

Dressing for the job without looking like someone else

Jesus says not to worry about what we will wear. Usually I fail at this.

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If all of the articles of clothing mentioned in the Bible could be plucked from the page and draped on hangers, they could fill a small wardrobe. There's Joseph's coat of many colors and John's shirt of camel hair. There's the garments of salvation, the robes of righteousness, the ash-stained sackcloths of aggrieved kings. There's a lovely set of wedding clothes that have never been worn. (What the unprepared guest at the wedding banquet would have done to have them in his rucksack when he received his last-minute invitation!) Stashed away on the top shelf, behind the belt of truth and breastplate of righteousness, is Jeremiah's threadbare loincloth, so stained with metaphorical filth not even Fels Naptha soap could restore it.

Pondering these biblical garments makes me feel a bit better about something: in general, I fail to follow Jesus's advice not to worry about what I will wear.

I tried on three dresses before I left for work this morning. (Okay, four.) I'm not a clotheshorse exactly, but I do like what I wear and wear what I like. I didn't always feel free to do this. The week before I graduated from seminary I bought a black linen suit for my first job interview. It was terrible. I looked like a little kid playing dress-up. I was 24 and fully convinced that the only way I could be taken seriously as a pastor was to look like someone else. Someone less young, less girly.

During my first years of ministry I dressed in outdated, frumpy clothes. I wore floral rayon dresses without irony, Oxford shirts without ironing. Then help arrived—not from the hills but from reality television. I developed a mild addiction to *What Not To Wear*, the old TLC show in which co-hosts Stacy London and Clinton Kelly shamed and/or mentored the sartorially challenged. I daydreamed about getting picked for the show—a dubious honor granted only to the notably poorly dressed.

One episode featured Emily, an Episcopal priest roughly my age. Emily's vocation was front and center. "I can't believe I'm going to say this to a priest," Clinton remarked at one point, giggling, "but your ass looks terrible in those jeans."

But is a woman of the cloth allowed to care about the appearance of her rear end? I watched, mesmerized, as Emily wrestled with questions of identity, sexuality, authority, and the perennial problem of ugly patterns. (For the record, I agreed with her assessment of the dress they recommended: it looked like a flower threw up on it.)

I did try one more time to buy a suit a couple of years ago, recognizing that it would be a handy thing to have in my closet for funerals and weddings. I thought maybe if I tried a spendier brand, it wouldn't be such a train wreck. I went to Nordstrom Rack and halfheartedly schlepped a few possibilities to the fitting room before I was led into temptation by a black and white polka-dotted dress emblazoned with bright pink roses. Reader, I bought it. A few weeks later I wore it to church—even though I knew, given our custom of casual summer Sundays, that I wouldn't be concealing it with vestments. It turned out that my colleague wore a similar pattern that morning; we rejoiced in our liturgical polka dots.

Before interviewing for my current position outside Chicago, I hit the mall. This was a necessity, given the differences in culture and climate between southern California and the Midwest. But this time, I walked right past the racks of suits—tweed, with bulky shoulder pads and boxy silhouettes. Instead, I clothed myself in a black wool sweater from the clearance rack at Anthropologie. It was flowy and funky and, to me at least, full of meaning. It fit my body and my personality perfectly. When I put it

on, I looked more like myself, not less. Furthermore, it communicated that ministry, for me, is a creative profession. I don't have to dress like a banker. I can dress like an artist.

My Anthropologie sweater is a token of authenticity. My polka-dotted dress is a symbol of joy. My LuluLemon yoga pants and tank top—a thank-you gift from a church member for directing the Christmas pageant—make me feel like a million bucks, which is only slightly more than they cost.

I don't mean to make an idol out of the things in my closet. I aspire to clothe myself with the garments from St. Paul's closet of virtue: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. I simply find this easier to do when I am not distracted by the effort of trying to look like someone else.

I still don't own a suit.