

I've brought this mirror with me today not so much as to reassure myself of my appearance, although there might be a little of that going on, but so that I'm reminded that I'm preaching to myself. Everything I say this morning, I need to hear and heed. For I'll readily admit that I'm one of God's needy ones and I need to receive the truths Paul penned to the Colossians so many years ago, still fresh and pertinent.

But before we begin, sisters, would you pray with me?

Psalm 131:

Kind Father, don't let our hearts be proud this morning or our eyes haughty. Enable us to accept and even revel in your Father's love for us, and not concern ourselves with matters too great or too awesome for us to grasp. Instead, will you calm and quiet us, like weaned children who no longer cry or fidget or paw for their mother's milk? Yes, like weaned children make our souls within us, content, still, at rest, our ears burrowed to your chest listening for your heartbeat. May our cry for one another be this morning and ever after, "O beloved of God, put your hope in the LORD—now and always." In Jesus Name, we pray.

Our goal this morning, ladies, is to get to love. As you know, the theme verses for the weekend are Colossians 3:12-14:

And so, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone, just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. And here, the key verse (14) And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

If the purpose of this retreat is to get us to love, what is the path we must take to arrive there? I'm grateful for Bette's testimony of God's loving care for her and can't think too often as myself as a daisy and His love as the mighty Amazon cascading down heights to nourish me. Surely coming to believe this sets us on the path to love. And I believe we'd also do well to start back up at the beginning of Colossians 3 which you got a chance to look at during your devotional time this morning. I'll read the passage:

"If then you have been raised up with Christ, (you, His Children, the Chosen, holy and set apart, Christ's ambassadors, his witnesses, his peculiar people, his delight, the sanctified, redeemed, transformed, transplanted, the precious bride, gifted members of one beautiful body, God's workmanship, God's lights in the world, God's own salty ones, the poetry crafted by God. Yes, I'm talking about you,)

“ If then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory. Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry. For it is on account of these things that the wrath of God will come, and in them you also once walked, when you were living in them. But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. Do not lie to one another since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self *who is being renewed* to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him—a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all and in all.

Eleven verses packed with powerful, purifying direction, revealing our identity, telling us where to set our thoughts, what to put on and off, and consolidating our marching orders: to seek renewal by pursuing a true knowledge of God.

Renewal—change—transformation. Do those words excite you like they do me? What woman among us doesn't love a make-over story? After all, wasn't transformation the basis of our girlhood fairy tales? The cinder wench becomes the belle of the ball; the orphaned girl becomes a princess, the imprisoned maiden is liberated to a life of love and freedom.

I believe the popularity of The Learning Channel's **What Not to Wear** program stems from our God-given yearning to walk in all the loveliness and potential the Creator intended for us at our conception. The gist of the TV program is that a woman's name is submitted to the producers by her friends who suspect her to be undermining her inherent good looks by the way she dresses, essentially telegraphing to the world less than what she truly is and what her friends know her to be. If she's chosen to appear on the TV show, the hosts of the program descend on her with a gift card and their own best ideas of what constitutes a good look for her shape and size. Almost unanimously, after a week in New York City with the fashion and grooming wizards, the woman appears re-born, comfortable now in her skin, confident and utterly surprised that she could “look this way.” It's the ugly duckling's wish deep in each of us---to bloom as lovely, desirable and cherished for who we are.

Perhaps none of us in this room will have our names sent in for this experience. But, as they say in EE, I have some good news for you: **the** good news. You and I who have come to believe that Jesus died in our place to cancel the debt for our sins and are making Him

Lord of our lives—you and I are part of God’s great makeover story. He takes us-- women prone to sin, dissatisfaction and self centeredness in all its nasty and ensnaring expressions—and by his power, his word, his grace, his church, He transforms our hearts and the effect is beautiful. I’m not saying that now as Christians we are better looking than if we hadn’t come to God, but I do believe that when the heart is transformed, the will and the spirit will follow and it will show on our faces.

We are not passive in this like the inert recipients of some divine chemical process. Colossians 3: 1-14 is one of the treasured places in the Bible where God reveals his great plan, inviting us to participate in this transformation by renewing our minds with the knowledge of **who He is** and the knowledge of **Whose we are**. How important it is to know we’re loved as we take on the instructive truths of Colossians 3:1-14.

Because it’s very tempting to think the Christian life is simply a catalogue of behaviors, do’s and don’ts, mostly don’ts. And some of us (me) honestly really perk up when we get to application passages in the Word, for **doing** seems so much easier than **being**.

But our good and wise Father has better plans for his children than a life of simply lip (and limb) service. He has deigned to give us Himself and a life of relationship, hemmed in by love, directed by wisdom, sustained by care, bathed in grace. As we grow in believing this, our hearts will be warmed and when warmed they become malleable in the Creator’s hands—the result --transformation.

Do you find, like me, that the notion of taking off and putting on certain items of clothing really resonates in your female soul? Most of us know from experience how a new piece of clothing will boost our morale. In fact, I hope you’ve noticed what I have on, carefully selected to give me confidence for this morning’s talk. Last month I was shopping at Macy’s and on my way out stopped to see my good friend Wilma at the make- up counter. We talked for a bit and then she said, knowing my weakness for floral fabrics, “There’s a skirt you need to see.” And I said, “The black Ralph Lauren? I just bought it!” I love little skirts for many reasons not the least of which is I think they camouflage what I’ve come to terms with as saddlebags below my hips. The black top is part of what the British call “a twin set” consisting of a shell and this cardigan. You’ll probably never see me without the cardigan as I sport some clumps of extra breast tissue at the place where my arms meet my chest (called “spillage” in the fashion world) and I’m a little self conscious of it. Pearly bits of jewelry always make me think of my youngest, Gretchen, whose name means pearl. I always like to wear “my family” in some way when I give a talk to remind me that even if I bomb here, I’m always welcome at home. The satiny brooch is called a “cockade” and was favored by Jackie Kennedy who had it incorporated in many of her formal dresses, as a

tribute to her French heritage. Brooches until recently have always smacked of the queen mother to me, but I've lately developed an appreciation for them; perhaps because I'm rapidly approaching a queen mother's age.

And although it may not be true for all of us, some of us are probably guilty of spending more time getting our outer wardrobe together on Sunday than tending to our inner one. C.S. Lewis has written: **“Women sometimes have the problem of trying to judge by artificial light how a dress will look by daylight. That is very like the problem of all of us: to dress our souls not for the electric lights of the present world but for the daylight of the next. The good dress is the one that will face that light. For that light will last longer.” May 19th (The world's last night)**

“Dressing our souls in the good dress”. I love this phrase, don't you? If knowing we are loved by God is the first part of our trip, dressing our souls in the good dress is the second leg of our journey towards love.

Dressing our souls involves shucking off of old habits and dark ways and adopting new habits, new ways. God wants to be involved in this process as well as a guide, a beacon, an engine. It's not that He lifts a high bar and then suggests that we meet it every day. Every day He invites us to know him better through his Word, to trust the guidance that we find there, to move towards Him, relying on the power and strength He provides. As a life-long struggler with fear and anxiety, it simply isn't helpful when I'm caught in the throes of this ancient foe for a fellow Christian to opine: “God says not to be anxious about anything.” Knowledge alone of the desirable way doesn't fix it. I'm grateful for the passages in the psalms that reach me with real life saving power, teaching that God hears and will rescue me from my distress. And in my experience at least, I've come to believe that it will involve process—time, truth, the opportunity to trust, the prayers of the saints. It will take these things, too, to help us peel off the old wardrobe that belonged to our former lives and don the new wardrobe befitting children of the King. Please hear this exhortation this morning as a loving invitation inherent with helps, not the presentation of a rigid chart of behaviors to be affixed to the refrigerator door of your spiritual life.

And in that light, I can't shake a recent image here:

Last month my husband and I were privileged to accompany a choral group from Columbia College to Italy. In Rome, we were part of a tour that visited the Vatican and had the opportunity to spend a few minutes in the Sistene Chapel, the private chapel of the Popes since the late 1400's. Our tour guide had spent several minutes outside the Sistene Chapel priming us for the short time we would spend inside. He previewed some of the artwork we would see upon the walls and ceiling and told us a little bit of the artist's Michaelangelo's life. He also instructed us to be absolutely silent when we were in the

space, as a symbol of reverence and respect. In short, we were an instructed and prepared people.

We were ushered into the chapel that already had a couple hundred people in it. For the first time during this remarkable experience my eyes filled with tears as I gazed upward at the ceiling, overcome, I think by the work of the artist undertaken for the love of God. It was easy to be silent. But the room was still abuzz with the noise of the others who had come into this room, and periodically, very regularly, five of the Vatican guards stationed at the front of the room would emit a united and forceful “Shhhhhhhhhhh” in attempt to quiet the crowd, and I suppose take them to the point of reverence and awe. It didn’t, as demonstrated that these utterances were repeated with regularity. I experienced their strong suggestions to shut up as a kind of shaming coercion, and I wished that all the visitors that day had had the priming our group had experienced; it was easy for us to be in awe.

That’s what I pray will be true of our time together this morning as we look at behaviors to forsake and behaviors to adopt—that we wouldn’t feel shamed into behaving but would know ourselves to be loved and awed into walking in a manner worthy of the children of our great God.

Ladies, we need to get to love by noon. So to Colossians 3: 1-11. You’re probably aware that the apostle Paul constantly links doctrine to practice in his letters —truth to trial, the possible to the path, the divine to the daily. This is distinctive in the ancient world where often pagan religions dictated no special behaviors aside from periodic sacrifices at shrines to the gods. How good of Paul to connect the dots for us! Balanced, healthy people can’t embrace doctrine without exhibiting consequent behavior. But, again a warning: if our behavior is just that—behavior, not rooted in heart change, in no time we will be emitting the stinking self righteousness of the Pharisees.

I’m reminded of a time years ago in my homeschooling career when we had worked through a video from the public library on etiquette for children. At the dinner hour one night, my #2 girl started to reach for something, checked herself, and looked up at me and said, “Mom, are we still on manners?” The notion that manners were a way of life, not a periodic practice hadn’t penetrated. So with us, as we seek to know our God better, our changed hearts will sprout changed behavior, but until that comes most naturally, it’s up to us to exercise our limbs in preparation for strength and endurance by choosing the right behavior.

Paul writes that because we have died with Christ and have risen to a new life in him, we are to put to death the remnants of our previous fleshly life. He lists a catalogue of these behaviors: immorality, impurity, passion, and evil desire, anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech. Pastor and author Tim Keller notes that these behaviors stem from a worship disorder—that these evil desires are really “epi-desires,” (Epi-from the Greek meaning “above.”) intense longings for false gods that distort our souls, our lives, our testimonies.

Really, **whom** are we effectively worshipping when we pursue sexual immorality? A quick answer might be ourselves—our need to be sovereign over our own bodies. **Whom** do we worship when we step on the roller coaster of endless acquisition? We worship King Temporary Fix, who for moments at a time seems to numb the aching chasm that only God can fill. **Whom** are we worshipping when we slander another? It might be our own pious notion of ourselves, whose moral perfection seems so much shinier than the person we’re slandering. When we use abusive speech, **what idol** are we effectively worshipping? Possibly the idol of our own superiority. If we truly knew the great Creator God, who’s lavished wave upon wave of grace upon us, we’d come to realize that our own competency, sovereignty, glorified reputations, and King Temporary Fix are strident dictators who can never be satisfied and are never worthy of our worship.

For when we find ourselves serving those false Gods, like the potential candidate chosen for the TV show, we are not telegraphing to the world whose and what we really are.

In my own life, I’ve come to realize that two of my “epi-desires” that periodically threaten to usurp the throne belonging to our Great God are my own comfort and the fear of man, more specifically fear of being humiliated in front of others. I have enough good breeding to wince a little as I make these known. Several of you have been in the How People Change course with me and have heard my confession of how my need to be comfortable—that is, not put out too much-- has shaped my service to my family. How I effectively looked at my youngest 5 years ago when she was sixteen and communicated without speech, “I’m pretty worn out; you can go ahead and finish raising yourself, can’t you?” And from time to time I have to wonder if my perceived need for a nap in the afternoon just might keep me from walking in some good works God prepared for me that day.

Admitting to you that I’m fearful of others’ opinions takes a little more courage. I can pull off confidence in any crowd; but there are moments when if pressed I would confess that I think you’re only attracted to the competent, doctor’s wife Brenda and so I keep the anxious, dependent, myopic girl from public view. I know these are my own particular epi-

desires; I know when they're apt to lift their ugly little heads and roar. And I know there is grace from the Father's hand to deal with them.

Sisters, I appeal to you, seek to know **your** epi desires; seek to know what/who rules your heart; what is the thing with which you think you can't live without? Could it be financial security; a glowing reputation, applause, autonomy, the need to be right, a full belly? What one thing taken away from you would you find devastating? And when you realize what rules your heart—what false idol, who didn't die for you, who can never empower you to turn from sin, who's seeming grace is just a temporary relief, confess it and cling to hope. Turn to the real and only God, whom Jesus taught us to call, "DaDa." It's the primal cry of the infant and one -we are assured again and again from the Word--that will be heard.

So, one has to ask: what kind of wardrobe becomes a Christian woman?

A couple of years ago, my then teenager was responsible for watching a pair of young children twice a week during the summer. Often she'd bring them over to our house and I'd pop in from running errands and they'd be sitting at the kitchen island snacking. I always marveled at how clean and put together they looked. Clothes freshly laundered, socks creased just so, the little girl sporting a matching hair bow. This was made more wonderful to me because their mother was taking rounds of chemotherapy that summer, yet she had bothered to take such pains with her children's appearance, evidence of her love and regard for them. It certainly made me wonder about my own children whom I believe I let dress themselves from an early age—the first two were carefree tomboys, the third (at last) a girly girl but one who dressed more like a tart than a princess. And then came # 4 whose tired mother had all but pulled out and she as a toddler for days at a time appeared in her favorite garb: a white cotton tiered petticoat, jelly shoes, 101 Dalmatians T Shirt and pop beads. I'm sure when strangers saw her they wondered about her mother's mothering.

So truly I marveled at the love and care these children's mother marshaled on their behalf every morning, fighting nausea and fatigue to present her children so appealingly dressed before the world. And I have to wonder: if an earthly mother imperfectly demonstrates care for her children by dressing them so, **how much more a perfect Heavenly Father?**

What is in the wardrobe the King has provided for us? We can be confident that it is one that becomes us as His children and maybe causes others to marvel at the parent

who'd outfit His children so lavishly. So, let's take these "to do" verses –these 'what to wear" verses to heart this morning—to a heart that's being transformed.

"Therefore as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved,"(just the way we are? Figure flawed, prone to rebellion, jealously, fear?) "Clothe yourselves" (**we're** to do it, it is something we're to put on) with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." Verse 14 continues, "And over all these...put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." Now, I'm a bit of a fabric collector (hoarder actually) and I wondered if these qualities were fabrics what would they look like. Would they have to be handled gently? Could they be laundered at home or need to be sent out at some expense? Were they soil-resistant? Crushable? Permanent press? Would they be too dressy for everyday wear and only appropriate at church and social functions? (I have some experience wearing lovely clothes out in public and enjoying the look of them, but changing into things more comfortable and less lovely to really live in at home). Knowing God to be a very practical sort of being, I sensed that He intended these garments to be quite wearable, like an undergarment almost, and I could probably wear other things over these and enhance the whole outfit, but this was the stuff that needed to be closest to my heart. So, I'll tell you what these fabrics look like to me, as I might wear them around the house.

Compassion is an absorbent material, that at times is already full with some precious ointment. It may be the oil of gladness that I share with a struggling daughter at an academic triumph; it may be just absorbent understanding as I listen to the rigors of my husband's day, not jumping in to give advice or trying to take away the disappointment or the doubt, but just close attentiveness. It might be an honest reaction of tears as I share in a little way a grief in a friend's life. Compassion doesn't take the pain away, but it does soak up the loneliness. Wearing compassion accentuates not our waistline but draws attention to the fact that our ears were made to hear and our hands were fashioned to hold. **Compassion was the garment Jesus** wore when he wept with the sisters at the tomb of Lazarus and when he reached to touch the untouchable leper in order to heal him.

Kindness is a fabric I have admired on others. I have been at the receiving end of kindness all my life, and I know what it feels like to brush up against. Gentle, and unexpected, it doesn't draw attention to itself, and its beauty is in its subtlety, like the feel of the inside of a leather glove. I show kindness to my husband when he calls and tells me he'll be late coming home, and I can hear both the frazzle in his voice and the dread of having a mad wife, and I say, with sincerity, "OK, Kellar, I'll be praying for you. 'Love you" choosing that option over the just as real and pressing, "But I made a good dinner and you said you'd be home and how come your partners can't handle it?" Of all the stellar qualities

of the Proverbs 31 woman, this one fascinates me the most: the New American Standard translation of v. 26 b reads “and the teaching of kindness on her tongue.” Not only are we Christian women to model kindness, but we are to teach it as well. And I have to wonder if it wasn’t his kindness that compelled the children to crowd around Jesus and made wee Zacheaus climb down from that tree.

What does **humility** look like? It was our first garment, amazingly sensitive, amazingly resilient, amazingly protective, but so amazingly apparent. Humility is our nakedness. It is my being alongside my husband and his knowing my pain, my inadequacies, my fears, and what’s even harder for me to share, my dreams. There are no facades, no masks, just pure, apparent human being, in need of a savior, but in the process of being sanctified. When I choose to wear humility, my children know that I am not invincible; my husband knows I am not always right, and I know my motives are often mixed—oh, my argument may sound like righteousness, but there’s a good deal of trying to save Brenda’s face involved, too. Humility is what the God of the Universe squeezed into when he took the human form. It was the garment of choice to serve. Humility is what Christ wore on the cross, exposed to all the world; there was no modest fold of fabric to cover his brutal nakedness. He can identify with us in our humility for he has borne it so. And if He willingly took up humility, who am I to insist on something more grand?

Again, and again, I’m struck in scripture how it’s humility God desires in us; not our power hungry proficiencies propelled on his behalf; not our dry and gritty obedience, but our humble, true and exposed hearts lifted to Him...no matter the venue, no matter the pain. Humility is just living in the truth of who we are: creature, creature, creature, not creator. Any power, gift or strength, any impulse towards good within us is there only because the creator God chose to mirror the most infinitesimal fraction of who he is and placed it there.

Some of you know me well and know that for years I struggled with anxiety about travelling, especially by air. Years I spent crying out to God with such language as, “Why can’t I be normal like other women? Why does it have to be fear of travel?” Have I shared with you that in the last few years God has lifted that? “It is God’s doing; and it is marvelous in our eyes.” This lifting enabled me to say “yes” to my surprised husband’s invitation to take him up on a trip to Italy this spring. Frankly, I surprised even myself. I was wise enough, though, to enlist some prayer support before leaving. The day before I left, my friend Mary Petersen suggested that I copy down her phone number and if I found myself needing some focused prayer, just call her and say simply, “Mary, pray!” and hang up. I took note of that offer thinking, “Hmm, what are my chances of doing that? I’m not sure how to even turn my cell phone on.”

Beware of over confidence. Our cell phones didn't work in Italy and internet access was sporadic. At one point a few days into the trip, when we did have internet, I sent Mary an email of a single line: "Mary, would you pray that God would lift the anxiety I'm feeling?" It wasn't anxiety about air travel, it was the unavailability of the bathroom on the bus that put me into a panic. Middle aged, a bit overweight, the veteran of four childbirths—two of which produced babies over 9 lbs., I like to know where the toilets are in any given situation and I had presumed there would be one available the tour bus. There was one, but it was not in use due to the recent implementation of ecology laws in Italy. I had a moment of utter despair when I discovered this, not entirely sane after close to 18 hours of travel anyway. My old wiring began to fire off jolts of fear that I'd have a bathroom accident in front of 42 college students, their choir director and his family, our tour guide and the driver of the bus. And if I were really to parse that, to follow that to conclusion—so, what if I did have such an accident? Did I really need to be universally admired by all for my pristine behavior at all times and superlative self control? No, and besides, stuff happens. But fear triumphed over facts and humbled and needy, I sent for help. Mary prayed and alerted my quilting group and they prayed and I had moments of regular girl bliss on that once in a lifetime trip. I'll always be grateful for the relief my humility triggered.

Donning this garment of humility is a two step process; the first involves our taking some things off—things like pride and our own desires. And the second step, is reaching out and putting on—you guessed it—Jesus. Have you ever worn the garment of someone you loved and found you couldn't help thinking of them and even imitating their behavior? So it is when we put on our Lord, his righteousness is ours on loan forever, but his humility activates our muscles to serve and our minds to forgive, and our hearts and mouths to cry out to the Father.

What is **gentleness** and how does it drape across the skin? I think of the caress of the wind—gentle as it stirs—that delicious, wonderful light breeze in the spring you feel but can't see. Yet you know it's there and the touch brings a rush of expectation for the balm of warm weather. "Gentleness" means most to me in terms of touch; it's a paradox, but gentleness as I think about it—must exert some pressure to be identified. It occurs to me that gentleness might be like spandex, reining in our excesses and making us appear firm and sleek. Years ago, I used to let my kids go off to school with the time-worn maternal benediction of "Did you make your bed?" But I was convicted that the last moments before they are sent out in the world are precious moments and that I wanted to acknowledge that time, and I began to chase after them and hug them and kiss them, and just seal them with an affirmation of my love as they crossed that threshold into the world. This met with some resistance from one durable daughter who made a big fuss out of not wanting to be kissed and hugged and some surprise from the oldest, my then self-reliant

ten year old. But after a while they would come searching for me before they left if I hadn't found them first asking for a kiss. A kiss is a kind of gentle pressure that reminds them they are precious to me. Gentleness is a fabric with pressure—it's felt. I'm sure it was conveyed in the touch of Jesus as he took the departed child's hand and commanded, "Talitha, kum! Little girl, I say to you, arise!" (Mark 5:41) And it's the nature of his touch with me, and I suspect with you, when he welcomes me as I turn to Him again in need, fear, repentance.

And **patience**. If compassion is absorbent, kindness a leather glove, humility nakedness and gentleness spandex, something you can feel on your skin, patience is—sweat suit material: comfortable, accommodating, warm, standing up to repeated washings, and even getting nicer for the wear. If mothers were issued uniforms in America, they'd be cut from this cloth. Although they've seen a lot of this material on me, I'm not sure my family has experienced the feel of this fabric. Patience is what God demonstrates again and again towards me, and I want to do it too, so when my oldest child stumbles or my youngest one cries I can hold her—literally or figuratively—and she will feel the assurance that she can take her time; her mother will be there, always believing in her, always rooting for her. Don't you know that it's patience our Savior wears as he intercedes for us night and day at the right hand of the throne of our Father?

And finally, **there's love, at last**. Love which we read binds all these together in perfect unity. Love --- the great overcoat of the Christian faith. And of what is it constructed? I think of the crazy quilt stitched with velvet and satin that I slept under when I sought sanctuary at my aunt's home during my tumultuous first year at the University of Denver. Homesick and overwhelmed, I would call my Aunt Sandra and barely chirp her name before my voice cracked, and she would say, "We'll be right there." And she was; she'd pick me up and take me out to her house in the suburbs and feed me and encourage me and tuck me under this quilt at night, (having first foisted on me several of her favorite books for nighttime reading). And I'd lie in bed for some time, relishing being in a home, and I'd wonder at the feel of this old quilt that lay heavy and comforting across me. It really belonged to her husband, having been given to him when a child by a doting aunt. Sandy said she liked to think of Hank as a little boy, pulling the blanket up snug under his chin, a highly effective but luxurious way of keeping out the frigid North Dakota winters. How he might have fingered the odd shaped pieces, snippets taken from party dresses and cat-off ties, scrap pieces of irregular shape, pieced together like a topographical map gone awry; how the little boy Hank might have wondered at the whimsy of the various stitches—cross hatching here, a parade of flower stitches there, a supple satin chain rolling its way down various seams. The beauty that came from variety—irregular pieces of sumptuous scraps stitched with love---how there was harmony in the whole, because of the artist's hand.

And this, I think, is the most significant thing I have to say this morning. God's love comes to us so full of variety—it was there in the sun filtering through the leafy trees this dawn; it's there in your tablemate's smile; it's here in the fullness of His word; it was there in the reassuring pat you received from your sister in Christ this morning. God's love comes and settles around us despite ourselves; it's love that comes in irregular shapes and from unexpected places—like the velvet cut from party dresses and the satin from smoking jackets. Yet it's here, in our lives this morning. The beneficiaries of God's love surely, we are the conduits as well—and so gently, I want to remind you, since we have been purified by obeying the truth, let us love one another deeply. And in a way only each of us can. Some can serve, some can affirm, some can hug, some can encourage, and I believe our awkward offerings of love in touch, encouragement, service and gift are so beautiful in the Father's sight. For we each have something to add to each other's scrappy but lovely, lovely overcoat of Christian love.

The cost of such garments? It's been paid. Every day as I open the wardrobe stores the Holy Spirit provides for me and for you, I can see these particular garments hung, their tags aflutter and upon each tag is written, "designed for you expressly, Brenda, Kathy, Mary, paid for in full by your Savior, Jesus Christ."

How shall we launder these fabrics of our God-given wardrobe? At home, in the grateful cycle. They can be washed in private or in confession with a trusted friend. The detergent—oddly—is that precious blood that the manufacturer has provided only for the asking; and like the tag that comes attached to raw silk, imperfections are part of the beauty and the nature of these fabrics and mark them as authentically mine and yours.

We can choose to don them first thing every morning or throughout the day if we find ourselves beginning to respond out of the tawdry clothing of our former lives. For this wardrobe is a good look on us and within our reach and our budgets. Tailored made for God's own children:

Chosen, holy and set apart, Christ's ambassadors, his witnesses, his peculiar people, the sanctified, redeemed, transformed, transplanted, the precious bride, gifted members of one beautiful body, God's workmanship, God's lights in the world, God's own salty ones, the poetry written by God. Amen.

Please join with me in a prayer that Charles Spurgeon prayed over his congregation more than a hundred years ago. For the desire still burns today.

Will you pray with me:

“We do with all our hearts pray “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.” Lord, help us to do Thy will. Take the crippled kingdom of our own lives and reign Thou over it. Let spirit and body be consecrated to God. May there be no reserves; may everything be given up to Thee.

Reign for ever!

Pierced King, despised and nailed to a tree, sit Thou on the glorious high throne in our hearts,

And may our lives prove that Thou are Lord over us;

By our every thought and desire, and imagination, and word, and act,

In every respect being under Thy divine control.

In Jesus Name.