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Baccalaureate Sermon, Colossians 3:12-15  
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“Dressed For Success”

During World War II, when the most urgent matters of the war needed attention, Prime Minister Winston Churchill would sometimes visit The United States, to address Congress, and meet with President Franklin Roosevelt in the White house. Churchill had the odd habit of practicing his speeches in front of a mirror, in the nude. One evening Roosevelt wheeled around the corner in the White House guest suite and there’s Churchill in front of a mirror, completely naked, practicing his speech.

Roosevelt caught his breath and said, “my apologies Mr. Prime Minister, I did not mean to interrupt.” Churchill turned on his heels to face Roosevelt, waved his hand, and replied, “On the contrary, the Prime Minister of England has nothing to hide from the President of the United States.”

Perhaps Churchill knew, that at the end of the day, all the trappings on the outside, the stuff he dressed himself in, meant very little compared to who he really was.

So here we are. Despite what some faculty are saying about you, you’ve made it. You’ve finished what you started out to do. It is baccalaureate, where we gather to give thanks to God for the abundant blessings of life and congratulate and challenge our graduates.

You’re about to rocket out of this campus for the country’s best graduate and professional schools, for jobs in the public and private sectors, for years of service and teaching abroad. But before you go, we, the university do an odd thing, we choose your outfit for the day. We dress you up in caps and gowns, symbols of your knowledge, covering up whatever it is you are wearing or not wearing under your black gown, a sign of your education and the privilege and responsibility that comes with it.

I saw one of you on the way in this evening, noticed the cap and gown that you along with all your classmates are wearing, and called out, “nice outfit, real original.” You shot back, “it only cost me 140 grand.” Indeed, in many, many ways the cap and gown you don today is the most valuable outfit you will ever wear.

I read a column in a pop culture magazine some months back targeted toward graduating seniors about dressing for success. It had the usual sort of advice one would expect to read in a magazine scooped up on the way out of Kroger. Perception is reality. Physical appearance is everything. Never miss a chance to make an impression. Always look your best. Men, when in doubt, wear a dark suit. Women, look strong, but feminine. Remember, it’s a competitive world out there, the columnist said. People will judge you by what you wear on the outside. If you want to succeed you’ll have to dress the part.

In this Colossians passage found in sacred scripture, Paul is writing to a young church in Colossia. This was a young, brash community, ready to take on the world, to expand beyond its own borders to set sail into the wild blue yonder. And Paul, their teacher, counselor, and spiritual guide suggests an outfit for them, a different kind of

clothing, a different means of success. You won't find it on 9<sup>th</sup> street or SouthPoint mall or SAKS Fifth Avenue, before sending these young ambitious rabel-rousers out to transform the world outside Colossia, Paul says to them, while your out there in law school or med school, on your way to tenure by 29, or running your own business by 31, forget what the magazines and leadership gurus are saying, take a new wardrobe:

Clothe yourselves with compassion. It's a tough world out there and having a little compassion reminds us of our common humanity, the triumph of people over profit. Clothe yourselves with kindness, for everyone with any age on them at all is fighting some tough battles, and kindness is the vehicle through which genuine human relationships can flourish. Clothe yourselves with humility. A Duke degree is a great gift, but it becomes an even greater gift when the recipient believes there is always more to be learned.

Finally, Paul says, clothe yourselves in love. Over the past several months I have been polling seniors about their dominant feelings as they approach graduation. The answers were fairly consistent, excitement, nostalgia, gratitude, and genuine fear topped the list. When I have asked you all what you will remember most about your time here at Duke, on some level every single one of you said the relationships that you formed, the friendships that you have developed have been the single most important part of your Duke experience.

All of you are wise enough to know that many of those you have been close to these last four years will take different paths and ultimately you will drift away from one another, and that is not a bad thing. It is as it needs to be. And yet, there will be those handful of folks, those three or four friends you will stay deeply connected with over the years. And they are indeed special gifts for which to give thanks, and as the years go by they become even more sacred in a way that it is impossible to recognize in the moment.

I remember well my own graduation weekend not so many years ago. My roommate, who was also my closest friend, and I dressed up in our caps and gowns and went over to the football stadium for commencement, enjoyed the parties, and reveled in the excitement of it all. We remained dear friends over the years, rooming together throughout graduate school . . . and then a year and a half ago he was killed in a car accident. His friendship is one of the most sacred gifts of my college years and my memories of those years and of that graduation weekend are now even more precious, as they will be for you one day.

There is nothing more profound or important in life than to bear one another in love, and to give thanks to God for friends and family who are a part of your life and who have helped you become who you are today.

Perhaps the most touching moment in the book, or in the movie if you prefer, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, takes place in the attic of Hogwarts, the school where gifted young wizards go to receive the best education possible. If you know the story, Harry Potter is the most promising student in his class.

He's also an orphan who has had a painful and lonely childhood following his parents' deaths. At one point in the book, Harry is wondering who is he and where is he is going in life. In the dusty recesses of Hogwarts, Harry discovers the mirror named "Desire." It is a magic mirror, that reflects back to the one standing before it the deepest desires of the heart. When Harry stands before the mirror in his academic gown he sees his reflection and standing behind him on his right and left are his mother and father, with

him, the deepest desire of his heart. He feels a touch on his right shoulder and he looks, but there is nothing. He feels a touch on his left shoulder, and he turns, but there is nothing there either. They are gone.

The wise wizard Dumbledore stumbles into the room at that moment and sees Harry staring into the mirror and says: “only when one looks into this mirror and sees oneself as one actually is, can he or she be accounted truly happy.”

Graduates of the class of 2005, you have already accomplished so much, but at some point over the next couple of days, take a moment to reflect on who you are, on where you have been, and on the deep desires of your heart. Stand in front of a mirror, take off your cap and gown – or if you prefer the Churchill method, take off all your clothes – and ask yourself not just what you want to do with your education and your life, but what kind of person you will become, for whom do you give thanks, and what sort of clothes you plan to wear next.