robes, instead of the finery of the day.

But the founder of the Franciscan order had gone even further, early in his life. Giovanni

Bernardone was called by the nickname Francesco, which means, “Frenchie” because he learned some French Provencal songs which his father had taught him after returning home to Assisi from business trips to the south of France. After going to war, being wounded and suffering from fever, Francesco suddenly awoke to a new vision of life, one where he was pained to realize that the poor he saw all the time in the streets, dressed in rags, were really kept in their place by the policies of the privileged, including his own family. So, impulsively trying to change

things, he started to give away bolts of his father's expensive imported cloth to the poor, for them to make clothes that were no longer the cruel badge of rags. When his father Pietro found out, he dragged his son, in great anger, before the Bishop of Assisi for a summary judgment. "I have given you everything you need," said Pietro to his son Francesco. "And this is how you treat me." "Well, if that is how you feel, I will give you back everything you ever gave me." And with that, Francesco stripped off his clothes, and walked out of Assisi stark naked, leaving the whole town, especially his father, shocked and horrified.

In some ways, and without any real scholarly knowledge of the passage, Francesco was enacting the advice about clothes Jesus gave to the poor in his own day. The poor in Galilee had not always been poor, you see. They once had been middle class, to use modern class jargon. But during the teens and twenties of the first century, the Galileans had been taxed into impossible debt by the Roman system of oppression. Local well-to-do landowners who benefited from this system, made things all the worse by charging small landowners terrible interest rates, up to 250 percent. Peasants were being sued by the privileged, to extract every last cent out of them.

So the teacher Jesus offers them this zany advice: "When someone is trying to sue you to get your last coat, why not give them your undergarments as well?"

It's hilarious actually. Don't you see? If you took all your clothes off, you would be naked in the courtroom. This, says theologian Walter Wink, is a deliberate lampoon, guerilla theater which "unmasks" the entire absurd system for the baloney it is, "burlesquing its pretensions of justice." Wink tells us that something like this actually happened in modern times, in South Africa, before Apartheid ended. White police intended to bulldoze a black women's squatters' camp. They warned the women to leave. Instead, the women defiantly took off all their clothes, and just stood there naked in front of the bulldozers. The police left, red-faced, and the camp survived into the justice of the new system, unscathed.

So, to sum, what we wear is not merely decorative. And what we do not wear is equally symbolic. Both prove to have a social significance. Both can actually serve as unconscious meditations on justice, on identity, on authority and personal experience. And both prove to be meditations, ultimately, on happiness.

The hermit I met in Marin gave up his Armani suits and Gucci clothes, and changed his life to make himself happy. Others work hard to get themselves out of oppressive situations and historic poverty so they can wear Armani clothes and Gucci shoes, and make themselves happy, secure in their new social status.

What clothing would most make me happy, I wonder? How about you? And is personal happiness the same as justice? Francis of Assisi and Jesus might have said no. What might you say?

Offering

For the support of the work of this congregation, and in expression of whatever joys we find in sharing of our livelihood with others in this common house, we give and receive the offering.

Questions in the Form of a Prayer

O Mercy, why do you refuse to let me stew in the wine of rage? Why do you remind me that there are neither demons or angels on this earth, only human beings, broken and healthy both, with lives as precious to them as mine is to me?

O Pity, why do you break my heart so much? Why does loss of life in the Philippines, and in Iraq or a thousand other places bid me rend my garments in sadness? Why do we spend so much time magically transforming people I have never met into family?

O Peace, where are you? Is that my heartbeat, or you, knocking at my door? Is this weight around my shoulders this stole, or your arm, comforting me?

O Love, who am I that something more wonderful than all the stars or the first tulip of the season should dwell inside my heart? Why do you make it so that every single person, whether friend or stranger, and every single thing, whether rare or common, can open like a door into the brightness that is you?

Hymn: To Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love