

September 6, 2026
Lectionary 23, Year A
The 15th Sunday after Pentecost
Romans 13:8-14
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

New Year Fashion

Back-to-school at the Warner household used to be a very big deal. I would look up the kids' lengthy school supply lists on their schools' websites and then I would take each kid school supply shopping individually. I used to take all four at once, when they were younger, but that was a recipe for disaster, that inevitably ended up in me yelling and someone crying, sometimes I was both doing the yelling and the crying. The cost of the school supplies really added up, and someone always wanted something beyond the basic—a fancy pencil holder or binder or special pens and when I had all four kids with me running around throwing things into the cart, I didn't have the ability to focus enough to evaluate the request. Hence the opening for yelling and/or crying.

When I started taking the kids one at a time I could keep track of things better, and could make better decisions about the special things the kids wanted for back to school and communicate my decisions better. Sometimes the answer was still no, but if we talked about why and put it in the context of everything that particular kid needed, they tended to understand, or at least accept. No more tears, no more frustrated mom and disappointed kids in Target or Staples.

Then, beyond the school supplies, of course, back when they were all still growing, there had to be new shoes and often new clothes. And hair always grows so there were usually back to school hair cuts as well.

The night before school started there were check-ins about summer work, which my kids tended to leave to the last minute, so the last day of summer was always filled with summer math and summer reading. No the greatest way to finish

summer vacation. And there was also the back pack packing, which, given the number of school supplies they needed every year, was an ordeal all its own. Then, before Covid and free school lunches, there were lunch boxes to prepare and pack, trying to figure out who would eat what for lunch and snack, making sure that everything was nut free.

It was a stressful and expensive time of year. But it was also exciting. There was an energy to it, that, in spite of all of my frustration, I still enjoyed. It felt like one of those pivotal moments in life, the beginning of something new, a time to start again, the true beginning of the new year, no matter what January 1st claims, a time filled with unknowns and therefore filled with possibilities.

Now, with one kid out of college, one kid in college, and two kids in high school, back to school is a lot different. For one thing, I have enough pens, pencils, highlighters and other school supplies in my house to start my own Staples, so there are no more big and expensive school supply shopping trips. The boys just get what they need from the basement. Cyrus did ask me to pick up a couple of things for him but my total Staples purchase this year for our household's back-to-school needs cost \$2.13.

Since the kids aren't growing anymore there's no real need for a wardrobe refresh at the end of every summer. They aren't growing out of their shoes and their clothes every season anymore.

But still, last Friday found Britton, Cyrus, and me at the outlet mall, not because Cyrus really needed anything but because it's fun to get something new to mark a transitional time in life. A new school year, moving from freshman year to sophomore year of high school, sometimes deserves a new outfit, even if you don't strictly need one.

Britton has been looking for new shorts all summer, he wants white shorts to go with a couple of shirts he has, so we were on the look out for those too. And we found them. But they cost more than he wanted to pay. And when I told him

he should get the shorts if he wanted and needed them, he said, “It’s silly to buy white shorts now anyway. I can’t wear white after Labor Day.”

I almost laughed my head off. My fashionista husband refused to buy the shorts he’s been looking for all summer because he can’t wear white after Labor Day.

I didn’t know people still followed that rule. No white after Labor Day. A fashion rule from previous generations to mark the change of seasons. Lining up with that transitional time, back to school, another rule that feels like it marks the beginning of something new—new activities, a different wardrobe, a new pace to life.

I think Paul would approve. Because in his letter to the church in Rome he recommended a wardrobe change, at least that it is the metaphor he used. Because it was time for a change, time for a new way of living.

It wasn’t back to school, it wasn’t necessarily a transitional time in the year, in the lives of his hearers, but according to him, the presence of Jesus Christ, in their lives and in the world meant that a new time, a new moment had arrived.

So, he talked about it in terms that I certainly understand, especially this time of year. He talked about it in terms of a transitional moment. He told his hearers, “You know what time it is, how it is already the moment for you to wake from sleep.” (Romans 13:11)

In other words, it was time for them to move from one way of living to another. When we are asleep, we are unaware of what is going on around us. Paul wanted his readers to switch from unaware to aware, awake, tuned in to what was going on around them, because God was calling them to live in a certain way in response to the needs of the world around them.

According to Paul, they were living through a transitional moment in the history of the world. “Salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers, the night is far gone; the day is near.” (Romans 13:11-12)

And that transitional moment required a metaphorical outfit change. It required the church to throw off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light (Romans 13:12). It required the church to put on the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 13:14). Like a new outfit, a new way of presenting ourselves in the world. A new outfit for a transitional time.

And what does that new outfit look like? It looks like a life shaped by love, loving your neighbor as yourself (Romans 13:9). Love that does no wrong to a neighbor (Romans 13:10). Love that is the fulfilling of the law (Romans 13:10).

That is what we are called to, to remember not just in this back-to-school, new year, time of year, but all the time, that we are living in a different kind of world, a world shaped by the presence of Jesus, who has shown us the depth and the breadth of the love of God, and who has called us to follow him. To be awake and aware of the needs around us, the suffering around us. To care for each other and to care for the strangers in our communities and around the world, and to care for the earth itself.

To remember, as we have done, the children in refugee camps, the parents living in poverty, the families who cannot afford to buy their children school supplies, who we will be helping with our Lutheran World Relief school kits.

To remember, as we have done, our neighbors who are hungry, that we have supported through our food drive for the Norwood Food Pantry.

To remember, as we do throughout the year, the people who are served by our Matthew 25 Fund, who need help with rent or utility bills or groceries, or gas for their cars.

To remember, as we do through our Mission Fund, those who have experienced disasters and those organizations that are touching people's lives with help and hope.

To, at times, lay aside our own wants and desires to make room for the needs of the people around us, so we can turn to the world in love.

It will probably come as a surprise to anyone under 40 who is hearing this sermon that not wearing white after Labor Day was once a hard and fast rule. The law of fashion. Now people can wear whatever they want and hardly anyone from the younger generations would even notice Britton, should he have chosen to buy the white shorts and wear them next weekend. Probably no one from any generation would care.

Because we have a more important rule to follow, a more important law to fulfill. Paul's fashion advice, for such a time as this. Put on the armor of light, put on the Lord Jesus Christ. And be aware of, be awake to, the call to love. Because that's the rule that matters, that's the law that matters. Love is the fulfilling of the law (Romans 13:10). Amen.