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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
Lectionary 23A, September 10, 2023  
Romans 13:8-14  
Like Joseph's Coat of Many Colors

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text for this morning's sermon is our Epistle Reading — that beautiful reading about love in Romans 13. Consider the way that reading begins:

<sup>8</sup>Owe no one anything, except to love one another;  
(Romans 13:8, RSV)

What a good rule for starting out the day! What a good way of life, to wake up in the morning, wipe the sleep from our eyes, say our breakfast prayer, enjoy that early meal, and then resolve to go out into the world owing no anything save for love. Folks on the sidewalk, people on the bus or subway, colleagues at work... this whole busy town: we owe one another love. That is to be our principle.

Now, we have quite a word there: "owe." St. Paul believes that love is something we are under obligation to give to one another. We owe one another love. We owe it, I firmly believe, because we bear the name of Jesus Christ. We are called "Christians," and that we are. We are the folks in this city and in this world who are supposed to be Christ-like. We are to be built on Jesus... conformed to him. To use the lovely phrase of Martin Luther, we are to be "little Christs" in this world. And if so, then when we wake up in the morning and start out on a new day, we are under discipline. We are under obligation to Jesus. We *owe* something in this world. We owe love *to* this world.

I guess someone could object that St. Paul is not talking about the relationship of Christians to the *world* — a world that has some unpleasant people in it — but rather to the people of the *church* — where people are nice! The objection could focus on the words "one another":

<sup>8</sup>Owe no one anything, except to love *one another*;  
(Romans 13:8, RSV)

Paul, so the claim would go, is not talking about loving our neighbors in this city, but simply loving one another in the church.

But I want to fight against this interpretation, for two reasons. A first reason against this narrow reading of Paul's rule has to do with the Biblical context for our reading. Paul's rule comes from Romans Chapter 13. That is a

chapter famous for its teaching about the duty of Christians to be obedient to the secular ruler — a ruler back then who certainly was not a Christian. A Christian ruler and a Christian government did not come along for three centuries. So, in Romans 13, St. Paul is teaching us about our relationship to the world — not just to the church. Some of his opening verses go this way:

<sup>1</sup>Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God... <sup>7</sup>Pay all of them their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due. (Romans 13:1, 7, RSV)

Our reading begins with the very next verse:

<sup>8</sup>Owe no one anything, except to love one another;  
(Romans 13:8, RSV)

It is not unreasonable, then, to think that the apostle is still talking about the relationship of the Christian to *everyone*, not just to people in the church.

But my main reason for resisting the narrow interpretation is simply that I think it is a small-souled reading. It is unworthy of Jesus. After all, Jesus went about Galilee and Judea loving everyone in sight — not just his disciples, but all the people of the towns and villages. Always he was trying to save folks. Whether his words and deeds were gentle or severe, he was always trying to save them, always treating them with love. St. Paul wants us to be like Jesus.

So, I have jotted down a title for this sermon. It goes this way: “Like Joseph’s Coat of Many Colors.” I am moved to that title by the culminating verse in our Epistle Lesson. St. Paul ends our passage with these words:

<sup>14</sup>But *put on the Lord Jesus Christ*, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. (Romans 13:14, RSV)

Put on Jesus. When we wake up in the morning and dress for the day, let us put on Jesus, like a robe. Let us stretch out our arms and slide them through the sleeves of that robe. It is a many-colored robe, like Joseph’s many-colored coat of old (Genesis 37:3, KJV).

The King James Version puts it that way about Joseph’s coat: His father “made him a coat of many colours.” Some modern translations simply say that it was a “long robe with sleeves” (RSV) or “an ornate robe” (NIV). For my purposes, I am going to go with the old translation about a coat of “many colours.” The reason for that is that to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ,” as St. Paul bids us to do, is a pretty complex thing. There are many dimensions

involved in growing into Christ. It challenges our souls in many ways to “put on Christ.”

So, for the rest of this sermon I want to lift up some of the colors in this divine coat. I want to discuss some of the ways in which we should try to grow that we might be putting on Christ.

It is easy to come up with a list of colors. It is easy to find the dimensions of growth that are appropriate for us. We can simply find them in St. Paul’s passage about the “fruit of the Spirit.” That’s Galatians Chapter 5. The word “Spirit” in that passage is capitalized. It means the Holy Spirit. It means the very Spirit of Jesus Christ dwelling in us and showing forth in us. The great verse goes this way:

<sup>22</sup>But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup>gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law. (Galatians 5:22-23, RSV)

This list is a mighty list. Each fruit of the Spirit is worthy of its own sermon. There is too much here for me deal with in one sermon. So, let me lift up just three of them — not three of the famous fruits of the Spirit — love, joy, and peace — but three that might be overlooked or underappreciated, but which I think are important in our day and age too, alongside the others. I am thinking of these three: patience, kindness, and self-control. Let’s take them in order, beginning with patience.

Remember that we are speaking of the “fruits of the Spirit.” That means, we are speaking of the virtues we can find in Jesus and which we ought to strive toward too. So, patience. Was Jesus patient? Well, as a first note we can recall that Jesus was patient with his disciples. By and large, they were an uncomprehending lot. They came from their fishing boats and tax booths. They were more acquainted with nets and winds and tides than with book learning. They could hardly take in the spiritual revolution Jesus was proposing in his new conception of the Messiah, connecting that great figure with the cross and suffering. They were slow to learn, but Jesus was patient with them. More generally, Jesus was patient with town after town, village after village. He did not have a lot of success in his ministry. He would enter a village, heal people, perform miracles, forgive sins, and give hope to folks, but few of them followed him. He would have to move on to the next village and start all over again. But he did not give up. He was patient, I say, with us human beings.

Putting on Christ, then, means that when we wake up in the morning and set out on the day, we ready ourselves, as best we can, to be patient with the people we meet that day. If we have a temper, we resolve to hold that temper. If we are easily offended, we resolve to seek charitable interpretations of the

deeds of our neighbors, so that we will not be so troubled by them. We will try to be more sympathetic to others, more understanding, more patient.

Next, let us think of kindness. That is one of the fruits of the Spirit: kindness. Was Jesus kind? Well, that's to say the least about him! He certainly was kind to our fallen race. This is a trait of the divine family. Listen to Jesus in St. Luke's Gospel, Chapter 6:

But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for *he is kind* to the ungrateful and the selfish. (Luke 6:35, RSV)

But beyond this great theme about the kindness of our God toward us, there are simple, human stories of kindness when we think of Jesus. Remember the tenderness in some of the miracle stories. Think of the widow in the city of Na'in. Her husband has died. She has only one son, and now, he too has died. Jesus sees the woman in the funeral procession for her son. St. Luke tells the story:

<sup>13</sup>And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep." <sup>14</sup>And he came and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, arise." <sup>15</sup>And the dead man sat up, and began to speak. And he gave him to his mother. (Luke 7:13-15, RSV)

This is a story of kindness toward a grieving mother. Another story comes to mind about the kindness of Jesus toward a child — a child who has died. The onlookers laugh at Jesus when he says that the child is not dead but asleep. But let them laugh. Jesus simply puts them outside the room, and then takes the hand of the dead girl. St. Mark tells the rest of the story:

<sup>41</sup>Taking her by the hand he said to her, "Tal'itha cu'mi"; which means, "Little girl, I say to you, arise." <sup>42</sup>And immediately the girl got up and walked (she was twelve years of age), and they were immediately overcome with amazement. <sup>43</sup>And he strictly charged them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat. (Mark 5:41-43, RSV)

And so it is that in the midst of big questions of life and death, Jesus does not forget that children get hungry. "Give her something to eat," his kindness bids the grownups to do.

Likewise for us. Our coat of many colors includes the color of kindness. This includes such everyday matters as courtesy toward the elderly and pregnant women. Be kind to them. Open the door for them. Surrender your seat for them. Support institutions of kindness, like the New York Common Pantry and our church's Meals on Heels program. Kindness should penetrate even such workaday matters as paying our taxes. Have goodwill toward taxes. They form the commonwealth of our land. That is how we are kind to people in need.

My grandfather was a kind man. He was farmer and a fisherman. He was a quiet man, but people knew they could count on him. They say that in the days of the Depression, folks in town would tell hungry strangers to go to Garfield Bilbrough's farm, and he would feed them. And he did. When I think back on him, I think too of his kindness. Well, let that be so for you and me too. Maybe we have not been renowned for kindness so far in life. But in the years that remain, let us work to gain that reputation. Let it be said of us in the end, "He was a kind man, a kind woman." Such a nature is right for us because we bear the name of Jesus.

So, these have been a few words about patience and kindness. Let us conclude by thinking about self-control. It is one of the fruits of the Spirit. It is an important characteristic of Jesus. Especially I am thinking of his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. Someone with Jesus drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his ear. Jesus ordered the man to put away his sword, and then Jesus spoke of angels. St. Matthew records the words:

<sup>53</sup>Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? <sup>54</sup>But how then should the scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so? (Matthew 26:53-54, RSV)

Heaven and earth tottered at that moment. Jesus was not kidding. He could have indeed appealed to his heavenly Father, who would have sent those angels and shut everything down. I mean, shut our salvation down — the salvation of you, our people, and of me and the other clergy here. But Jesus was a man of self-control. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus had been frightened of the cross and the next few days. He had prayed that his cup would pass from him. But he accepted the will of his heavenly Father, and readied himself for that the path of the cross. He kept his eye on the big picture, and so no twelve legions of angels for him. He exercised self-control.

Likewise with us. Without self-control, the other colors of the robe risk becoming mere wishes. We might have kind hearts, for example. But if we do not control ourselves, we will squander our resources and have little remaining with which to be kind toward others. We might wish to be

forgiving, but if we do not control ourselves, our fist or our fierce words might fling out before we even have a chance to be forgiving. Self-control means no dissipation of life for us. We do not mean to squander our chances and our advantages, leaving us little left over for the life of love in this world.

St. Paul has given us a great image for daily life. Let us put on Christ. Let the many virtues of Jesus find a place in our lives too. Let us put on our coat of many colors, seeking in many ways to honor and imitate Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.