

"Your Spiritual Emoji"

Colossians 3: 1-14

1 Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. 3 For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.

5 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. 6 Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. 7 You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. 8 But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. 9 Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices 10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. 11 Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

12 Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. 13 Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. 14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

If you are on Facebook or some other social media you may have noticed that some people have created their own personal online emojis or avatars with the help of an app called Bitmoji. Our daughters encouraged Amy and I to do it so we did. They are basically emojis that look something like you do. You create them to look how you want by shape of face, glasses, nose, facial hair, hair color etc.

If you've been around long enough, you might remember the yellow "smiley face" that seemed to be everywhere from buttons to bumper stickers in the 1970s. The origin of the smiley face as we know it dates from a few years earlier (1963 the year I was born) when an insurance company contracted with artist Harvey Ball to develop a happy face symbol to raise the morale of its employees.

We're not sure if it actually did raise their morale (our guess is that raises would be more likely to put smiles on their faces), but we do know that the smiley face has taken on a new role in the digital age as a way of conveying emotion when sending text messages. So basically an emoji is a picture symbol to add to your text message to give it some context like happy, sad, mad, frustrated, cold, hot, sick, etc.

"When it comes to text-based communication, we're babies," explains Tyler Schnoebelen, a linguistics Ph.D. from Stanford who works for Idibon, a text-analytics company. As he says, we've learned to talk, and we've learned to write, but we're only now learning to write at the speed of talking (i.e., text), sending messages over vast expanses, absent any physical contextual clues. If you are talking to someone face to face, you don't need an additional word or symbol to express "I'm smiling" because you would, presumably, be smiling. The psychologist Albert Mehrabian, in an oft-cited (and occasionally criticized) study, determined in the 1950s that only 7 percent of communication is verbal (what we say), while 38 percent is vocal (how we say it) and 55 percent is nonverbal (what we do and how we look while we're saying it). This is well and good for face to face communication, but when we're texting, that means that 93 percent of our communicative tools are negated. --Adam Sternbergh, "Smile, you're speaking emoji: The rapid evolution of a wordless tongue," *New York magazine*, November 16, 2014. nymag.com. Retrieved February 2, 2016.

Enter the "emoji," which has become shorthand for expressing the spirit of a cold, hard text message. Using a "winky face," for example, means that the text should be taken more tongue-in-cheek, or a gritted-teeth face might convey anger or anxiety. Using an emoji can help the text be taken in the right context by the reader, which is important in a world where text is easily misunderstood. Emojis help you to give your text message some context. I even had someone leave my last church because of a text I sent that they took in the wrong way. If I would have used emojis it is very possible that they would never have gotten angry and left.

But, what if you could make the emoji even more personal? What if you could change out the smiley face for your own face and make those texts even more emotive? A fairly new app from Bitmoji allows you to do just that, making an avatar of yourself to inhabit the world of virtual communication.

Unlike the plain, basic smiley face, you can create your personal emoji with the hairstyle, facial features and accoutrements that represent you to the world. You can even choose what outfit you want to wear. Whenever you add your emoji to your texts, you're letting others see some of the person behind the words.

It's an interesting concept -- creating an avatar of yourself to inhabit a virtual world that intersects with the real one and peppers your communication with others. And just like in the real world, what you wear in your emoji tends to say a lot about you. You can dress up as your old self or create a new look that others will notice. Creating your personal emoji allows you to kind of reinvent yourself in a new way and communicate your new self to the world. For instance, my avatar has a camo shirt on to represent my redneck side and that I like to hunt. Yes, there's a huge degree of silliness involved here, and perhaps a bit of narcissism, but it is also kind of fun.

Creating a personal emoji, however, is just a virtual way of doing something that Jesus can do for us in real life. We live in the world of God's kingdom, which is breaking in on our present world. To live in God's world, however, we have to be properly attired, and, for Paul, that involves a complete change of clothes and a brand new look that will not only represent us, but the Christ whom we follow.

[NOTE 1] I think it is important to be clear. When we're talking about the real world and a virtual or fantasy world, we are saying that it is the kingdom of God that is the real world for Christians. Too many people seem to think that God's world is a sort of fantasy world in which we put on some sort of avatar appearance for the sake of show once in a while. That is simply not true!

In fact, the world we inhabit is the transient world of shadow and decay; Jesus wants to cut through that by breaking through the false fronts of avatars, and transform us into *genuinely* good people. Paul talks about it as taking off the old (avatar) clothes and putting on the (real) clothes of Christ. [NOTE 2]

Paul isn't just trying to raise morale when he writes to the Colossian church; he's reminding them that they have been raised from the dead. "So if you have been raised with Christ," he says, "seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (v. 1). This is the virtual world into which Paul invites his readers, the heavenly world from which Christ will be revealed once again to the present world when His kingdom comes in its fullness. Because that heavenly world will replace the real one, Paul says, "Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (vv. 2-3). [NOTE 3]

In other words, when you came to Christ in baptism your old life was put to death with Him on the cross and a new life was made possible by His resurrection from the dead. Our lives are now "hidden" with Christ in that new world awaiting the time when we, too, will be "revealed with him in glory" (v. 4).

So Paul urges his readers to take on a wardrobe worthy of that new world, which means first stripping off the grave clothes of the old life, or that which is "earthly" (v. 5). I call them grave clothes because the old self died with Jesus, so you can leave them in the tomb with Jesus' grave clothes. Fornication (which includes a variety of sexual sins), impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed are all forms of "idolatry" that will bring forth the "wrath of God" on those who reinvent themselves as the center of their world (vv. 5-6). Paul urges the church to strip off this "old self with its practices," including the language of anger, wrath, malice, slander and abusive speech, including, we might add, nasty text messages! (vv. 8-9). [NOTE 4] I have recently preached on forgiveness and reconciliation because we are not good representatives of Jesus when we send nasty texts, lose our tempers, flip off other drivers on the road, etc.

This is important advice for Christians in a divided world where online speech is often peppered with emojis that are anything but smiley. It's easy to represent oneself as an avatar of angst in an environment where everyone is arguing about something, but Paul reminds followers of Jesus that they don't ever represent only themselves. Our real and virtual selves are to be clothed with "the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator" (v. 10).

That renewal is the great equalizer, reminding us that we can never be superior to anyone else. There is no longer Greek or Jew, Republican or Democrat, Apple or

Android, but "Christ is all in all" (v. 11). [NOTE 5]

Since we are God's "chosen ones, holy and beloved" by him, Paul urges those in the church to put on clothing that will re-create us as representatives of Christ. That wardrobe includes clothes like: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, self-control and patience (v. 12). Each of these pieces is designed for life in community, recognizing that life in the kingdom is all about putting others ahead of yourself. It's the exact opposite of the old life of self-serving idolatry. It's a reinvention of the self as a servant who presents himself or herself to the world as a humble representative of Christ. *Christians who put on the Christlike behaviors listed in Colossians chapter 3 and verse 12 discover, in time, that they are speaking the language of virtue.*

Included in that wardrobe is the communal need for forgiveness. We must "bear with one another" and forgive each other as the Lord has forgiven us (v. 13). When problems and disagreements arise in the community that represents the new world made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus, forgiveness and patience with one another are essential. [NOTE 6]

We accept others for who they are, with all their faults and weaknesses, while spurring one another on to live up to the image of God within each of us. We were created to represent God's communal, Trinitarian image and to engage together in God's mission for the world (Genesis 1:26-27). Forgiveness allows the community to live that image and mission fully in the present world despite our tendency to act like the sinners we are. We need not present a fake, superficial avatar to the world, but rather our authentic, broken, forgiven, and forgiving selves living together with the goal of being more like Jesus, the perfect image of God (1:15). Like the sign says, we need to be the perfect church for those who aren't ... perfect.

If there's an outer garment to choose that puts the whole ensemble together, says Paul, it's love, "which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (v. 14). This isn't a love simply based on feelings, but rather the self-sacrificing, outwardly focused love bound up in the Greek word *agape*. Love acts as the bond that holds the community together despite the circumstances and despite our individual faults, needs and hurts, and is the basis of our unity. It not only binds together all the other pieces of the new wardrobe perfectly, it creates a communal avatar that represents the body of Christ to the world -- a body in which the "peace of Christ" rules in the hearts of all (v. 15). We are never just representing our individual selves; we are representatives of Christ together. [NOTE 7]

How do we put on this new wardrobe and how do we become a communal "emoji" of Jesus? Paul says we need to let the "word of Christ" dwell in us richly through listening to and obeying his word found in the Scriptures and following his example. That means getting into our Bible every day! We must "teach and admonish" one another in wisdom, and worship together with gratitude, singing "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God" (v. 16). Coming together for worship regularly is its own emoji that represents the body of Christ in practice for the life of the world to come.

In a world where people are constantly looking for new ways to present themselves, personal emojis can be a lot of fun. It's even better, however, when those who follow Christ can represent Him in the real and virtual world in the present, while practicing for the life of the world to come.

Paul's advice is instructive here: "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (v. 17). That's an emoji that should follow everything we say and do! --Thanks to Rev. Chuck Williams (Grace UMC, Houghton, Michigan) for suggestions regarding this material.

Sermon Notes for "Your Spiritual Emoji" based on Colossians 3: 1-11
Given at Doster Community Church Sunday September 4, 2022

- I. Creating a personal emoji is just a virtual way of doing something that Jesus can do for us in real life. To live in God's Kingdom, a world where Jesus reigns as ruler, we have to be properly attired, and, for Paul, that involves a complete change of clothes and a brand new look that will not only represent us, but the Christ whom we follow
- II. Paul reminds us in this passage that we have been raised from the dead. "So if you have been raised with Christ," he says, "seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" Because of this we should act, be, and talk differently. Set your mind on things above.
- III. When you came to Christ in baptism your old life was put to death with Him on the cross and a new life was made possible by His resurrection from the dead. Our lives are now "hidden" with Christ in that new world awaiting the time when we, too, will be "revealed with him in glory" (v. 4)
- IV. Paul tells us to change clothes. We are to take off "the grave clothes" of our old selves, put away the old habits, bad words, etc. and put on our new self in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Our new clothes, our new selves, should point others to the fact that "Christ is all in all" (v.11).
- V. Become the "new creation" that God says you are. That includes compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience (v. 12). Each of these pieces is designed for life in community, recognizing that life in the kingdom is all about putting others ahead of yourself.
- VI. We need not present a fake, superficial avatar to the world, but rather our authentic, broken, forgiven and forgiving selves living together with the goal of being more like Jesus.
- VII. What are you going to do about it? Please write something down about something concrete that you will do this week to put off the old clothes and put on the new to better represent Jesus.