

## **Wardrobe Stewardship: Our relationship with clothes matters to God.**

By Kristine A. Luber – *Gather* magazine, Women of the ELCA, September 2019

Not long ago I attended a panel discussion on art quilting. The moderator welcomed us with these words, “I’m glad to see you here today. None of you would be here if there was no such thing as fabric.” Then she expanded on the obvious – no one would go out in public if they didn’t have clothes to wear.

Genesis tells us that wearing clothes is the result of the fall – Adam and Eve sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves after eating the forbidden fruit. (Gen. 3:7) A few verses later we read about how their gracious God provided them with softer, more suitable clothing, “The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.” (v. 21)

Clothes are a wonderful gift from our loving God who created the plants and animals that provide fibers and gave humankind the ingenuity to spin yarn, weave cloth and sew garments. From the beginning, clothing was used not just for modesty and warmth, but also to indicate ethnicity, allegiance, occupation, status and gender.

You can find references to clothes throughout the Bible. Exodus 39 records the instructions for the finely woven and beautifully colored priest’s garments Moses received from the Lord on Mt. Sinai. Wearing sackcloth as a sign of mourning, grief and repentance is mentioned numerous times in the Old Testament. We remember Jesus’ familiar words in the Sermon on the Mount, “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?” (Matthew 6:28-30)

I am not a scholar, but as an avid sewer I find the cultural history of cloth and clothing fascinating. Sewing runs in my family. My great-great grandfather was a tailor for the Union Army; my mother was an excellent seamstress and taught me to sew.

Colonial Americans imported their textiles from Europe. Cloth was a valuable commodity, and the tailor took great pains not to waste any of it. Articles of clothing were often passed from generation to generation. When cotton, linen and wool textiles were produced in the U.S., prices came down but only at the cost of human exploitation in cotton fields and shirtwaist factories. Fabric continued to be valued – scraps were turned into quilts, and feed sacks were used to make dresses. When I was a girl, store-bought clothes were a luxury for my family, but my mother was a good seamstress and I liked wearing the one-of-a-kind outfits she sewed even though my older sister wore them first. My mother and I designed my wedding dress, assuring that it would be unlike any other.



*My wedding dress incorporated two fabrics (both polyester – crepe and lace). I crocheted cotton hairpin lace for edging. I made the banner, too – it’s fabric, rug yarn, and a cardboard Chi Rho covered with recycled gold foil from an Easter lily pot.*

As an adult, I sewed fewer and fewer clothes for myself. The price of ready-made was so low that it seemed to be poor stewardship to spend my money and time to make my own wardrobe. I gave up the pleasure of sewing, and I fell into “fast fashion” – buying more and more clothes just because they were cheap. With all that clutter in my closet, answering the question, “What am I going to wear today?” became more and more difficult.

“Fast fashion” is responsible for the glut of clothing in everyone’s closets, creating an explosion of thrift stores in the United States and an overstock of cast-off clothing in countries that were once happy to receive these donations. Consumers buying too much and salving their consciences by donating what they are tired of creates an environmental crisis

when no one wants the castoffs and they get passed from organization to organization, ultimately piling up at overseas ports or ending up in far-off landfills. The cost to consumers may have been small, but manufacturing those low-priced clothes comes with a huge cost – the exploitation of garment workers living in third-world countries.

In her 2012 book, *Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion*, Elizabeth L. Cline uncovers some of the issues surrounding “fast fashion” and makes suggestions for letting go of the “cheaper is better” mentality. She advises to switch to “slow” fashion, calling on a return to making, altering and mending.



When I was young the thought of buying ready-made would never have crossed my mind. I made all my own clothes, including fly-front pants and blazers. I did all my husband’s alterations. I enjoyed sewing and was proud of my skills.

*Christmas, 1975 --I sewed the skirt, pants and vests, although we wore them with purchased blazers. See how well I matched the plaids?*

Giving up sewing and buying cheap mass-produced clothes robbed me of the enjoyment and satisfaction making my own wardrobe gave me.

An offhand question from a friend, “You know how to sew, don’t you?” led me to join the costume team at my local community theatre. Working in the costume shop as a volunteer resurrected my long-dormant sewing skills, and 15 years of constructing costumes for productions ranging from farces to Shakespeare with dozens of Broadway musicals thrown in, have taught me to sew quickly and with confidence. The theatre owns thousands of costumes which must be altered and mended whenever they’re used in a new production. Shirts will have all the buttons replaced by Velcro for quick changes and ripped seams will be repaired. Men’s pants are let up and down, in and out over and over.



*A suit I sewed for Topeka Civic Theatre. Mary Poppins had to “fly” -- so both the skirt and jacket were made to have slits for the flying apparatus.*

Then I inherited my mother’s fabric stash – all the scraps left over from everything she made in 60+ years of sewing, her button box and all her trims, notions and sewing tools. I started to make art quilts using those vintage materials. At first I donated the quilts to charity auctions, then I started to show my fabric artwork in galleries. I love being able to tell people what the scraps are from – pajamas I had as a little girl, my sister’s prom dress, 60s shift dresses, the curtains in my mom’s kitchen.

My business cards read, “Kristine A. Luber, fabric artist,” and I made up a personal tag line, “It’s a rare day that I don’t have a needle in hand to sew something.” It’s more than a slogan. It’s the truth.

I decided to never (well, almost never) buy any more sewing supplies. I’m helped with this resolve by people who have given me their leftover fabric and thread to supplement my already plentiful supply. My friends have been so generous that I have to say no when I’m offered any more. If I really need something, I try to find it at a thrift store or one of the creative reuse stores that are popping up to sell the contents of everybody’s grandma’s attic.

It’s my stewardship. Cloth and clothing are valuable gifts from God. I want to consume what I’ve been given responsibly. I enjoy the challenge of using my God-given creativity and talent to make something beautiful out of what others have cast off.

What about my personal wardrobe? I’m happily sewing my own clothes again – using my vast supply of old stuff. Following the fashion trends that lead young women to seek cheaply made faux vintage, I’m “upcycling.” I took one of my dad’s flannel shirts and made it feminine by adding vintage lace and pearl buttons. I decorated a thrift store

sweatshirt with patchwork. I deconstructed one of the blouses I'd made for myself 40 years ago and included the hand-embroidered yoke in a new outfit. Most recently I've sewn myself a dress and a tunic from some of the larger pieces in my fabric stash. And I'm getting lots of compliments on my one-of-a-kind outfits.



*Some of my recent outfits. Many of them are inspired by fashions I've seen from high-end fashion houses. They cost me next to nothing to make because I have so many materials on hand.*

I have come to the realization that it's poor stewardship to buy more clothes just because I can't resist the sale rack. After all, I have a roomful of older, quality fabric to use to make something I will really like with the enjoyment and satisfaction of making it myself. And as for all the "fast fashion" cluttering my closet, instead of patting myself on the back for passing it on to someone who doesn't want my castoffs, I'll assume that if I don't want it nobody else does either and find a creative way to use it.