

Spiritual Values on a Tee Shirt

All-Ages Worship Service

Sunday, July 16, 2017

Rev. Roger Jones

Wear a tee-shirt with an image or message proclaiming your faith, philosophy, theology, community commitments, or ethical outlook. Threads of spiritual wisdom, social justice, or humor are welcome. No partisan politics or vulgarity, please. If you don't have a shirt to show off, wear whatever you like, but come!

The minister is wearing five tee shirts in layers and removes them, one at a time, to reveal a message related to each stage of this worship service.

Hymns: #1024 "(You Got to Do) When the Spirit Says Do," #123 "Spirit of Life/Fuente de Amor," #1064.

Milestones: Joys and Sorrows

Pastoral Prayer

Please join me now in the spirit of prayer, as I offer these words of intention and hope. A minute of no speaking will follow to allow for silent reflection, and the silence will end with music from the piano.

Spirit of Life, Fuente de Amor, come unto us now with peace and the stirrings of compassion. May all sorrows, grief and anxiety among us be held in the arms of love and serenity. Help us to live life with courage, one day at a time.

God of love, bless our lives and our loved ones. Receive our hopes and prayers for them, and bless the whole human family. May all beings be well.

May our joys and our causes for gratitude be lifted up high, so that we may behold the goodness and beauty of life. Help us to give thanks for this new day and for all good gifts.

Now as we reflect on our concerns, hopes, joys and aspirations, let us be together in this community of all ages. Let us notice our breathing, our neighbor's breathing, our common breath, which is the breath of life. With the sounds of our community around us, let us come into the place of silence which is more than the absence of sound, but which is the source from which we all emerged and to which we all eventually return.

Message

Do you know where tee shirts came from? Do you know where they got the name? Well, I didn't, so I found out. Here is a bit of background. In the 1890s, several garment makers in the United States experimented with making a men's undershirt with stretchy fabric so men could pull it on over the head.¹ Before then, men wore long johns—underwear that covered the whole body in one piece. The top of the garment had buttons, the way we find on regular shirts. A guy would put on the long johns and button them up. To take them off, unbutton. But, what do if your buttons fell off, and you were a guy? Apparently, this afflicted many American men in the late 1800s.

¹Pagan Kelly, "Who Made That T-Shirt?" *New York Times Magazine*, September 20, 2013. Accessed July 15, 2017. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/22/magazine/who-made-that-t-shirt.html>. All future references come from this article.

In 1904 a newspaper advertisement by the Cooper Underwear Company pictured a man with some of the buttons popped off his undershirt. He has used safety pins to hold the two sides together, and he looks embarrassed. If you didn't know how to sew, and you didn't live with a wife or your mother, you were helpless. To the rescue came stretch cotton fabric. It made buttons unnecessary. Next to that picture of the guy was pictured this new product: the "bachelor undershirt." This is an example of how commercial advertising both makes use of gender stereotypes to sell products *and* reinforces the same stereotypes. If you buy the pullover shirt, you won't need to have somebody to sew for you, and surely you won't need to learn how to sew for yourself. The slogan was: "No safety pins, no buttons, no needle, no thread."

At first it was considered indecent to wear your undershirt in public with no outside shirt, even if the weather was hot or you were doing hard work. But over time, crew neck undershirts became popular, especially among younger men. And they got a new name. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word T-shirt was coined in 1920 in a novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald, an American writer who wrote *The Great Gatsby*. In another of his books, *This Side of Paradise*, Fitzgerald included a t-shirt on a list of items that a teenage boy would take along to a preparatory boarding school. By the 1940s, tee shirts had become fashion items for teenagers. They would sew patches on their tee shirts, the way folks later sewed patches on denim jackets or backpacks. They would add fringe to their tee shirts. They would write words on the fabric, by hand.



By the 1950s and 60s, designs and pictures appeared on shirts. My late mother was kind of old fashioned when it came to fashion. One week in 1956, when my older brother was seven years old, he didn't tell Mom that his elementary school was having school pictures taken. He probably forgot, or didn't care, or maybe he wanted his picture taken with him in his favorite tee shirt, his Davy Crockett shirt. When Mom saw the resulting photographs, she was exasperated. She spoke about this fashion atrocity many years later—that's why I remember it. My brother's picture is captured forever in our family photograph collection. It's cute, and a lot more charming than if he'd been wearing a shirt mom had bought from the department store. Now in retirement, my brother wears tee shirts nearly every day of the week.

By now, tee shirts have become ubiquitous. They serve so many purposes: art, fashion, humor, politics, commerce, and comfort. They show club membership and school spirit and they promote fundraising events. Produced in multiple quantities of one design, tee shirts are used to

keep track of kids on a field trip, leave people with fond memories of summer camps, cruises and bus tours, and show allegiance with a college or an athletic team (especially the athletic team of a college). Business enterprises think of all kinds of ways to make money by making tee shirts. It's especially nice if you can promote your own brand name on a shirt and get folks to pay you to advertise for them, as many a sportswear company has demonstrated. We wear tee shirts to show the causes we care about, the candidates and ballot propositions we support, and perhaps just as often to show the ones we don't like.

I have so many tee shirts, I think they will outlast me. But for some reason, every now and then I can't resist buying another one. Some strange, grasping American consumerist part of me wins out. I just one more design to adorn myself with, or one more cause to align myself with, or one more joke to say with a short-sleeve cotton-weave silk screened shirt.

This buying behavior is odd, since I rarely wear a tee shirt for office hours, committee meetings or pastoral appointments here at church. And when I choose one to wear, I think about what it says and who might read it when I'm out and about. For me, wearing a tee shirt with a message looks like the start of a conversation. When I see a shirt with a message I don't like on someone else, I do start a conversation, but only in my head. At home, when consider putting one on, I think about where I'm going. Do I have the courage today to proclaim this message, or do I not have it in me to know that other people will be having private conversations in their own head?

That brings me to this one. "Jesus Is a Liberal"—I bought this tee shirt at a booth during General Assembly 17 years ago. It says that in big bold letters. In small text that circles the slogan, it gives definitions of liberal from the dictionary:

"Not bound by established positions in political or religious philosophy"; "Independent in opinion"; "Not conservative"; "often having a tendency toward democratic forms." I love the provocative message. Too bad I don't have the nerve to wear it in public more often. It could be a good spiritual discipline for me.

In fact, I tried it once, 17 years ago this summer. I had bought *Jesus Is a Liberal* in the exhibit hall at our denomination's annual General Assembly. A few days later, I was on a Unitarian Universalist tour of Civil Rights history in several southern states. You saw a lot of tee shirts about Jesus there in the South. Billboards too. And most of them did not proclaim him as a liberal. One night we stayed at a motel in Oxford, Mississippi. The next morning, we had breakfast in our motel. As I packed up, I put on the tee shirt. I walked out to the bus, and then before getting on I walked past it. Two city blocks. Then I turned around and walked back. It seemed like a very long walk. In spite of my self-conscious feelings, I'm not aware anybody noticed, let alone made a comment, until I got on the bus with my UU companions.

Sometimes, wearing a tee shirt or a badge or a button can take a little bit of courage—putting your message out there, or your sense of humor or your faith. Sometimes even wearing a name tag requires a little bit of courage.

One of the reasons for a congregation like this one is that we have opportunities to practice being a bit more brave. And if we can have a little fun learning to be a little more courageous, why not. Whatever your message or commitment, your sense of humor or sense of loyalty, you are welcome here. May your cotton shirt never shrink, and may courage ever grow.

Messages: Our Procession of Tee Shirts

Please line up on either side at the front. As you approach the center, a Worship Associate will announce your tee-shirt message as you model it. We can come to your seat with a microphone if that is easier for you.