

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“Alive in the Spirit of God: Dress for Success”

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Exodus 32:16, Ephesians 6:10-20

It was fascinating. Off in the distance, a mother cheetah was teaching her cub how to hunt. Their prey was a large group of antelope, who had become aware of their presence. Cindy and I were fortunate enough to have gone to a water-well dedication in Kenya several years ago, and since we were there we figured, why not go on safari. We saw lots of wonderful animals but one of the most fascinating was the hunting lesson we witnessed. The cheetahs would crouch low and slowly slink towards the antelope. One of the animals, a lookout perhaps, would get wind of them and bolt, followed quickly by the others. What was interesting though was that they would not just keep running, but would run just far enough to be safe, then stop. I think Cindy focused on the cheetahs as we watched this play out, but I was focused on the antelope because they reminded me of people at a sporting event doing the wave. All it took was one person to start it and everyone followed; without any instruction or organization. It was as if we, like the antelope, were not individuals but a single organism reacting to external stimuli over which we had no control.

Have any of you ever been part of something like that? Have any of you ever been carried away in a crowd to start cheering, booing or laughing; to do the wave or to...and this is where I am headed, to do something you knew was wrong because everyone else was doing it? If you have ever found yourself in that position, you are not alone. Scientists have told us that the answer to our mother's question, “If everyone else jumped off a cliff, would you?” is not “Uhh, no, sorry mom”, but it is “Sure, why not.” I say this because study after study has proved that human brains are wired for the kind of antelope-like connection that cause us to instinctively do what others do in order to be part of the crowd. We are wired for connection to others and that connection brings comfort and a sense of safety and belonging. In the same way then, to be forced out of the crowd, to be shunned if you will brings us pain. Therefore we go along to belong.

The problem with this, as the Apostle Paul understands, is that we may live in societies or hang out with people that ask us to live in ways, and to treat others in ways, that are not consistent with the teachings of Jesus. This was so for Paul because in the Roman Empire there was a very clear hierarchy in which some people were not only taught that they were better than others, but they acted like they were. Chances are we have witnessed such behavior in those around us...or perhaps even within ourselves. We have stood by when people told jokes that demeaned various kinds of people or perhaps simply to lies about others. We wanted to belong so we went along. For Paul, this was not acceptable. As we discussed last week, Jesus' followers were to radically reorient their relationships, meaning that they were to see every person as their equal; every person as one made in the image of God. And then treat them as such...regardless of what culture or community tells them to do. They were not to go along to belong. The issue becomes then how can Jesus' followers break free of the unconscious connections that cause us to go along to belong? The answer for Paul was that people are to get dressed.

So, a quick poll. How many of you got dressed this morning? Good, then you have some idea of what Paul wants people to do in order to resist the temptation to go along to belong. Paul tells his friends

at Ephesus that they are to get dressed in the armor of God; that essentially every morning they are to reach into their first-century spiritual closets, pull out the armor of God and put it on. It is what will protect them, it is what will protect us, from the temptation to go along to belong. I suppose if you are a Game of Thrones fan or you like knights in shining armor, Paul's image of armor may be appealing but this morning I want to give it a new twist. I want us to see our task as getting dressed as Jesus' superheroes, meaning we are putting on the same items of clothing Paul proposes: truth, righteousness, peace and faith, but we are simply doing it in a slightly more 21<sup>st</sup> century way.

Step one in our superhero preparation is to put on truth, in this case our Jesus suit. Just like Superman always had his red and blue outfit on under his clothes, so he could step into a phone booth and change for action...and by the way for many of you a phone booth is this thing that people had to use to make phone calls when they were away from home...we are to do the same. We are to do this because Jesus is the truth. He shows us the truth about who God wants us to be. So, step one, we are to consciously put on our Jesus suit, maybe with a big "J" on the front, to remind us that we belong to Jesus above and beyond all the other groups to which we belong.

Step two in our superhero preparation is to put on righteousness, or in this case our x-ray goggles. Now, these goggles are not the usual "I can see through buildings" goggles. They are goggles that allow us to see through the color of a person's skin, nationality, sexual-orientation, language and see that inside they are God's children; men, women and children bearing God's image. This is what righteousness means. It means to live in relationship with all people without prejudice or judgment. It is to see them and love them as God does.

Step three in our superhero preparation is to put on peace, or in this case our force-field...which by the way is a superpower given to all of Jesus' followers. What I mean by this is that peace is that ability to not give in when people try to force us to go along in order to belong, by shaming us, ignoring us, criticizing and even threatening us. Peace is that deep inner strength that comes from knowing that we are loved by God such that nothing can tempt us or force us to do what God does not want us to do. It acts as a forcefield that allows us to follow Christ even in the face of the pressure to go along to belong.

The fourth and final step in our superhero preparation is to put on the extra lives of faith, salvation and Spirit. For those of you who do not play video games, one of the gifts that can often be won or earned by characters is extra lives. And I know that this is slightly straying from the superhero theme, but it works...and I'm the one up here, so...so faith, salvation and Spirit deal with the reality that even superheroes fail; that we often fail. That sometimes we go along to belong in ways that hurt others before we even are aware that it is happening and we wonder if we ought to turn in our Jesus' superhero card. Faith can be seen then as the container in which we place our extra lives. Salvation is the source of those lives with which we fill our basket of faith. And the Spirit is the power that applies those lives to our life, reminding us that in Jesus, failure is not the end; that even when we have gone along to belong, this time, God still loves us and empowers us. God gives us extra lives to try again, and again, and again.

You and I are called to be God's superheroes, living out our lives with radically reoriented Relationships. But in order to do so we must stand against all of the forces both internal and external that push us to go along to belong. My challenge to you then is this, to ask yourselves as you are getting dressed each day, am I putting on my Jesus outfit so that I am not going along in order to belong, but that I live into the kinds of relationships God desires me to have.