

THE CHRISTIAN PUT-ON

Scriptures: Colossians 3:5-17; I Timothy 4:11-16

My first real acting experience was in Potlatch, Idaho. I tried out once for a small part in a high school play, but I didn't get it, and in college and seminary I was too busy. So my big break came in the Potlatch Community Theater. We put on a comedy by Neil Simon called *The Good Doctor*. I played the title role. It was a huge part, and I got it not because I was good actor but because the director knew I could memorize a lot of lines.

In this particular role I had to play several different characters: a playwright, a dentist, a banker, a father, and in one scene I had to portray a playboy giving a lecture to the audience on how to seduce women. When we got to this scene, the director said, "This is going to be a stretch." We went through the scene several times, and the director kept shaking his head. "No, No!" he said. "You've got to have more swagger; you have to be more dashing. You need to make us believe that you are God's gift to women." I shrugged and tried again. But he wasn't satisfied until we got to the dress rehearsal. At the dress rehearsal they dressed me in a white dinner jacket with black tie, a top hat, and a Fred Astaire style cane. And suddenly I was different. I was dashing, I was glib, I was debonair; well, sort of. But the director was amazed. He said, "Wow, we should have tried that a long time ago."

So what does this have to do with the Bible? Listen again to Colossians 3:12. The apostle Paul says, "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience." Then in verse 14 he says, "Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." The Christian faith involves dressing for the part. It is a put-on. It involves putting on the qualities of new life in Christ even before you are comfortable with them. It means assuming the character of Jesus even before you have gotten the hang of it.

Some people call this hypocrisy; I call it rehearsing. Sometimes people resent the fact that Christians put on a show of being nice to each other on Sunday in church when during the rest of the week they aren't always that nice. But don't you see? On Sundays they are rehearsing. Okay, they don't yet have the hang of it. They have not yet figured out how to do it on Monday through Friday. But that is not argument against practicing on Sundays. It is an argument for practicing more. Hypocrites don't need less church; they need more. Because the more they practice a relationship to God and the more they practice loving other people, even if it is only one day a week, the better chance they have of finally getting it.

Notice in the scripture reading how this is specifically applied to forgiveness. Verse 13: "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." In a book called *Forgive and Forget*, Lewis Smedes, a former professor of theology and ethics at Fuller Seminary, emphasizes that forgiveness is not a one time act. It is a process. He has an entire section of the book called "How People Forgive." The first chapter in this section is entitled "Slowly." The next chapter is entitled "With a Little Understanding." The last chapter is called "A Little at a Time." In this

last chapter he writes, “The healing art of forgiving people has to be practiced a little at a time—for most people anyway. Ordinary people forgive best if they go at it in bits and pieces” (p. 113).

Forgiveness, like love, like compassion and kindness and humility, is like being in a play. It requires assuming a character that may not be natural to you. It means putting on the costume of that character, which is like going to church, and practicing the lines and gestures of that character until you get the hang of it.

Shane Berg, a New Testament professor at Princeton Seminary, tells of visiting his grandmother when he and his brother were young. Whenever they got in a fight with each other, their grandmother would grab them by the back of the arm and set them down on her back steps. He said,

We knew what was coming next, and we hated it. It wasn't a lecture or a spanking—it was much worse. She insisted that we sit side by side on that stoop until each of us said something nice to the other one, and we had to mean it (she could tell when we were faking it). ... At precisely the moment I wanted to throttle my little brother, I was instead compelled to speak kindly to him. Sometimes we sat for over a half an hour before we could muster the will to spit out some halting expression of affection for each other. But here is the interesting thing—on those days when we were forced into such an encounter, my brother and I would not fight again (*The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, Vol 28, No. 1, p. 7-8).

Love takes practice; it takes rehearsing. That's why we do the Sharing of the Peace on Sunday mornings. When we turn to those around us and say, “The peace of Christ be with you,” we are practicing. I realize that the person to whom you say those words may not be at odds with you. You may hardly know them. But you are practicing. You are practicing for the time when you will need to say those words to some with whom you are really angry. And sometimes the person next to you is the person with whom you are angry. Well, here you are in church, like on the grandmother's back step. And you've got to say something nice to each other before you can sit down. That is practicing the peace of Christ.

We can do this because God, in a sense, has already given us the costumes for our part. We call that justification. Through Jesus, God has put on us the garments of righteousness that we did not possess on our own. Notice the verb tenses in verses 9-10: “Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off [past tense] the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves [past tense] with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.” God has already given us the costumes for our new role. Now it is our job to learn the lines and practice wearing them.

Of course, part of this process involves unlearning our old lines—our old patterns of speech. Did you notice in this scripture passage how much emphasis there is on the words we use—how we talk? Verse 8: “But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth.” To put on the character of Christ we must unlearn our old lines—our old way of talking to each other.

Many of you have probably seen the musical *My Fair Lady*. In the movie version Rex Harrison plays professor Henry Higgins, a speech teacher, who accepts the challenge of taking a poor uneducated girl from the streets of London and transforming her into a high society debutante—a woman of such refinement and sophistication that none of the elite of London will ever guess her true origin. If you remember, the first thing he works on is her speech. Before he even begins to change her clothes or her hair style or her manners, he works on her speech.

Unfortunately, Eliza Doolittle is not very good at it. You can take the girl away from her Cockney origins, but it is much harder to take the Cockney out of the girl. She practices and but it doesn't help, until one day, suddenly, she says, "The rain in Spain falls mainly in the plain." Professor Higgins jerks his head toward her and says, "What did you say?" She repeats, "The rain in Spain falls mainly in the plain." He leaps up and says, "By jove, I think she's got it," and they practice saying and singing those words over and over again."

By the way, did you notice that singing was also an important part of this scripture passage? Verse 16: "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." Singing in church is how we practice the language of gratitude. I know that not all of you are singers. That is okay. But when we stand for a hymn or song, I want to encourage you, if nothing else, to say quietly to yourself the words of the song as we are singing. If you don't think you can hit the note, at least quietly hit the word; because the words are important. The words we sing on Sunday morning or Wednesday night are the lines we need to learn for life in the Kingdom of God. We are practicing the language of gratitude, and we sing it, just as Eliza Doolittle did, in order to get it right.

Changing the way she talks is the first step in helping Eliza Doolittle put on the character of a debutante, and it is also the first step in helping us put on the character of Christ. But it is only the first step. The other step involves practicing the manners—the way of relating to other people—that goes with high society. And that is where a remarkable transformation begins to happen in Eliza Doolittle. At the beginning of the movie Professor Higgins treats her with contempt. He, after all, is a professor, and she is a tramp. But by the end of the movie she will not tolerate this anymore. She has spent so much time practicing dignity, she begins to have dignity. She has rehearsed for so long at being a lady of sophistication and grace; she has actually become one.

That friends, is the hope of the Christian life. If you keep dressing up as a follower of Christ, the clothes may one day begin to fit. If you keep talking to other people like a follower of Christ, you may one day begin to change your whole accent. And if you practice the demeanor, the attitude, the manners of a follower of Christ—even if you repeatedly mess up—if you practice these things long enough and often enough, God may one day be able to say, "By jove, I think you've got it."

- Ken Onstot
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