

# PUTTING ON JESUS

Sermon, September 23, 2020

Texts: Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

I'd like to re-read the last verse of today's selection from Romans: *"Rather, put on the Lord Jesus Christ and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh."* Now ... let's see who can name this tune: *(At this time, the organist played a few lines from the Irving Berlin classic "Puttin' on the Ritz" ... a sampling of the lyrics: "Now, if you're blue, and you don't know where to go to, why don't you go where fashion sits, Puttin' on the Ritz! Dressed up like a million dollar trooper, trying hard to look like Gary Cooper, super duper! Come, let's mix where Rockefellers walk with sticks or umbrellas in their mitts ... Puttin' on the Ritz!")*<sup>1</sup>

The song was written by Irving Berlin in 1929, and made famous by Fred Astaire in the thirties *(also sung by Judy Garland in 1960, and parodied by Peter Boyle and Gene Wilder in Young Frankenstein in 1974)*. "The Ritz" refers to the famous Ritz luxury hotels in New York, London and Paris, which were very elegant and pricey establishments. *"Puttin' on the Ritz"* is about overcoming the "blues" by dressing up, by trying to look and act and behave like you belong in that "ritzy" outfit and that you are part of, and belong to, that elite, "ritzy" crowd! Well, Paul is talking about *"Puttin' on the Jesus!"* "Putting on the Lord Jesus Christ" is all about trying to look and behave and act like you belong in that outfit, trying to live like you belong to His redeemed crowd! And the best way to do that, Paul infers, is summed up in the last verse of the selected passage: *"Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another."*

*"Forgive us our debts,"* we pray in the Lord's Prayer ... actually, we say "trespasses" here, but most Presbyterians say "debts". Yes, we pray God will forgive our sins, our trespasses, our "debts", but Paul speaks of a debt we continue to "owe" this side of heaven. This is a sermon in itself, but think of being a Christian as being married to the Lord; by faith we are brought into His family, and as we are joined to Him by faith Jesus assumes our debts, just as any spouse assumes the financial debts of the other; by grace He covers our debts with His ultimate payment on the cross. However, according to Paul, Jesus leaves us one debt outstanding, a continuing debt we are to never stop repaying ... the continuing debt to love one another. And we best do that, we best LOVE, by "putting on Jesus Christ" ... and trying to look and behave and act ... and love ... like we belong in that holy outfit.

In Act III Scene 4 of *Hamlet*; Prince Hamlet speaks to his mother Gertrude, whose moral life is a mess: *"Assume virtue, if you have it not!"* Paraphrased, this means, *"At least pretend to be virtuous, Mom, even if you aren't!"* The full line: *"Assume virtue if you have it not. Habit is a terrible thing, in that it's easy to get used to doing evil without feeling bad about it. But habit is also a good thing, in that being good can also become a habit [if that habit is] aptly put on. Say no tonight, and that will make it easier to say no the next time, and still easier the time after that. Habit can change even one's natural instincts, and either rein in the devil in us, or kick him out."* "Assume virtue, if you have it not." Again, paraphrased that means *"At least pretend to have virtue, even if you don't! Put that virtue on like a precious article of clothing, put on the Ritz, assume that habit, and act like you belong in that outfit and try to behave accordingly ... the more you put that on, the more you'll find it gets easier and easier to become what you are pretending/aspiring to be!"*

And so echoing Shakespeare, Paul exhorts his readers to "assume Christ;" that is, at least pretend to be Christ-like, even if you are not! *"Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the human nature."* Just as a nun puts on her habit *(that distinctive attire worn by her religious order)* as a reminder of her vows and commitment, so we are to make a "habit" out of putting on Christ. To slightly mix metaphors, we are to make a habit out of clothing ourselves in, putting on, Jesus Christ. Again, habit is a good thing *"... in that being good can become a habit [if that habit is] aptly is put on. Say no tonight, and that will make it easier to say no the next time, and still easier the time after that. Habit can change even one's natural instincts, and either rein in the devil in us, or kick him out."* And according to Paul, we best "put on Jesus" by determining to love, by learning all we can about how to genuinely love, and putting that knowledge to work by learning to love as Jesus would have us love. And I would add that we best learn about love by learning what the Author of love has to say about love in His Book. There are so many conflicting messages about "love" out there today; our secularized world is tremendously confused about love.

It was about thirty-three years ago, while serving that international congregation in Germany, I was leading a young adult Bible study group in my apartment and we were looking at this same passage from Romans. I've talked about this group at least four times before in my 23+ years in this pulpit, so those of you who've been here all along just bear with me a moment ... take a little nap or something *(I guess I'm getting to that age when I repeat myself, like every five years or so)* ... but there are others here who haven't heard this yet. The memory of this is so profound for me, as it was in my early *(and impressionable)* formative years of ministry. Back in the late eighties, 25-30 *(sometimes more)* of us met for Bible study in my apartment in Bonn, Germany ... if we had to observe social distancing it would have killed that fellowship, but I digress ... and it was a miniature United Nations. Over the five years I led this fellowship as part of the ministry of the American Protestant Church of Bonn, we had young adults from England,

<sup>1</sup> See <https://vimeo.com/31922652>. For the *Young Frankenstein* version, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ab7NyKw0VYQ>

Scotland, Germany, Holland, Uganda, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Romania, Sweden, Thailand, the USA; we had Sarah from Sierra Leone, Ivy from Singapore, Dan from England, Jerry from Australia, Chris from Romania ... and Cindy from the faraway land of Minnie-SO-ta. One thing I discovered about some who work in foreign service is that not a few of them are in foreign service because they want to get away from somewhere; they want to leave something behind, they want to get far, far away from a hurtful place and/or past. A woman in her mid-thirties from Thailand, who, through her preteen and young teen years, had been brutally victimized by the insidious sex trafficking of Bangkok (*an insidious industry that is tragically and exponentially increasing in our country, but I digress*). A woman from Scotland who had been in an abusive live-in relationship during which time she had come to faith, and finding strength in her new found Christian faith, gained the self respect and confidence to pack this guy's bags and kick him out ... although he continued to stalk her. A teacher in her early forties divorced from her husband of fifteen or so years due to his incessant philandering. A young German sailor (*the last I heard he was a ship's captain on a German freighter out of Kiel on the Baltic*) who had seen more human depravity in some of the world's seaports than many of us here could even imagine. A young man from Uganda, a son of one of his polygamous father's wives (*if memory serves, there were four wives*), in his late twenties and who mentioned he had never, ever seen faithful monogamy modeled in his entire lifetime (*for that matter, let me state the obvious that this is no longer a problem confined to deep dark places in Africa; we can find that in deep dark Rhode Island ... but that's another sermon*). Many in that room had been affected, and affected adversely, by love gone bad, by the devastating effects of sexual immorality. And all had come to that international church and to that Bible study fellowship group to find some measure of stability, security, sanctuary, safety, belonging ... and love, gracious love. They wanted to be loved; they wanted to learn how to love.

As literally represented in that apartment over three decades ago, our world is terribly confused about love, and it has only gotten worse. So much hurt and harm has grown out of loving intentions, so much hurt and harm has grown out of misconceptions of love. Love is confused with lust, with selfishness, with indulging passions, with personal desires/preferences ... none of which are really the central meaning of love as defined in the Scriptures. The word "love" has been so misused and abused in our culture that it has come to mean the same thing it does in tennis ... **nothing!** But Jesus and Paul believed love, properly understood and habitually practiced, is **everything!**

We read this same verse that evening: "*Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.*" This subject matter was an issue of more than just passing interest for them! They were there because they *wanted* to behave decently, they were there because they wanted to be *treated* decently, they were there because some had deep hurts from being treated *indecently*, and some were there who had painful memories of treating *others* indecently out of ignorance or confused ideas about love. They wanted to learn about love, how to love, how to be loved. The inevitable question arose, I think from Uganda Henry: "*What exactly IS sexual immorality?*" I replied in so many words, "*Good question! That's a question lots of people, even in the church, even in the leadership of the church, apparently have difficulty answering! So, let's talk about it next week.*" Actually, I didn't say that last part. I basically said, "*The short answer is the Bible defines sexual immorality as any sexual activity contrary to God's design for sexuality, which is fidelity in monogamous marriage between a man and a woman and chastity in singleness. But I'd like to save that larger discussion for next week. For now, in the time we have, let's just look at this text in front of us: What does it say about Love?*"

"*Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law.*" We went on to discuss that one thing to get straight is that the Bible refers to love as a duty. It can be, and most of the time really is, a delightful duty, but it *is* a duty, a continuing debt. It is something we do. Love is a verb, not a noun. It's not primarily something we feel; it's something we do, something we act out; in fact, it is something we even owe to those around us because of the love and grace we have received in Jesus Christ! Then we discussed how Paul goes on to define more precisely and practically what he means when he uses the word "love." He cites the latter portion of the Ten Commandments which have to do with our relationships with others, concluding they are summed up in this one rule: "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*" He goes on to clarify further, by telling us what love does NOT do: "*Love does no harm (or, wrong) to a neighbor.*" Genuine love does no harm, love does not encourage harm; love does not show itself in allowing others to be harmed, love does not pay money (*or cause others to pay money*) to see others being harmed or used or abused or misused. The love Paul is talking about is *not* about gratifying ourselves at another's expense. Love never involves or endorses taking, abusing, harming, stealing, coveting, or sexual immorality. These are all *repellent* and destructive activities, and love is an *attractive* and constructive force. Love does not repel or harm or abuse or threaten or give another cause to fear. Rather, authentic love *seeks the other's good*, as much as we would seek our own good.

So much more that could be said; I close with this: Every day we wake up and try to decide what to wear today. Well, perhaps the best fashion advice we could possibly receive is to start the day by "*Puttin' on the Jesus! Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ!*". Dress up! Put on your Jesus "habit," your Jesus "suit", and determine to play the part of the "uniform" you are wearing to the hilt and go on that day to do what you can to love well! And as we do that, the Spirit goes to work on us and makes it less and less of a role we are playing and more and more an actuality of who we are becoming, thus enabling us to better pay this delightful debt of love we all owe each other.

# A TIME WITH THE CHILDREN

## September 13, 2020

I'd like to tell you the story of an eight-year-old boy who was a bit of a clumsy, chubby, awkward child. One day after school, a group of bullies started chasing this boy, calling after him with the taunt of "Fat Freddy." He ran toward the home of an elderly widow in the neighborhood, praying desperately she would be home ... and she was. She graciously opened her door, let him in and gave him safe haven.

Years later, he said the answered prayer of that gracious encounter with his neighbor greatly increased his faith in God. Fat Freddy's full name was Fred Rogers ... Fred Rogers, as in "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood." The memory of this elderly neighbor who took him in and kept him safe from the bullies was one big reason being part of a safe, loving neighborhood was so important to Mister Rogers.

Some of you may know Mister Rogers was a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) ordained minister; he was ordained to a specialized ministry in the Pittsburgh Presbytery as "*an evangelist to work with children and families through the mass media.*" I learned his adult daily routine almost to the day he died in 2003, was to wake up every day about 5:30 AM, have a devotional time of prayer, Bible reading and singing of hymns, then he would go swimming to exercise. Following the swim, he would weigh himself on a scale. He was meticulous about keeping his weight steady; he weighed 143 pounds his whole life long. In fact, it was reported that 143 was his favorite number. Do you know why? Because it takes one letter to say, "I," four letters to say, "Love," and three letters to say, "You." 1-4-3 "I-love-you." (*Now, I was personally bemused by that ... I would have to say, "I, I love you."*).

From a March 6, 2000 article in Christianity Today: "*Mister Rogers, in his silent, subtle, mighty way, rescues children from a world that would too soon warp their souls. He summons them to a special place where trust arises and does not disappoint. Hearts come alive, awakened by his unconditional acceptance. 'Everybody longs to be loved and longs to know that he or she is capable of loving,' he says.*"<sup>1</sup> To Mr. Rogers love was everything.

Mister Rogers wanted to provide a safe haven, a place, a neighborhood, a refuge where children could come and be loved, nurtured and protected, which is also an integral part of the ministry of the church ... and not just for the children! It's a rough world out there, and people of all ages who are being chased and hounded and harassed by life are in need a sanctuary, a place where we can find refuge and protection, and love ... genuine love. We'll be talking a bit more about this in the sermon to come.

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<sup>1</sup> "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" Christianity Today, March 6, 2000 by Wendy Murray Zoba. Also at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/march6/1.38.html>