

10-14-12 The Fruit of Gentleness – The Spirit of Healing  
“Clothed and In Our Right Minds” by Rev. Seth D. Jones  
Genesis 3:20-24; Mark 5:1-20

For some of you, it will come as a surprise to learn that I am a bit of a fashion junkie. I pay attention to Fashion Week in New York City and make sure I have some knowledge of the coming trends in fashion. Unfortunately, men's fashion does not track as creatively or quickly as women's fashion. But I know Armani and Lauren when I see them. I learned early on that 'clothes make the man'. One of my favorite quotes comes from the lead singer of Van Halen, David Lee Roth – a man known for outrageous costumes and creative clothing. He used to say, “It doesn't matter if you win or lose. What matters is how you look when you play the game.”

Clothing transmits information about the person wearing it. Clothing, in the minds of many cultures including ours, matters. Depending on how we wear things, our clothes may communicate how we think of ourselves and our bodies. In our culture, clothing often transmits information about class and social standing. If we are trying to impress upon people an understanding of who we are, for instance in a job interview, we will wear one thing and not another. If we want to show we don't care what other people think of us, we will wear certain clothes and not other types of clothes. If I am a crime boss, a pinstriped suit will make me look taller and will communicate authority over my lackeys. If I am a high-level banker, a tasteful gray suit with a silk purple or black tie, communicates understanding and conservative values with an understated sense of the value of wealth. If I am a rock star, the less clothing the better, since my music is about baring my soul to my audience. Our clothes communicate a lot of information about us.

Our clothing also covers us. Our clothing protects us from the elements. Our clothing reminds us we are exposed and unprotected without it. It is the singular barrier between us – and by us, I mean our bodies and also our sense of who we are – and the rest of the world, human and natural alike.

In Philip Roth's short story, *Eli, The Fanatic*, Eli is a lawyer hired by the town's people to get rid of the crazy Orthodox Jews who have moved into an apartment building down the street. Eli has a troubled relationship with his pregnant wife. His life is a testament to emptiness. He shows no tenderness or gentleness to his wife. The neighborhood is a modern, liberal, Reformed Jewish neighborhood and these Orthodox who have moved in are retrograde, reactionary and reclusive. Worse, they have a school for their children, which just spreads their ignorance. Eli has been hired to negotiate on behalf of the Reformed neighborhood. He goes to the head of the school and tries to speak with him.

He sits in his old clothes behind an empty desk and speaks enigmatic answers to Eli's questions in a gentle, unobtrusive way. Eli leaves the house and sees an old Rabbi wandering by. The old Rabbi lives at the house and school. He is a gentle and loving presence among the people and the children there. It turns out this old Rabbi is the problem, however. He speaks to no one. He wanders the town, lips moving without sound, in the same black suit day after day. The neighborhood fears him. They say his old, worn, black suit smells. They don't like the way he looks. His clothes remind the modern, well-read, intellectual neighbors of an old, stale falsity left behind in an old, stale, decaying country.

The negotiations break down at the school, but something is happening to Eli. He lies on behalf of the school, telling the leader of the neighborhood group he has it all figured out. That night, Eli packs up his best suit, which is green. He puts in his best shoes and his cleanest undergarments and a new pair of socks. In the morning, he carries the suit-case to the school and apartment house and leaves the suit for the wandering Jew. Later that day, the neighborhood is awash with the news that the Rabbi is in a new suit and is talking to people. Something has changed for the Rabbi...and for Eli. For Eli has received back the suit-case from the Orthodox home and school. Inside is the Rabbi's suit. Eli tries it on. It doesn't quite fit, but he begins to imagine into the smells. He looks in the mirror. He tries on the hat and sees a different Eli looking back. Soon, it is Eli wandering the streets in the Rabbi's old suit. Soon, it is Eli who is taking on the condemnation of his neighbors. Soon, it is Eli who is judged and pigeon-holed by the clothes he wears. He visits his wife and new son in his new, yet old, clothes. He is gentle with her and with his son. Between Eli and the neighborhood, the only protection between himself and the vast nothingness he carries within himself, however, is the suit, the clothes he is wearing. The clothes make the man. The clothes cover the man. The clothes define and protect him.

In the Garden, things have gone radically wrong for Adam and Eve. A single act, an act of will, has completely altered reality itself. The consequence of their act is far reaching, altering our relationship with the natural world (Gen 3:14-15), our closest human relationships between mother and child and loving couple (Gen 3:16), and our relationship to our work and vocation on this earth (Gen 3:17-18). Lurking beneath all the consequences of this singular act of disobedience, of self-will, is the constant, unending awareness of death (Gen 3:19).

God tells Adam and Eve all of this. The gates of Eden have slammed shut behind the couple, and now the harsh reality of teeming, chaotic life face Adam and Eve. But God does something so gentle, so loving, so compassionate, we almost miss it. For following what God does for Adam and Eve, comes ejection, flaming swords of angels and being driven out of one's most innocent, most secure environment.

What does God do for Adam and Eve? Listen to the gentleness in this: "*And the Lord God made*

*garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and he clothed them*". God clothes Adam and Eve. God covers them in the face of the harsh world they face now. When I consider the fruit of gentleness, when I consider what the Holy Spirit does for us, I always come back to this brief scene. Right in the middle of the swirling chaos of a world radically changed by failure, brokenness, sin and dis-ease, God clothes us. Right in the middle of complete loss of...what? ... our innocence, our sense of wholeness, our completeness?...right in the middle of that, the Holy Spirit gently covers us.

The Bible has much to say about clothing. We are called to clothe the naked. God is very specific about the clothes the priests are to wear when he speaks to Moses on the mountain in Exodus. Because clothing is so intimate and essential, it is used as a metaphor for spiritual depth and understanding as well. In Scripture, and in the ancient world, one clothed oneself in spiritual life. In our day and age, we often speak of taking things off, of stripping away, of becoming naked, of baring ourselves when we seek spiritual depth in our faith. In the ancient world, it was exactly the opposite. The spiritual life *covered* a life without God. We *put on* the things of the Spirit.

Psalm 132 says, "*Let your priests be clothed with righteousness*". Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5:2, "*For in this tent (our bodies) we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling – if indeed, when we have taken it off we will not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan under our burden, because we wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee*". God has given us the Spirit as a guarantee that God will always clothe us in the same gentle way God clothed the first man and woman.

This tells us something about the fruit of gentleness. Gentleness clothes others and covers them as a protection and as a promise, literally and figuratively. What we *put on* when we are with others matters. When we care about our spiritual clothing, we care about what we are communicating to others. A spiritual outfit which communicates gentleness and care and healing is an outfit that looks like Jesus Christ.

In Jesus' encounter with the Gerasene demoniac, the possessed man who is imprisoned in the graveyard of Gerasa, we hear this phrase: "*(The people of the village) came to Jesus and saw the demoniac sitting there, clothed and in his right mind...*" (Mk 5:15). The breach that occurs in the ejection from the Garden of Eden is healed by the touch and words of Christ. God's gentleness and protection in clothing us before the chaos of the world is repeated in Jesus' healing of this man in the tombs. The Gospel of Luke adds that the man "*was sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind*" (8:35).

This is perhaps my favorite story in the New Testament. It is rich with meaning and we could

spend several weeks on the entire story. What makes it my favorite story, however, is this moment right here. It is the quintessence of gentleness, this image of Jesus standing over this man as the village returns, this man who is now clothed, in his right mind, complete, healed.

I have tied the Fruit of Gentleness with the Spirit of Healing because Jesus always heals with gentleness. When we imagine his words of healing – *“Your faith has made you well”*, *“Talitha Cum, which means ‘rise up’”*, *“Take up your mat and walk”* – I believe we imagine them as gentle and loving words, like the words of a loving mother to a sick child. Here, with the Gerasene man, we see Jesus' incredible gentleness, which does just what God did at the dawn of creation, covering and protecting those who are completely exposed to the chaos and horror of the world.

The fruit of gentleness clothes those who receive it in the love and protection of God. The fruit of gentleness allows the Spirit of healing to spread. It allows us to face the unpredictable environment of relationships and powers and principalities in a world which salivates for power, control and things. Gentleness covers many things and this is because gentleness is born of love. Remember, at the beginning, we said the fruit of the Spirit is love and all the other eight qualities are aspects of love? *The Fruit of the Spirit is love, (and the outcome of love is) peace, joy, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.* Love without gentleness is not really love, and contrarily gentleness is not possible without love.

Proverbs 10:21 says, *“Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses”*. Peter says, *“...maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pet 4:8)*. Indeed, it is love that covers the offense of the first sin – in the clothing God provides and in the work of Christ upon the Cross. It is love that covers the offense of the villagers' treatment of the demon-possessed man in Gerasa; and it is gentleness which makes room for the presence and continuance of love as we face an unknown future. Gentleness is the clothing which covers us and points us to the healing of Christ.

The healing gentleness of Christ leads the man of the tombs into his right mind. The experience of his healing will, hopefully, be a touchstone to be gentle with himself, for he has his work cut out for him. Jesus appoints him as a missionary to the very village and surrounding areas, a missionary to the very people who chained and abandoned him. *“Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you” (Mk 5:19)*. Paul recognized the need for gentleness for others and for oneself. The problem children of the early church, the Galatians, were called to the fruit of the Spirit. Paul especially wanted them to remember their baptism, for it is there, in baptism, that they were clothed in the white garments of purity and innocence to which Jesus restores each of us. Paul told the Galatians, *“As many of you were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Gal 3:27)*.

We have, all of us, been clothed with Christ. Like Adam and Eve, God's gentleness covers and protects us, literally and metaphorically. Like Eli, the Jewish lawyer, the clothes we wear influence our spiritual life. Like the demon-possessed man, when we put on Christ, we put on the gentleness of Christ and we are made whole, healed. The clothes we wear, as a result, become beautiful. Indeed, "...*even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these*" ( *Matt 6:29*). Here, in these clothes, we are in our right minds.

What does it mean, then, to be in our right minds? Jesus tells us when he tells the formerly demon-possessed man what to do: being in your right mind is to *gently* "*go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you and what mercy, what healing, what gentleness, the Lord has shown you*".

AMEN.