**Matthew 25: I Was Naked**

**Isaiah 58:6-7, Luke 3:7-11**

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 Earlier this year, a phenomenon swept across the country that led to millions of Americans sorting through books and papers, piling all of their clothing on top of their beds, organizing their garages and asking this question, “Does this particular sweater, book, photograph spark joy in me?”  If you managed to miss the phenomenon as it was happening, all of that sorting, organizing, boxing, and refolding was “sparked” by “Tidying Up With Marie Kondo”, a Netflix program based on Kondo’s book “The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up”. Basically, Marie Kondo helps people sort through all the stuff in their homes by having them pick up each item and ask themselves, “Does this spark joy in me? Does it lift my spirits or bring a sense of contentment?” If the answer is no, then they get rid of it.  After the sorting, Kondo teaches people how to organize their homes so everything is neat and tidy.

Of course, one of the biggest categories of belongings people have to deal with is their clothing.  Americans buy a lot of clothing. In 2016, US consumption of clothing averaged out to every American buying five new garments a month.  Obviously, that’s an average. Some don’t buy any; some buy a lot.

However, as a rule, many of us have more clothing than we will ever wear and, periodically, we get inspired to cull our closets and get rid of some of what we never wear.  In fact, on average, we will each get rid of 70 pounds of clothing per year.

Three weeks ago, we began a sermon series on Jesus’ teachings in Matthew 25: 31-46.  My thanks to Shonagh Taruza who read a few of those verses for us this morning in her native Shona language.  In Matthew 25, Jesus instructs us in what it looks like to be faithful Christ followers by putting our faith into action.  He names six actions, six ways in which we can love our neighbor, and grow in our faith, as well. Each week of our sermon series we are looking at one of those six.  Two weeks ago, we talked about feeding the hungry; last week, Pastor Nick preached on water for the thirsty. And this week, we land on “I was naked and you clothed me”.

Compared to food and water, clothing may not seem like such a great need.  Yet, for all of the Americans who could empty our closets and dressers and up with huge piles of clothing on our beds, there are people in our own country and around the world who don’t have adequate clothing to protect them or appropriate clothing for work.

In our scripture readings for today, we hear from two prophets - one in the Hebrew Bible and one in the New Testament - each reminding us that God’s heart lies with those on the margins.  Isaiah speaks to God’s people about what God values - not sacrifices and burnt offerings but acts of generosity and justice. John the Baptist calls out for the people to repent - to turn away from sinful behavior and care for those in need. Both prophets name giving clothing to those without as an act that reflects our love for our neighbor and our concern for justice.

Of course, during Jesus’ life, clothing was quite different than it is today.  For example, Levi was a man’s name rather than a brand of jeans. In fact, men didn’t wear pants or jeans at all, but typically wore an inner tunic, and then an outer robe, usually made of flax, animal skin, or wool.  The inner tunic was their under garment, and a person was considered naked if they wore only that or nothing at all. In other words, a person was naked if they didn’t have enough clothing to keep them warm and dry. In a subsistence economy like that of first century Palestine, someone who didn’t have land, work, or family could easily end up with nothing to cover them.

Today is not so different.  With the arrival of fall weather (finally!), we are reminded that winter is on its way, and we have a significant population here in Ann Arbor of people who do not have homes.  Nor do they typically have enough clothing to keep them warm when winter comes. We have children who don’t have clothes that fit or winter coats, hats and mittens. We have single moms who need work but don’t have anything appropriate to wear for a job interview.

And, of course, there are needs for clothing around the world.  Refugees arrive in our country and other developed nations with nothing but the clothes on their backs.  People in the developing world may have little to nothing to wear to protect themselves from the elements.  As with food and clean water, there is an imbalance of resources when it comes to clothing. Many of us have too much and many have too little.

The obvious solution is for us to donate the clothing we don’t wear.  We know there are many organizations that collect clothing to distribute to those who need it - Goodwill, Salvation Army, and Planet Aid.  However, some people have concerns about donating to these larger organizations because often the clothing ends up either in landfills or sold in African markets where the plethora of cheap American clothes on hand is putting local tailors and manufacturers out of business.

To try to avoid this, we can target our donations - offering clothing to organizations that will make sure it gets to people who need it. Our church has a long-standing relationship with House By The Side Of The Road, a local organization that gives away gently-used clothing and household items to individuals and families in Washtenaw County.  In a few minutes, you’ll be hearing from Mary Danforth, who is going to talk about House By The Side of the Road and what volunteering her time there has meant to her own spiritual journey.

To make it easy for you to put your faith into action, today we are kicking off a clothing drive for House By The Side of the Road.  There will be blue tubs outside the church office from now until November 3rd where you can donate gently-used or new clothing. The greatest need is for boys’ pants in all sizes, plus-size clothing for men and women, new underwear for men, women, and children, men’s shoes size 13 and larger, and winter coats.  Bring clothes with you to church when you come to worship.

Our church will also be sending a mission team to Costa Rica this winter where they will be working on building a Children’s Home.  That group is also collecting clothing donations for the children who live in the home. They are particularly looking for like-new shoes, croc-style sandals, sweaters, long-sleeved pajamas, and girls’ leggings.

Finally, Kendra Kerr, one of our church members, is working with the Ann Arbor Board of Realtors to collect socks, hats, and mittens that will be distributed at the Delonis Center, Ozone House, Safe House, and the Sheriff’s department to help keep our neighbors warm this winter.

These are all opportunities to help provide clothing right now.  Don’t forget, too, that in six weeks or so, we will put up our Giving Tree, and you will have an opportunity to buy new clothing for children living at Alpha House and near the Bryant Community Center.

Of course, there is another approach you can take in clothing those in need.  You can limit how much new clothing you buy and donate the money you save. Holly Gustafson, a mother of five, writes a blog post about the ways in which she and her family try to live faithfully as Christ followers.  Each year, they have taken one of the six actions in Matthew 25 and focused on it as a family for the forty days of Lent. The year in which they focused on clothing, they each reduced their wardrobes to forty items and packed everything else away until Easter.  They also fasted from buying new clothes. If a need came up, they borrowed from a friend or swapped hand-me-downs with other families. By Easter, they learned that they really didn’t need much more than 40 wardrobe items. They donated what they had packed away and then greatly reduced their clothing budget - freeing up money they could use in other ways.

 Another mom, Emily Hedlund, set the challenge for her family that they not buy any new clothes for an entire year.  She wanted to break her shopping habit, but stayed motivated as she learned about the excesses and waste of the fast fashion industry.  Like Holly Gustafson, she realized her family could manage with much less and save considerable amounts of money.

 What would you do with money you saved by buying fewer items of clothing?  You could send it to an organization that provides for the needs of refugees.  You could use it to sponsor a child and provide clothing for him or her. You could donate it to UMCOR, which routinely responds to the needs of individuals whose lives are destroyed by natural disasters.  You could donate it to a mission project here at the church or to the cost of keeping our church operating so that we can continue to do mission in the world. You could use it to buy clothing or sleeping bags or hand warmers for the homeless folks who sleep on our portico.

Whatever you choose to do, what Jesus teaches us in Matthew 25 is that when you offer clothing to someone who has very little, you offer it to him.  You serve him. And as we offer more of ourselves and our resources to him, we grow in faith. We nurture hope. We become conduits of God’s love. And that, far more than any piece of clothing in your closet, my friends, is what truly sparks joy.

May it be so. Amen.