

Maundy Thursday 2024: "Clothed in Power"
March 28, 2024
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

The man said, "The day I first wore that shirt was the day I learned clothes possess power."¹ The person quoted started out his life as Maximilian Grünfeld, born in 1928 in what is now western Ukraine. Last week he died on Long Island as Martin Greenfield, age 95. His obituary bore the headline: "Auschwitz Survivor Who Dressed Sinatra, Shaq and 6 Presidents."

The shirt that taught Greenfield "clothes possess power" belonged to a Nazi guard at Auschwitz where he was a teenage concentration camp internee. His work assignment was in the laundry, and he accidentally tore the collar of the shirt. As punishment the guard **whipped** him, and angrily threw the shirt back at him. He **did** repair it, but he never **returned** it. He had the chutzpah to keep it and wear it under his striped prisoner's garb. Other guards assumed he had an "in" with someone important, so more food and relative freedom came his way. By the grace of God and through his wits, Grünfeld survived both Auschwitz and Buchenwald. He was among those liberated in spring of 1945, almost 80 years ago. Then-General Dwight David Eisenhower, the Supreme Commander of the Allied forces, visited the camp while Grünfeld was still there. Little did Ike know that a few decades later one of the young, emaciated people he helped liberate would become his tailor at a world-famous shop, Greenfield Clothiers, in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn.

If we agree that "clothes possess power," whether you're a prisoner, a president or a basketball player, let's think about the clothing our Lord Jesus wore. As a newborn He "wore" the swaddling bands we hear about in the Christmas Gospel, wrapped up tightly by His mother so He'd feel snug as a bug in a rug.... St. John tells us that, as an adult, Lord Jesus wore a special robe, "*seamless, woven in one piece from the top*" (John 19:23). The soldiers who crucified Him

recognized the value of His clothing, at least, and so threw dice to see who would get it, instead of tearing it apart. (The book and the movie *The Robe* tell the subsequent imagined story of the centurion who won that robe.) And as we just heard in the Maundy Thursday Gospel, the night before His death our Lord Jesus wore only His inner garment and a towel, freeing Himself up to wash the feet of His friends.

The humbling and loving act of footwashing was a foreshadowing of our Lord Jesus' total gift of self on the cross. In his letter to the people in Philippi (Philippians 3), St. Paul invites us to mirror our Lord's pouring out of self, as far as possible, by God's grace:

*⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
⁶who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
⁷but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸he humbled himself [far beyond footwashing....]
and became obedient to the point of death –
even death on a cross.*

Maximilian Grünfeld's father, named Joseph, was not a Christian. He was a Jew, and that's why he and the rest of the family were arrested and sent to a death camp. Father and son were immediately separated from the females in the family upon arrival at the camp. On their second day there, guards asked if anyone had skills. Joseph shot up his hand, spoke the number already tattooed on his son's arm (A4406), and proclaimed, "He is a mechanic. Very skilled."² The father knew the son's chances of survival were greatly improved if he served some practical purpose for their jailers. The teen boy was peeled off of from the group of new arrivals, and never saw his father again. But earlier his father had told him, "If you survive, you live for us." The obituary ends:

The rest of Mr. Greenfield's life was an attempt to follow that commandment, his son Tod said: "And that's what he did."³

Joseph said to young Max, "If you survive, you live for us." Joseph pushed his son forward as useful, rather than himself. In that way, Joseph helped to ensure Max's survival. Our Lord Jesus put Himself in our place. He took upon Himself **our** sin, underwent the punishment **we** deserved. He died, that we may live, **all** of us: prisoners and guards, parents and children, Jews and Christians, people of all faiths and people of no faith.... Paul puts it this way:

¹⁹ ...I have been crucified with Christ, ²⁰ and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2)

Our Lord's final commandment to His friends before His death was: "*Love one another as I have loved you.*" (John 13:34) Let's remember that love is our perfect, most powerful, all-purpose garment. This is Paul's spiritual power-dressing advice in the letter to the Colossians (ch. 3):

¹²As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts... And be thankful... ¹⁷And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Hear the command again: "*Love one another as I have loved you.*" Hear the advice again: *¹⁴Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*"

"[C]lothes possess power" – and none moreso than a garment of Christlike love, enabling us to give the precious gift of self, without counting the cost. Our Lord died nearly naked, but fully clothed in love. "Nails didn't hold him on the cross; love did." Amen

¹Alex Traub, "Auschwitz Survivor Who Dressed Sinatra, Shaq and 6 Presidents" (*New York Times*, March 22, 2024, A1, A24), A1.

²Ibid, A24.

³Ibid.

