

WGUMC April 14, 2019
Luke 19:28-40

“Cloaks on the Road”

Here it is, Palm Sunday again. I've preached a lot of Palm Sunday sermons. I've preached about the Jesus Parade and the powder keg of political tensions that he was riding into. I've preached about all the hellish events of Holy Week, leading up to Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. But today, I want to stay in the moment, in the crowd, on the road with Jesus. The text says, “As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road.”

Let's just stop there and consider what these folks are doing and why. I thought about what we would do if someone as famous as Jesus rode by. We would try to get a selfie, but we probably wouldn't take off our clothes, unless we were young women at a rock concert throwing underwear. But we're talking outerwear, here. It's more likely that the people took off their cloaks because they were hailing Jesus as king and wanted to give him the royal treatment and they didn't have a red carpet handy.

There's something almost ritualistic about laying cloaks on the road for a king, and ritual actions lend themselves to many different interpretations. So I want you to hold that image in your mind this morning so we can ask ourselves: what would it mean and what would it look like in our own lives if we were to lay down our cloaks for Jesus?

To figure that out, we need to think about what we mean by "cloaks." We find the first clothing in the Book of Genesis. Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and discovered they were naked. So they covered up their shame with some leaves. Ever since then, we have been covering up our shame, too. So one thing that laying down our cloaks for Jesus means is pulling the cover off our shame.

Being naked before our Creator is about being willing to give a true account of ourselves. In AA, it's about taking that brutally honest spiritual inventory. Taking off our outer wear is about getting real with God, and laying down our cloaks is about being vulnerable,

which is something none of us want to do. It's every dream you've ever had of getting to school or work only to discover that you've forgotten to put on your clothes. But no matter how painfully embarrassing it is, we won't get anywhere if we don't get naked with God.

Another way to look at it is: unless we run for high office, we're going to have to do the opposition research on ourselves. No one else is going to do it for us (though our in-laws might lend a hand). We don't want to wait until some catastrophe forces us into it, so we'd best start practicing honesty today. Better lay down our leaves. They aren't covering up much anyway. [I lay down some leaves.]

Giving God our bare naked truth is just the beginning. In the Bible, clothing has other meanings. In both testaments, the clothing of a spiritual person holds a certain spiritual power that can be passed on to others. In the Book of 2 Kings, Elijah gave his disciple Elisha the mantle he was wearing and when the young man put it on,

he immediately became as powerful as the old prophet. [2 Kings 2:14] And in the Gospels, we see the crowds pressing in on Jesus to touch the hem of his garment so they can tap into his healing power. The woman with the hemorrhage said, “If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.” [Matthew 9:21]

So in the Bible, the laying down of cloaks is also a laying down of our power. And it is a recognition that our power comes from someplace else. As Paul told the Corinthians: God gives us the power of eternal life, but God puts it in clay jars, in bodies that are going to die, to make it crystal clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. [2 Corinthians 4:7]

If the life, death and resurrection of Jesus teaches us anything, it teaches us that we have to lay down our power, but the world doesn't want us to. The world tells us that we should be at the head of everything when Jesus teaches us that our proper place is to be at the foot. When Jesus took off his cloak, wrapped a towel around

his waist, and knelt down to wash his disciples' feet, he was showing us what to do with our power.

Dr. Gary Morsch learned about laying down his power when he was a young man just out of medical school and went off to India to meet Mother Teresa. He knew that he had the education and the tools and he envisioned all the healing he could do in this Third World country. When he arrived, Mother Teresa greeted him and after some small talk, wrote something on a piece of paper, folded it, and told him to take it to Sister Priscilla.

The sister led him through the ward for dying men. He thought, I can be of help here. But she didn't stop there. Then she led him through the ward for dying women, and he could see the work was cut out for him. But she didn't stop there. She took him to a kitchen where they were preparing rice over an open fire, and he thought, Oh good, they are going to feed me first. But she didn't stop there.

She kept going right out the back door and into an alleyway filled with a mountain of the most disgusting garbage. The smell was

so bad it made him cough and gag. Then Sister Priscilla told him, “We need you to take this garbage down the street to the dump” and handed him two buckets and a shovel. And then she left him. He was in shock. It took him a while to realize that this full-of-himself doctor from Kansas City was going to spend all afternoon digging garbage in Kolkata to learn a lesson about humility. [from Dean Nelson, in *The Christian Century*, Nov. 23, 2016]

God doesn't need us to save the world. Sometimes, God just needs us to take out the trash. I hate to say that I'd been here for several years before I asked for a dumpster key.

We all need to learn to lay down our cloaks of power and prestige, lay down our degrees and expertise. But you know how it is. We don't want to take on menial tasks at our own house or God's house because these jobs don't feed us and we have better things to do, which is why churches are always looking for volunteers. But the truth is that there is no job too low for us if Jesus is the one who is hiring us. There is no task so demeaning that his love can't fill

it up with meaning. If we want to follow Jesus, we have to realize that Christ is our head and we belong at his feet.

At the Maundy Thursday service we are going to have a special foot washing. I've asked one of our oldest active members and the mother of one of our youngest if they would be willing to have their feet washed as we all reflect on Christ's example of servant leadership. [I lay down my doctoral robe]

We may be reluctant to lay down the cloak of privilege and give up our entitlement, our sense of importance, but when we do, when we empty ourselves of our own power, we are in a very good position to be filled up with God's power. And that is the power that will save us. What happens when we humble ourselves is that we begin to look more like Jesus. We get a whole new wardrobe. Paul says that we clothe ourselves with Christ. [Galatians 3:27] We strip off the old self and put on the new self that is being renewed every day in the image of our Creator. [Colossians 3:10]

This new cloak we are wearing becomes our Christian character. As St. Ambrose pointed out a very long time ago, when the Bible talks about clothing it is often talking about character. A good person is clothed in strength and dignity. [Proverbs 31:25] The redeemed are clothed with the garments of salvation and covered with the robe of righteousness [Isaiah 61:10]. And God has turned our mourning into dancing and has taken off our sackcloth and clothed us with joy. [Psalm 30:11]

These are the clothes that I talk about when I am writing a eulogy which is what I was doing on Friday. It was a casket funeral for a woman named Grace and there was a viewing before the service began. I know the family carefully chose the clothing that she would be wearing. Grace was well dressed in life and well dressed in death. But really, no one is going to remember what you were wearing to your funeral. Anyone who really loved you is not going to care about your outerwear (or your underwear). What they are going to hold onto for dear life is your inner wear, your

character. It is the Christ you wear in your mind and heart that will be the legacy you leave to them.

But we don't have to wait until we die. We can lay our Christ cloaks on this road while we are still alive. Ambrose knew that the road to salvation is rough. Following Jesus has never been easy. But it is especially hard when so many Christians live unChrist-like lives. Most people have no problem with Jesus, only his followers. So Ambrose encourages those of you who are clothed with Christ to lay down your cloaks, lay down what is Christ-like in you, so that others might see your good works and give glory to your God in heaven. [Matthew 5:16] That way, you can make the road to salvation a little smoother. You can make it a little easier for Christ to ride into someone else's heart. [*Ancient Christian Commentary Series*, Luke 19:29] [Lay down the overalls.]

I was at a Finance Committee meeting on Thursday and that usually isn't the easiest place to follow Jesus. But I ran into Gina Libbey. Some of you know her as one of the success stories from

Village House. She has worked her way from guest to staff and she's now in stable housing. Though she has met wonderful Christians in many churches around San Jose, she was telling me on Thursday that she needs a spiritual home and Willow Glen feels like home. Over the past four years, Jan and Jim Leonard, Linda Yepiz, Liz Pense and a whole bunch of other people have laid down their Christ-made cloaks for her so that she could find her way home to God. Being around you all, Gina has an idea of what it looks like to stay on the path with Jesus no matter what. I told her that we would be so blessed to welcome her into the Willow Glen family. I can hardly wait. I don't know about palm branches, but we'll roll out the red carpet, and I promise you, even the stones will shout out!