

First Mennonite Church Edmonton

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I'm sorry if this is going to shatter anyone's illusion of me, but I have to say I'm not much of a football fan. Having said that I always knew when the Saskatchewan Roughriders were playing on Sunday's, that's because many folk in Rosthern tended to 'dress up' to come to church. I would typically notice this as I greeted people as they arrived for worship. The more modest in the congregation would wear a green T-Shirt 'snuck' under a dress shirt, while the more confident would come decked out in their jerseys. Outside of Saskatchewan Rider fandom, the devotion is a cultural phenomenon that I haven't experienced elsewhere. Rider green, in its own way acts as a bit of a uniform that unites a whole fanbase together, not just in Saskatchewan but all across the country and perhaps even beyond.

The clothes we wear are one way that we become a part of a 'tribe.' Many of our clothing brands know this. Colleagues and I joked at one time, that it would be nice to 'bring back' or maybe I should say 'bring in' the priestly collar to identify ourselves with the particular community we're apart of, but the argument always returns to that we should dress similar to the people we serve. We can easily pigeon hole people by what they wear, and I'm going to go out on a limb and suggest that high school students probably would know this better than most.

I'm willing to guess that's one of the reasons why some schools have implemented a uniform dress code. Uniforms dress codes are one way that communities identify themselves. In some ways we've developed unspoken dress codes for church.

At one point in time people would dress up for church. There always was the Sunday outfit that was different from the week day dress. Now that's likely, and I'm not just thinking about the last year, though I'm willing to guess your dress code for worship this morning is different than it was prior to the pandemic. But I also think that it's changed in the last decade or so. I remember growing up and we always had to dress up for church, Dad wore a tie, Mom a dress, my brother and I always had nice slacks and shirts or sweaters to wear. I'm speaking about dress codes here because in today's passage from Ephesians, the Apostle Paul in his discourse about the 'armour of God' suggests a dress code for God's people, a dress code for the Body of Christ.

I remember growing up and the classic teaching element for the armour of God was a flannel board lesson for children. Though, I must say Vince and Ruth's presentation is one of the most memorable tellings I've ever seen and heard! There was a white caucasian male in a simple tunic, and as the lesson went on we slowly attached the armour of a legionnaire onto this person, with the implied lesson being that this is what each of us must do. Thinking back on it later, there is much about this that makes me uncomfortable. And as much as the image of armoured follower of Jesus makes my Anabaptist hackles stand on end, I have to admit, Paul was onto something. In this, I see him using a present image of the day, the dress code of a Roman Centurion. The centurion would not have been a foreign sight. The Roman Centurion would possibly have been a regular sight, probably as regular a sight as our police force. But what I see Paul doing here is subverting it by suggesting an alternative dress code for the Body of Christ.

What I see the apostle Paul pushing out here, are the qualities that Christ's church need to wear. And please notice, I'm talking about this with the focus being on the whole congregation and not simply individuals. We have to remember that Paul is not writing to one person, Paul is

writing to a whole group. So often Pauls' writings are interpreted as an ethic or a guidance for individuals, when, more often than naught they're written for the broader church, the corporate church, the Body of Christ. So these qualities that Paul highlights are qualities, not just for you or I, these are our qualities, our congregations, our Church's qualities, it is, our dress code. The dress code that identifies us as a particular, perhaps even peculiar people.

So what is it? what do we need to embrace? What do we need to get comfortable in, and wear proudly? What are the qualities that will make us stand out. It's these, Truth, Righteousness (or Justice depending on your translation), Peace, Faith, Salvation (or Healing), and rootedness in Scripture. This is our dress code, this is our uniform. And it's these things together, that help us stand out, they're what make us different, they're what make us distinct, they're what make us a part the Body of Christ.

And as much as this is the uniform that we're to wear is in opposition to the powers and principalities, as much as these are our personal protective equipment in the cosmic struggle, it's this uniform that sets us apart. We speak truth, we seek justice and peace, we are a people of faith, rooted in a message of healing, hope and love, which is found in our scripture.

So what does it look like when get 'dressed up'? We speak truth, as a congregation with one voice, imagine with me what that witness looks and sounds like? We work together for justice and peace, imagine the strength is there when we are doing that together. We share our faith, with actions, yes, and also with words; answering the questions of the world, such as "Who are Mennonites?" "What do you believe?" and "Where's your horse and buggy?" And we try our best to live lives of healing, hope, and love, emulating Jesus, who we discover, learn from, and follow, based on how we encounter him in Scripture, and when we fall short, we practice grace, forgiveness, and seek to make things right. This is all apart of that Encountering, Embracing, and Embodying Jesus as a community. It's getting dressed up and wearing this uniform from God.

This uniform is more than on outward image that we present. This uniform, I believe, can be our defining characteristic. These qualities are what make us distinct in how we go about the work of the church. They are what separate us from other charities and organizations, they are the 'being' underneath supporting the 'doing.' And the curious thing for me is that when we've worn this uniform long enough, it's no longer a uniform that we put on each day, it becomes a part of our identity, it becomes a part of ourselves.

In high school, at least so far as I've heard, uniforms were loathed. Reflecting on this particular uniform, I must admit I don't feel loathing. Rather, I find myself quite excited to be known for these qualities, I'm excited to put them on and get dressed up for God.

Amen