

## Holy Habits

### Colossians 3:12-17

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear 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. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Two nuns are ordered to paint a room in the convent, and the last instruction of the Mother Superior is that they must not get even a drop of paint on their habits. After conferring about this for a while, the two nuns decide to lock the door of the room, strip off their habits, and paint in the nude. In the middle of the project, there comes a knock at the door. "Who is it?", calls one of the nuns. "Blind man," replies a voice from the other side of the door. The two nuns look at each other and shrug, and, deciding that no harm can come from letting a blind man into the room, they open the door. "Looking good, ladies," says the man, "where do you want these blinds"?

The very first time I went to Ecuador I was serving with a team from Christ Episcopal Church from here in Elizabeth City, with two Episcopal missionaries as our hosts, at an Episcopal church in Quito. The Episcopal Church in Ecuador is part of the Episcopal Church USA, and as it "happened," that very same week that we were there was the very same week that the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church came to Ecuador. Which was a really big deal anyway, but an even bigger deal because a Presiding Bishop had never been to Ecuador before.

So for Sunday worship, our team, our hosts, and our friends from Mision Emaus got up early and went to the cathedral along with believers from all over the Diocese of Central Ecuador and we listened to the Bishop speak about hospitality and faith, and we received Communion and several of the youth from Emaus along with those from all over were Confirmed by the Presiding Bishop herself, and then we all went outside to have lunch together and enjoy a cultural exhibition that had been put together in honor of the Bishop.

There was a ton of dancing that afternoon. And that was one of the first times I really realized how diverse this country was, but not just by the different styles of music and dance.

Every city or region in Ecuador has their own distinct history and traditions. You can tell by looking at a calendar and seeing the multiple Independence Days the entire country celebrates, one for each major city, one for the entire country. And that day it was visible the second a group walked out on the pavement to perform.

We knew when a group was from the coastal region by their short pants, bandanas, and sleeveless shirts. We knew if a group was from (or representing) the *oriente*, the jungle region, from their grass skirts and spears and headdresses. We could make distinctions even between all the groups from the highlands: the wide, bright skirts and round hats that were from Cuenca and the embroidered blouses and feathered caps that signified Quito.

And they were serious about their dress too. Several of the young ladies from our mission team were asked to participate in a traditional dance with members from Emaus. The church members had no worries that five *gringas* would be able to learn the moves. But heaven forbid if they couldn't find a skirt or a pair of the proper fabric dancing shoes. In fact when we arrived at the cathedral, one pair of shoes had gone missing when the bus was packed, and when a suggestion was made of somebody dancing barefoot, our priest immediately took off her own shoes, thrust them at the offending idealist, and tore off looking for another pair to borrow. You *could not dance* the traditional dance the *proper* way if you did not wear the *traditional* and *proper* clothing.

It was certainly a cultural difference that Lourdes got stressed out and went on a shoe quest while I laughed, shrugged, and found a seat. Granted, I didn't have to dance. (And nobody would have wanted to see that anyway). But I hadn't learned yet how important that clothing was because it represented them and their specific culture just as much as the dance did.

We read the scripture earlier about Samuel as a child growing up in the temple and studying under Eli. We pick up this story somewhat in the middle. In the preceding verses his mother had been unable to bear children, but God heard her faithful cries and gave her Samuel, who she then took to the temple to serve God for all his life. To be literally set apart for God.

So Samuel's mother Hannah would come to visit him at the temple. The verses said that she would bring him a robe, a garment that would identify him as a servant of the Lord. And he would also wear a linen ephod. The very condensed description of it is basically this golden and colorful priestly apron. And that's a crude description that doesn't do it justice, but the point is that it was this special piece of clothing that was something holy- set aside for the ones who were serving God and leading the people in worship. Wearing it didn't make Samuel holy, but it identified him to those who saw him. Like we see a habit or a clerical collar or a stole, the Israelites saw the ephod and knew its wearer belonged to and loved and served God.

That's exactly how visible I think it should be when we follow Paul's advice to the Colossians. He tells us that as God's holy people we should clothe ourselves in compassion. In kindness. In forgiveness, and most of all in love. And that's really easy right? Right? To act with all these simple attributes. Or maybe not all the time? But it should be.

I'm reminded of two stories. The first is about author, activist, missionary, and occasional prisoner Shane Claiborne. He tells about a summer during college at Wheaton in the 1990s that he decided he could best live out his faith by serving in India with Mother Theresa. So this southern boy with big ideas started calling nuns all over the northeast, and kept getting hung up on, until a Mother Superior from the Bronx decided he was for real. She gave him Mother Theresa's phone number. He stayed up until 2 o'clock in the morning so it would be a reasonable time in Calcutta, and he called her. And she answered. And he talked and talked and talked. He wanted to come for the summer. And he

understood that was a long time, and he would come for a shorter amount of time if she thought that was better. And what shots would he need? And where would he eat? And where would he sleep? And she told him “God takes care of the lilies and the sparrows, and God will take care of you. Just come.”

Just come.

I’m sure that’s what a lot of people thought my attitude was when I first told people I’d be spending that first summer in South America. That I was just going to go. Nonchalant. Confident.

Psyche.

I’m a worrier by nature. I was and am much more like Shane Claiborne than Mother Theresa. At serving in big visible ways, and at following the Apostle’s advice. “Love people,” Paul says. “Forgive easily,” Paul says.

That’s where I’m reminded of the second story, one that happened to me. That very first summer that I actually worked for Youth World, serving as a missionary intern with the Quito Quest program, I was walking home one night with all five of my roommates, the rest of the male Quito Quest hosting staff. It was one of the very rare nights that we all had off, between the departure of one set of teams and the arrival of another. We had gotten dinner in the plaza up the street, in a wealthy area of the city, and gone to see a movie. By the end of the night we were very much feeling like normal college-age North Americans, laughing, having a good time, unconcerned with anything going on around us for one evening in that crazy, crazy summer.

We went past a building and there was a man half sitting, half laying, propped up against the side of it. And at first we all six kept walking and continued our conversation. We had all totally seen him, but it was Lane who decided to say something about the man, and Bryan, the only one of us who had grown up in Ecuador, who decided to ask out loud if anybody had wondered if he was okay, and we

all stopped, turned around, and walked back to the man. We realized as we got closer that although he was well-dressed, his clothes were a mess, and his bottom lip had been bleeding. He didn't respond to us at all, and we weren't sure at first if he was even alive, but both Teddy and Lane got right up to him and decided he was breathing. After that we realized that his wallet was sitting next to him on the ground, its contents strewn around, his cash gone. He had very clearly been mugged.

Four of us set about trying to take care of him, while Matt, one of our stronger Spanish speakers, went to look for the cops with Lane. And we were able to get him semi-conscious and make sure he was going to continue breathing. But when Matt came back with a pair of police officers, they just scoffed. They told us "El esta boracho, no mas." He's drunk. They pulled him to his feet and began to basically shove him down the sidewalk. We had been close enough to know that he was totally sober and that these cops were simply choosing the easiest option. They didn't want to help him so they chose to believe he was drunk and ignore the fact that he needed help. And we also knew as a group of foreigners that the best way to not make the situation any worse with the Ecuadorian police was to simply leave.

I wrote that night all about the experience on my blog. And people from home commented on it left and right. They sympathized with me on how frustrating it must have been to have to literally turn our backs on him as the officers did so figuratively. People from home told us what good Samaritans we were for trying to help. And yes, I'm thankful for what love, care and attention we were able to give him. But I'll always remember how every one of us, myself included, initially wanted to just walk by him.

What kindness we were able to display came when we finally let our habits from being missionaries override our habits from being self-absorbed wealthy foreign students. We had already spent most of a summer together in prayer and in service, reading the Word together, trying our best to be examples to one another and to our teams of Christ's love. We had put on the label of missionary.

We had literally put on the clothing. I bet you every one of us had a t-shirt or sweatshirt or hat on that night that said “Youth World International” across it. And in the process of taking on this identity we had grown in our love for God, grown in our love for people, and grown, not as much as we would have liked, or even liked to think, but grown nonetheless in how much we were able to show that love to those around us.

Have you ever known somebody who just loved everyone around them? Who was visibly joyous all the time? And thought, “Oh, if only I were built like them.”

(insert story of monk)

The Gospel lesson in the lectionary today, which we didn’t read, but I could have chosen to do, is the story about Jesus as a child staying behind at the temple in Jerusalem. He has been there following the traditions of his people, and when his parents come looking for him he’s debating with the priests and amazing them with his insight. And the passage ends with the statement that when Jesus went home with his parents, he continued to increase in wisdom and in the Lord’s favor.

Even Jesus didn’t go through life with “cheat codes” or with some secret. Just like Samuel and just like you and me, he grew as he followed the simple instructions of the Lord.

Which is why I think it’s so cool that Paul tells us to clothe ourselves in love. We don’t wake up in the morning in the clothes we are going to wear for the day. We put them on. And we do it often and over and over again. Every day we have to get up and choose our clothes.

As our clothes cover us so we’re not like the naked nuns from the joke; our Godly choices cover us like an ephod. Because much as we wish for it, nobody is built any differently. “Oh, if only I were built like that person.” “Oh, if only I had the secret of holiness.”

Paul tell us plainly and simply. Be covered in kindness, compassion. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, or as Eugene Peterson's translation says "Let the Word of Christ... have the run of the house. Give it plenty of room in your lives."

May you and I choose the habit and the everyday habit of love. Let it cover us like an ephod, and be visible to all those who have the opportunity to see Christ's love through us. Amen.