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1 Cor 1:10-18 and 3: 1-11

“State of the Church: 2. Party Lines”

I'd like to share with you a story entitled the “Yay-Yuck Man” by author, Max Lucado:

Bob loved to make people happy. Bob lived to make people happy. If people weren't happy, Bob wasn't happy. So every day Bob set out to make people happy. Not an easy task, for what makes some people happy makes other people angry.

Bob lived in a land where everyone wore coats. The people never removed their coats. Bob never asked “Why?”, he only asked “Which?” - “Which coat should I wear?”

Bob's mother loved blue. So to please her he wore a blue coat. When she would see him wearing blue, she would say, “Yay, Bob! I love it when you wear blue.” So he wore the blue coat all the time. And since he never left his house and since he saw no one but his mother, he was happy, for she was happy and she said “Yay, Bob” over and over.

Bob grew up and got a job. The first day of his first job he got up early and put on his best blue coat and walked down the street. The crowds on the street, however, didn't like blue. They liked green. Everyone on the street wore green. As he walked past, everyone looked at his blue coat and said, “Yuck!”

Yuck! was a hard word for Bob to hear. He felt guilty that he had caused a “yuck” to come out of a person's mouth. He loved to hear “yay!” He hated to hear “yuck!”

When the people saw his coat and said “yuck,” Bob dashed into a clothing store and bought a green coat. He put it on over his blue coat and walked back out in the street. “Yay!” the people shouted as he walked past. He felt better because he had made them feel better.

When he arrived at his workplace, he walked into his boss's office wearing a green coat. “Yuck!” said his boss. “Oh, I'm sorry,” said Bob, quickly removing the green coat and revealing the blue. “You must be like my mother.”

“Double yuck!” responded the boss. He got up from his chair, walked to the closet, and produced a yellow coat. “We like yellow here,” he instructed.

“Whatever you say, sir,” Bob answered, relieved to know he wouldn't have to hear his boss say “yuck” anymore. He put the yellow coat over the green coat, which was over the blue coat. And so he went to work.

When it was time for him to go home, he replaced the yellow coat with the green and walked through the streets. Just before he got to his house, he put the blue coat over the green and the yellow coats and went inside. Bob learned that life with three coats was hard. His movements were stiff, and he was always hot. There were also times when the cuff of one coat would peek out and someone would notice, but before the person could say “yuck” Bob would tuck it away.

One day he forgot to change his coat before he went home, and when his mother saw green she turned purple with disgust and started to say, “Yuck.” But before she could, Bob ran and put his hand on her mouth and held the word in while he traded coats and then removed his hand so she said, “Yay!”

It was at this moment that Bob realized he had a special gift. He could change his colors with ease. With a little practice, he was able to shed one coat and replace it with another in a matter of seconds. Even Bob didn't understand his versatility, but he was pleased with it. For now he could be any color anytime and please every person.

His skill at changing coats quickly elevated him to high positions. Everyone liked him because everyone thought he was just like them. With time, he was elected mayor over the entire city. His acceptance speech was brilliant. Those who loved green thought he was wearing green. Those who loved yellow thought he was wearing yellow, and his mother just knew he was wearing blue. Only he knew that he was constantly changing from one to the other. It wasn't easy, but it was worth it, because at the end everyone said, “Yay!”

Bob's multicolored life continued until one day some yellow-coated people stormed into his office. "We have found a criminal who needs to be executed," they announced, shoving a man towards Bob's desk. Bob was shocked at what he saw. The man wasn't wearing a coat at all, just a T-shirt.

"Leave him with me", Bob instructed, and the yellow coats left.

"Where is your coat?" asked the mayor.

"I don't wear one."

"You don't have one?"

"I don't want one"

"You don't want a coat? But everyone wears a coat. It.. it.. it's the way things are here."

"I'm not from here."

"What coat do they wear where you are from?"

"No coat."

"None?"

"None."

Bob looked at the man with amazement. "But what if people don't approve?"

"It's not their approval I seek."

Bob had never heard such words. He didn't know what to say. He'd never met a person without a coat. The man with no coat spoke again.

"I am here to show people they don't have to please people. I am here to tell the truth."

If Bob had ever heard of the world truth, he'd long since rejected it. "What is truth?" he asked.

But before the man could answer, people outside the mayor's office began to scream, "Kill him! Kill him!"

A mob had gathered outside the window. Bob went to it and saw the crowd was wearing green. Putting on his green coat, he said, "There is nothing wrong with this man."

"Yuck!" they shouted. Bob fell back at the sound. By then the yellow coats were back in his office. Seeing them, Bob changed his colors and pleaded, "The man is innocent."

"Yuck!" they proclaimed. Bob covered his ears at the word.

He looked at the man and pleaded, "Who are you?"

The man answered simply, "Who are you?"

Bob did not know. But suddenly he wanted to. Just then, his mother, who'd heard the crisis, entered the office. Without realizing it, Bob changed to blue. "He is not one of us," she said.

"But, but,..."

"Kill him!"

A torrent of voices came from all directions. Bob again covered his ears and looked at the man with no coat.

The man was silent. Bob was tormented. "I can't please them and set you free!" he shouted over their screams.

The man with no coat was silent, "I can't please you and them!"

Still the man was silent. "Speak to me!" Bob demanded. The man with no coat spoke one word. "Choose." "I can't!" Bob declared. He threw up his hand and screamed, "Take him, I wash my hand of the choice."

But even Bob knew in making no choice he had made one. The man was led away, and Bob was left alone.

Alone with his coats.¹

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Blue coats. Green coats. Yellow coats. Red states, blue states. Liberals, conservatives, rich, poor, black, white, men, women, young, old, them, us. We have to know what camp everyone is in so we know how to treat one another, don't we, or if we should even be associating with one another.

I'm reminded of another story, this time on a more personal note. I married into a family that had made its money in a particular chain of grocery stores. When we moved to Virginia, we found a local grocery chain

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<sup>1</sup> Max Lucado, "The Yay-Yuck Man," *A Gentle Thunder* (Nashville: Word Publishing), 1995.

which had gained a great deal of respect and notoriety as a “Christian-run” store which refused to open Sundays and wouldn’t sell alcohol or tobacco. Of course, our family chain did sell both, alcohol and tobacco, they opened on Sundays, and they also sold for less, attracting more lower income families. One afternoon, a neighbor stopped by to meet us. One of the first things he asked me was, “Do you shop at store A or Store B?” The assumption of course, was that those who shop at the local Store A are the good folks, the well-to-do folks with good morals and values, and the folks who shop at the national chain Store B were not. We know what kind of person you are by the store you choose.

And it’s not so different here, is it? We know what kind of person you are by the clothes you wear, the car you drive, the places you frequent, the groups you belong to, the position you hold.

We judge people quickly and easily. And we not only judge them, but we treat them accordingly too, don’t we?

Paul was faced with much of that in the church as well. Chloe’s people had reported that the good people over in Corinth were fighting with each other. They were drawing party lines according to which previous pastor they liked more, which one said or did the things they liked. And once Paul caught wind of it, he responded. And boy did he respond. He really let ‘em have it!

“You’re acting like a bunch of babies, not spiritual people like you claim to be. If you were really spiritual people, you wouldn’t be fighting amongst yourselves. All this back-biting, quarreling, and choosing up sides just shows what infants you are, so I’ll treat you like infants until you learn how to grow up.”

Sheesh! It’s a good thing his wages weren’t dependent on these folks. He sure wasn’t afraid to call ‘em as he sees ‘em!

Paul tells them it doesn’t matter what store you shop in, what club you belong to. It doesn’t matter what color your coat is, for in Christ, we all have no coat, no matter what we think we’re wearing. And we’re only showing how much we need when we forget that we don’t need a coat at all, and in fact, we’re better off when we finally realize we can shed our coats and get on with being Christ’s people all together, not little factions who claim we have the answers and you don’t, we have Christ and you don’t.

I have to admit that we pastors are surely guilty of placing people in camps so we know how to treat one another. “I attended Princeton,” or “I graduated from Union.” “I am a liberal,” or “I am a conservative.” “Which camp is Rev. Do-good in? I can’t seem to figure out where he’s coming from.” And we’re confounded when we can’t tell what color coat Rev. Do-good is wearing. We aren’t sure how to take what he says if we can’t identify his camp before he speaks. But once we do figure him out, we can just tune out when he approaches the mic, because we already know what he’s going to say. How unfair is that? Where is the room for the Holy Spirit to work here? We’ve already closed our minds to the possibility of the Spirit at work in our midst, which probably limits the Spirit’s ability to work in our midst.

And we do it in our churches too. We look at the Church of the Holy Folks down the street and we wonder what in the world they’re up to. We wonder how those people over there at the Church of the Waving Hands could really be worshipping God with **that** kind of music or all those strange activities. Or we scoff at the folks over at the Get-Up-And-Go Church and shake our heads at their latest marketing technique. How in the world could we ever know what good work is going on in God’s church when we close ourselves to the possibilities that the Church of Them and Not Us may actually be following God’s call?

But surely we don’t do it in our own church.

Perhaps Paul's plea is an invitation for each of us, and all of us together as Christians, as Presbyterians, and even more specifically, Glendale Presbyterians, to take some time to examine ourselves and see what coats we have donned, one on top of another—how we try to wear “Yay” coats instead of “Yuck” coats and sell ourselves for another person's or another group's approval. Paul says this kind of behavior is living in the flesh, living in rivalry and disunity in the church.

We must ponder how it is that “the church is God's project...”. It may have been planted by Paul, by those early Glendalians 150 years ago. It may have been watered by Apollos, by all those pastors and church leaders lo, these many 150 years, but the reality is that this church doesn't belong to us. It is Christ's church and the only agenda that is on the table is God's agenda. We, ourselves, “cannot define the aims or the agenda for the church. That has already been done by Christ,” and God waits as we discern what that is and join in the march. “Each of our pet projects and jealously guarded areas of responsibility are only chores assigned by God, and with no advance notice, we could be notified of different orders and be required to turn our tasks over to someone else”<sup>2</sup> or let go of them entirely. We cannot claim ownership of any part of the church's ministry. **God** is in charge of this church and her ministry, the Presbyterian Church (USA) and her ministry, and the greater church universal. When we resist God's leading and assume control of the church's ministry, we divide the community and incur the judgment of which Paul speaks.

When we dispense with our petty quarreling, our gripes and complaints, our personal agenda for the church, and even our pet projects and turn them over to God, the wind of the Holy Spirit can rush through the church and transform her into the holy community, the vital, growing church God desires. When we allow the Spirit to transform our very lives, we cease to move the church toward our own selfish desires and allow her to become the very church of the risen Lord, active and moving in this community and in this world. With God at the helm, there is no reason we must march ourselves toward the death of the flesh-and-blood church, when we can follow Christ toward the church of possibilities, the church of new life.

This week, I invite you to join me at the mirror of our faith wardrobe. Examine with me the color of the coats we wear. Let us ponder together the color of the coats we have buttoned over our own church. Pray with me about the awful coat our Savior has donned for the journey he made to the cross—the coat of our quarreling and jealousies, the coat of the I-wants, the coat of our spiritual infancy. But the folly of the cross has allowed Christ to become the no-coat man, free of all tethers and requirements and expectations, and he invites us too, to shed the coats of our many party lines, that we might be of one mind, the mind of Christ our Lord, united, of the same purpose as the one who wears no coat. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard B. Hayes, *First Corinthians, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. (Louisville: John Knox Press), 62.