

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. Apparently the origin of the smiley face dates from a few years earlier (1963) when an insurance company contracted with artist Harvey Ball to develop a happy face symbol to raise the morale of its employees. I'm not quite sure if it actually did raise their morale, my guess is that a pay raise would more likely have put smiles on their faces), but those of us who use our phones and computers to communicate these days are aware that the smiley face has taken on a new role in the digital age as a way of conveying emotion when sending text messages.

Enter the "emoji," which has become a type of 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 ubiquitous and easily misunderstood. 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?

An 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 other accoutrements that represent you to the world. You can even choose what outfit you want to wear. And 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 to enhance 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 you can 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.

Yes, there's a huge degree of silliness involved, and perhaps a tad bit of narcissism, but it is also just a lot 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, after all, which is breaking in on our present world. To live in God's world, however, we have to be properly attired, and, for Paul, in our second lesson this morning, that involves a complete change of clothes and a brand-new look that will not only represent us, but also Christ whom we follow.

Let me be clear. When talking about the real world and a virtual or fantasy world, it is the kingdom of God that can and should be the real world for us 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 putting on a show every once in a while. In fact, the world we inhabit is the transitory world of shadow and decay; and Jesus wants to cut through that by breaking through the false fronts of our avatars, and by transforming us into genuinely good people. Paul talks about it as taking off the old (avatar) clothes and putting on the (real) clothes of Christ.

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." That 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."

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." 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." 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. 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!

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." That renewal is the great equalizer, reminding us that we can never be superior to anyone else. There is no longer Greek or Jew, Male or Female, Liberal or Conservative, Republican or Democrat, Gay or Straight, Apple or Android fan, but "Christ is all in all."

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 compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Each of these pieces is designed for life in community, recognizing that life in the kingdom is all about putting others ahead of yourself. In other word, 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.

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. 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. 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. 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.

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." And it 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. We are never just representing our individual selves; we are representatives of Christ together.

So 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. We must "teach and admonish" one another in wisdom, and worship together with gratitude, singing "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God." 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." And that's an emoji that should follow everything we say and do! Amen.