

Devotion, Third Week after Epiphany, 2023

Rev. Jeanne Simpson

After church on Sunday, I drove over to First Presbyterian Church in Monroe to install a new pastor. This installation was what we normally do for a new pastor with a first call, except that Bruce is not a new pastor. He was a pastor for the Presbyterian Church in America for over 30 years, having grown up in the Presbyterian Church in Canada and later an independent Presbyterian church in Maine and Philadelphia. Bruce has a D.Min with a specialty in revitalizing congregations, but he has no experience with PCUSA. He went to a PCA seminary and then Fuller for his doctorate, but not any PCUSA seminary. So he went over to Columbia Seminary and took courses in order to pass the 5 PCUSA ordination exams, which he did with flying colors, and the Examinations Commission, that I chair, also examined him.

I thought when I got to the church that this installation service would be a fairly simple formality – but no. The first thing that caught my eye was that the green paraments were still up, even though an elder was putting out communion on the table. I asked Bruce about switching to red, because we always use red for ordinations (we want to invoke the Holy Spirit on this new pastor), and he had no idea what I was talking about. In the PCA church, they never wore robes or stoles and they didn't use parament colors. So I had to give him a short lesson in paraments and stoles. We found a red stole that I could borrow so I could "stole" him after I gave him the installation charge, the elder switched the paraments, and I suggested to his elders later that they buy him a red stole.

So that got me to thinking – why DO we use liturgical colors? And why do ministers usually wear robes in the PCUSA? When I was growing up in the PCUS church, we never used paraments and the minister used a robe, but I never paid attention to whether he wore a stole or not. Robes are just a symbol of our education and authority as a teaching elder/pastor – if you see a minister with a D.Min., you will notice 3 velvet stripes across the sleeves to indicate this. The rest of us have plain sleeves.

But the paraments and stole colors represent the liturgical year – green for "ordinary" time, which isn't "ordinary" in terms of nothing much happening but "ordinary" in that the Sundays are labelled with ordinal numbers and not part of special seasons. We use purple, the color for preparation and royalty, for Lent and Advent. We use red, representing the Holy Spirit, for Pentecost, and occasionally when other special days occur, based on the minister's sermon or the church's special events, like elder ordination or even homecoming. We use white, the color representing the redemptive work of Jesus, for Communion Sundays, Eastertide (the season from Easter Sunday until Pentecost), Christmastide (the season from Christmas Day through Epiphany), Transfiguration of the Lord Sunday, Trinity Sunday, All Saints Sunday, and Christ the King Sunday.

So I hope you'll pay attention to the paraments, my stole, and choir collars on Sundays. We will be starting Lent soon and will switch to purple. Liturgical colors are a visual symbol of what that season or Sunday means to us as members of the church. I told Bruce when I "stoled" him that the yoke (which the stole represents) was light, but the hands that were getting ready to be laid on him, another form of yoke, would feel heavy. And I reminded him that the yoke may feel heavy, but the burden is light. Jesus is always there to give us a hand. May you remember that when your yoke feels too heavy to bear.

Jeanne