
WHAT'S YOUR DRIP?

ROMANS 13:8-14

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

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Before I begin preaching, I want to give a little primer for anyone who is new to worshipping at the Chapel. If you are new here or if you're new to a worship service that follows a similar pattern or liturgy as ours, you may be unfamiliar with how we select the scripture texts that we read each week in our Sunday services. We follow a collection of readings called the Revised Common Lectionary that was created by representatives from various churches known as the Consultation on Common Texts. This group built a set of readings that over a three-year period cover a broad swath of the scriptures. These readings include an Old Testament lesson, a Psalm, a New Testament lesson, and a reading from one of the Gospels. These readings follow the seasons of the Church Year which is based on the life of Christ. The year begins with Advent and concludes with Ordinary Time, which is the season we are now in and have been since Pentecost on May 28th this year.

Since the second Sunday in Ordinary Time, the lectionary has included a lesson from the book of Romans. And though we haven't exactly been in a sermon series on Romans, if you want to listen to several good sermons on the book, I recommend listening to the Chapel's sermon podcasts from the summer. Today is the second to last in this series of lessons from Romans, and I want us to turn again this morning as we attend to Paul's guidance on life shaped by the transformative work of Jesus.

Prayer: Father, send your Spirit that we might put on your crucified and resurrected Son, Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Each generation seems to have its own slang, its own contribution to the English vernacular. Where one generation called something groovy, another generation called it cool and yet another rad. Learning the new lingo of the day can be like learning an entirely new language sometimes. Social media is full of generational translators who can help you if you're ever feeling like you need guidance on how to understand someone who is not from your generation. One of my favorites is the youtuber who goes by Cool Carll on the channel "Sunday Cool." If you get a chance sometime, I recommend checking out his "How to Speak Gen Z" and "Gen Z" Bible translation videos. They're hilarious and informative.

So, if you're in the mood to blow the mind of a middle schooler, you might walk up to them and say, "those kicks be drippin'" or to give an approximate translation: those shoes are really cool. Drip is one of my favorite current slang terms. The thing about drip is it's about style but it is more than just what you're wearing. It's the swagger or confidence someone has in what they're wearing. Two people could be wearing the same thing, and one could be drippin,' and the other could just be fake drip.

While there is no doubt in my mind Paul had some of his own slang, I'm quite sure drip was not one of his. That said, I think Paul and the early church knew a thing or two about drip, especially when it came to Jesus. Our lesson from Romans today ends with the admonition to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ." Paul and the early church with him knew that what, or better who, you wear and how you wear it matters. This was so important to early Christians that the baptismal practices of the early church included stripping off old garments before entering the waters of baptism. Upon coming out of those baptismal waters, the newly baptized individual would be wrapped in white clothes. The new member of Christ's body was literally dripping from their baptism and clothed with a robe that signified their new life in Jesus. As Paul says in his letter to the Galatians, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." The new life a follower of Jesus began in the waters of baptism included a new look and a new way of being. It's that baptismal drip.

The white robes that early Christians received in baptism were not their daily attire, just as the white robes we wear as we lead worship here are not mine. Yet the change of clothes serves as a reminder of the calling to wear our Lord, to put on Christ, to be drippin' with Jesus. But what does it really look like to put on Jesus? Paul has given us some guidance throughout the book of Romans and our passage today to help us more fully understand. First, putting on Jesus is something that has been done for you. The early chapters of Romans share about God's work in and through Jesus to offer salvation to all people. Paul says in Romans 5 that "God proves God's love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." This is a gift—absolutely free and by God's grace. By God's own will and choosing, God poured God's love on us. When we receive this gift in faith, it changes us to the core. Who we are is different. It's not simply a change of what we do, but it is a change of being.

Given this change of who we are, we see that putting on Jesus is also something you do because of who you are. If you're wondering how Paul understood the way our doing is transformed by our being made new in Jesus, reread Romans 12, which was our New Testament readings from the last two Sundays. But if you don't have time right now to read Romans 12, he has summed it all up for us in our lesson today: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves has fulfilled the other law. The commandments... are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." Paul essentially says that to wear Christ is the most expensive type of garment because it will put you in debt forever. As one who wears Jesus, you will always be in the debt of loving your neighbor.

Now for all the talk of love in our world, sometimes it's hard to know what it really means to love others. Paul gives us some clues about what it does not mean. Romans 12:9 says, "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil and hold fast to what is good." What is translated as "let love be genuine" is actually a combination of an adjective meaning "without hypocrisy" and the noun "love." The love that a follower of Jesus is to show is a "without hypocrisy kind of love." I'm sure you've heard before that the word hypocrite comes from the Greek word used for actors wearing masks and inhabiting a character. As actors do, hypocrites portrayed someone who they were not, wearing a mask to make it all the more convincing.

Paul says that our love needs to take off our masks. Just as the early church had folks take off their clothes before baptism, loving like Jesus involves taking some old things off. Loving others can mean taking off ways of cutting people down with your words; removing approaches to arguments that are all about winning; eliminating methods of comparing yourself to others, so you can look better and they worse; stopping practices of finding your worth in having more than others; quitting the act of hiding behind anything that keeps your true and vulnerable self from view. These are just some of the things that need to be shed, so we can act on the “without hypocrisy love” that Paul describes.

In addition to removing these ways of acting or responding, there are other actions that we should not put on if we are going to drip with Jesus and wear love. Paul lists a few for us that come right from the decalogue or ten commandments. You shall not commit adultery, murder, steal, or covet. These ways of engaging your neighbor are inherently unloving, and we know it. They are intrinsically counter to a love that is good for your neighbor, that puts their cares on the same level as your cares. Maybe these aren't things you've done and maybe these ways of acting never cross your mind. But the hard truth is that acting in any way that does wrong, or works evil, to our neighbor falls right in line with these and is counter to the love to which Paul calls followers of Jesus. While we may never commit murder or adultery, we surely can make our own lists of how we do wrong to our neighbors. Our lists may include things like cutting someone off on the road because they drove in a way you didn't like, or quarreling with family members, or being petty toward or simply jealous of someone in your class, at work, or in your social group. It could also include other things like participating in predatory lending practices, stealing the work of others through plagiarizing, or perpetuating systems of discrimination based on race, class, sexual orientation or any other thing. I bet you know your list better than anyone else in the room. The truth is, it isn't really about a specific list of actions as much as it is about the disposition of love toward others. The invitation for you today is to take off those old things and try on something new—try on Jesus and his way of love.

If there is a taking off, there is also a putting on. Paul says it is about clothing ourselves with Jesus. Wearing these clothes is true to who we are in Christ. The masks of doing harm to others are merely a false representation of who we are made to be in the image of God. If love works no evil toward others, then love works for their good. But what does this love really look like? Our first guide to comprehending what this love looks like is what every good Sunday School answer has ever taught us: it's Jesus. Jesus is the one who showed love so greatly that we might even want to change our shirts from “love=love,” as true as that is, to “love=Jesus.” Jesus showed us that love is self-sacrificial and other-centered. Jesus showed us that love goes to the broken and harmed. Jesus showed us that love moves to the places of dread and death and decay and decides to find hope in God there. Jesus demonstrated that love is about giving instead of grasping.¹ Jesus showed us that love gives of itself fully and without reserve, all the way to the grave trusting that God resurrects love. Jesus is love.

¹ Luke Timothy Johnson difference between coveting and loving.

I would be remiss if I didn't pause here to make a small but utterly significant aside related to putting on Jesus and his self-sacrificial love. I must mention that too often in our culture, in our world, and really within Christianity, women and marginalized peoples (you name the group) have been told by preachers and leaders who look a lot like me that they must love through sacrifice and most of the time it only goes in one direction. So hearing me preach about a calling to self-sacrificial love may be causing some alarm bells to go off in your head this morning, and rightly so. While I don't want to water down a love that shows what it is most clearly in Christ's death on the cross, I will say that if the only people who are ever told to give up their hopes, desires, dreams, and selves are those society has already disempowered, then we are encouraging the church to put on something masquerading as Jesus, but not actually wearing him. I hope you'll hear that Jesus's love sacrifices especially for those the rest of society has marginalized and disregarded. And when we wear this love we will mutually sacrifice, especially in care for those same people.

In another of his letters Paul says some quite familiar things about love: "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." This love works itself out in the concrete particulars of everyday life. For the church in Rome, one concrete form that love took was not judging others when matters of conscience made them practice their faith differently. So when some thought it was ok to eat vegetables only and others thought that one day of the week was more important than all the others, Paul told those with opposing views not to judge each other and to welcome instead. Also in that community, love took the form of not causing others to stumble. So, if in their freedom, people ate foods knowing that it caused other people to be harmed in their faith, then Paul said the people eating were no longer walking in love. You see, no matter what the practice in question is, love's answer always involves giving for the sake of the other. So at times, even our freedom is bound or restricted by the debt of love we owe.

Paul concludes his calling to love, and I'll conclude this sermon, by speaking of the urgency of the time. Like someone waking to an alarm before daybreak, Paul says the time to dress in Jesus is here. Our debt of love is due, and the world is watching. Get on your Jesus attire, your love attire, because God's appointed time for living in the reality of salvation is now. It's getting lighter out, and people are looking to see what you're wearing and how you're wearing it. You see, here's the thing about that baptismal Jesus drip: people notice. So, what's your drip? My prayer is that its love.