

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, July 26, 2020**

**WHATEVER YOU DO (2)**

**Colossians 3:12-17**

You may wonder why I'm wearing my pulpit robe this morning, along with the academic hood I received when I graduated from Princeton Seminary 37 years ago (please don't hold it against me!). It's possible that many of you have never seen me in my clerical garb. I decided to dress this way to help you visualize another of my life's most embarrassing moments.

Mary Sue thinks I have told you this story before. Her memory is more reliable about such things than mine is. So, if you've heard this before, I ask you, in the spirit of Colossians 3:13, to bear with me as I tell it again.

This embarrassing moment took place when I was serving in my first church position after seminary. I spent three years on the staff of a church in Downingtown, PA, which is roughly half way between downtown Philadelphia and the Pennsylvania Dutch farmland of Lancaster, PA.

One of the families in our church – the Martins – had a daughter who was graduating from a Catholic girls' high school called Villa Maria Academy. It was the tradition at Villa Maria to invite the pastors of all their graduating seniors to participate in the school's commencement ceremony. It was very ecumenical of them to include the pastors of their non-Catholic graduates. I felt very honored that the Martins wanted me to attend.

This was, as you can imagine, a pretty formal occasion. All the clergy were instructed to wear appropriate vestments for the ceremony. So, I took my black pulpit robe (the only one I had) and my academic hood from Princeton. It was, after all, I reasoned, an academic ceremony.

I don't remember exactly what I expected, but when I got there, I discovered there would be 18 members of the clergy up on the stage: 16 Catholic priests, one Episcopalian, and me. All 16 of the priests, plus the Episcopalian, were dressed in flowing white vestments. Of all the clergy, I was the only one not dressed in white. I was the proverbial black sheep. There was absolutely no place to hide. You can imagine the optics. I stuck out like a sore thumb. Only I think "sore thumb" hardly does justice to the picture.

The Martins (the family from our church) were really good sports about it. They thought it was hilarious. They could barely contain their laughter. Fortunately, they weren't embarrassed and didn't get upset about it. I guess it made the occasion a bit more memorable for them. I was grateful for their forbearance and good humor.

As if it weren't enough to be in front of this audience of graduates, families, and school leaders in this scenario, it turns out that there was more awkwardness of the liturgical and theological variety. I didn't know the ceremony would include the celebration of the mass –

you know, the Roman Catholic observance of communion or the Lord's Supper. Because of their doctrine of transubstantiation – the belief that the bread and wine used in communion actually, literally become the body and blood of Jesus – the Roman Catholic understanding of the sacrament is significantly different than ours.

We believe the elements used in the sacrament remain what they are: bread and wine (or juice). They are symbols of the body and blood of Jesus. Only symbols. They are not transformed into the actual body and blood of Jesus. In our understanding, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is primarily a memorial observance. It is intended to help us remember what Jesus did for us. Jesus tells us to eat the bread and drink the cup "in remembrance of (Him)." It is not, as our Roman Catholic friends believe, a re-offering or re-sacrificing of Jesus. The Bible is clear that the once-for-all suffering and death of Jesus on the cross was and is sufficient for the salvation of everyone who believes in Him. There is no need ever for it to be repeated. While the bread and wine do not become the actual body and blood of Jesus in the institution of the sacrament, we do believe, as John Calvin and other Reformers taught, that the Lord Jesus is really, spiritually present in the sacrament and may be discerned by those who receive the sacrament with a sincere, personal faith in Him.

So, there I was, up in front of this large commencement gathering, and I didn't know what I was supposed to do. I had never encountered a situation like this before. As one priest officiated, the other 15, in what seemed like a well-choreographed unison, all went through the same motions and appeared to speak the words of the mass silently. Fortunately for me, I had a good view of my Episcopalian counterpart across the stage. I figured he knew more than I did about what a non-Catholic should do in this situation. So I just watched him and did whatever he did.

Neither of us partook of the sacrament. The bread and wine were not offered to us. When my Episcopalian friend stood, I stood. When he knelt, I knelt.

I can't tell you how glad I was when that ceremony was over! It was one of the most embarrassing, humbling moments of my life. Unlike the other events I've told you about the last two Sundays, I suffered no broken bones or bloodshed. But the Lord has certainly used it in the ongoing process of teaching me to not take myself too seriously or to think of myself more highly than I should.

Now I'm going to take off my robe and hood.

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The clothing we are to put on, symbolizing the wardrobe of a Christ-like character, includes, as Paul says beginning in verse 12, "compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience," along with forbearance, forgiveness, and the ultimate all-encompassing virtue of love.

## **COMPASSION**

We talked last Sunday about compassion. The essence of compassion is coming along side and sharing in the pain or suffering of another person with a desire to help. Most of the time you can't give the kind of help that is most needed until you enter into the hurt and pain of others.

In her book *Roadmap to Reconciliation*, an African-American woman named Brenda Salters McNeil tells a story that touches on what we are dealing with in our culture in what I believe is a pivotal time for race relations. She describes a trip with a group of college students to a museum with an exhibit of graphic photographs documenting the lynching of black people in America. I won't describe the photos to you. They were horrific. Many of the photos show groups of white people looking on jubilantly.

The exhibit was intensely disturbing for the group. Most of them couldn't speak. They got back on their bus in complete silence. Finally, some of the white members of the group broke the silence. They wanted to defend themselves, to put some distance between themselves and the immense brutality of what they had just seen. After all, *they* hadn't committed these terrible crimes, and it all took place such a long time ago.

Then a black student stood up, obviously in pain, but outwardly calm and collected, and declared her belief that all white people are evil. Shouting and arguments erupted. It wasn't clear how this group would be able to move forward from this experience.

Finally, a white female student stood up and said: "I don't know what to do with what I just saw. I can't fix your pain, and I can't take it away, but I can see it. And I will work the rest of my life to fight for you and for your children so they won't experience it." She started to weep, and her mascara streaked down her cheeks, leaving dark trails.

The bus was silent, until one of the group leaders said: "She's crying black tears." As Brenda Salter McNeil comments, she was indeed crying black tears. The black students on the bus now felt that someone identified with their pain and the experience of their people. It was a profound moment of identification for them. (McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation*, 74.)

That is a picture of genuine compassion. It is entering into the pain and suffering of others with a desire to help. It is an expression of the kind of love Jesus wants all of us to exhibit in our everyday words, attitudes, and actions.

## **KINDNESS**

Compassion is not the only article of clothing we are to put on, of course. Next on the list is kindness. Like compassion, Kindness is an attribute of God Himself. In Ephesians 2:7, Paul speaks of "the incomparable riches of (God's) grace, expressed in His kindness to us in Christ Jesus." Again, in Titus 3:4-5, he says: "When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy." Kindness, as it says in 1 Corinthians 13, is an expression of love ["Love is kind"

(13:4)]. It is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Kindness is more than being nice. You can be nice without being sincere. True kindness is rooted in genuine caring for the feelings, desires, and needs of others.

Have you ever been to the Biltmore House in Asheville, NC? Mary Sue and I, along with our son Nate, were there one summer when Nate was in high school. Built on an 8,000-acre estate, it is the largest privately-owned home in the US. It was built by the ultra-rich Vanderbilt family in the late 1880s, both to show off their wealth and to show lavish hospitality to their rich and famous guests.

There is a touching story about how George W. Vanderbilt II treated one of his young employees. Her name was Bessie Smith. We're probably related. ☺ Bessie was a teenager when she started working at Biltmore, and she was understandably intimidated by its opulence. On her first day as a server, she walked into the great banquet hall and, stunned by the vastness of the room, dropped the tray of monogrammed china she was carrying.

With his guests looking on, Mr. Vanderbilt rose from his chair. He didn't say a word. Instead, he got down on his hands and knees and helped Bessie pick up the shards, before saying: "Come see me in the morning." Bessie assumed she was going to be fired. Instead, Mr. Vanderbilt promoted her to chambermaid, so she wouldn't have to carry such heavy dishes. (Leigh Ann Henion, "Biltmore Insider's Tour," March 2011.)

An act of kindness. We applaud "random acts of kindness." But Jesus calls us to *intentional* acts of kindness, to a *lifestyle* of kindness that reflects the character of God in His dealings with us.

You never know what may come from intentional acts of kindness. Ken Burns and Dayton Duncan tell how Lewis and Clark's expedition to the Pacific Northwest almost came to a tragic end. In the winter of 1804, the men of the expedition staggered out of snowy mountains in Idaho, half-starved and almost frozen, into the camp of the Nez Perce Indians. Lewis and Clark were the first white men ever to reach the homeland of the Nez Perce. A chief named Twisted Hair had to decide what to do with these strangers who had wandered into their midst. Some members of the tribe suggested killing the white men and confiscating all their weapons and goods. The expedition's rifles and ammunition, in particular, would have instantly made the Nez Perce the most powerful tribe in the region.

But a Native American woman came to the aid of the explorers. As a young girl, she had been captured by an enemy tribe on the plains, who in turn sold her to another tribe farther to the east. Eventually she was taken in by some white people in Canada before escaping and making her way back home to her people. They called her Watkuweis – "Returned from a Faraway Country." For years she told her people stories about the fair-skinned people who lived toward the rising sun. She was old and dying by the time the explorers arrived.

When she heard about plans to kill the explorers, she intervened with the tribal leaders. "These are the people who helped me," she said. "Do them no hurt."

Acts of kindness by others years before saved the lives of Lewis and Clark and their entire expedition.

You never know what may come from acts of kindness. What we do know is that a lifestyle of kindness pleases God. I'll say more about this another time. For now, please understand that kindness and gentleness are not signs of weakness. Being kind to others doesn't make you a wimp. It doesn't mean you let people walk all over you or people you care about. Real kindness comes from a place of strength. You can be kind and gentle in your dealings with others because you are strong in the strength God gives you.

## **HUMILITY**

Then comes humility. We've talked about this in connection with the prophet Micah's call to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). A spirit of true humility enables us to think of ourselves less and to think more of others and their needs. True humility prompts us, as Paul says in Philippians 2:3, to consider others better or more important than ourselves. It enables us to play second fiddle and not worry about who gets the applause. Echoing these verses in Colossians 3, Paul says in Ephesians 4:1-2 that to "live a life worthy of the calling (we) have received" involves being "completely humble and gentle." We are to "be patient, bearing with one another in love."

In 1 Peter 3:8, Peter urges us to be both compassionate and humble. A little later, he says we are to "clothe (ourselves) with humility toward one another, because (as it says in Proverbs 3:34) 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble'" (1 Peter 5:5).

Humility is essential for a right relationship with God. You know that. You can't be right with God if you allow pride or self-righteousness or any feeling of superiority toward others to get in the way. Humility before God says: "Nothing in my hands I bring; simply to Thy cross I cling" (Augustus Toplady, "Rock of Ages").

On the horizontal plane of our relationships with one another, humility leads to civility. To a large degree the level of un-civility (incivility) in our culture is due to the lack of humility in our attitudes toward one another and, especially, toward those with whom we have disagreements (or who disagree with us). If everyone in America were to clothe themselves with humility toward one another, as Peter says, our nation would look a whole lot different than it does today. You and I can be agents and instruments of civility in our culture by clothing ourselves with humility in our attitudes, words, and actions.

I have an idea: Let's start – or join – a movement of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, and love. All in the name of Jesus.

## **WHATEVER YOU DO**

*Whatever you do*, do it with compassion. *Whatever you do*, do it with kindness. *Whatever you do*, do it with humility. *Whatever you do*, do it with gentleness and patience. *Whatever you do*, bear with one another. Put up with one another's annoying, irritating habits. *Whatever you do*,

forgive as quickly and fully as God forgives us. *Whatever you do*, put on love. *Whatever you do*, let the peace of Christ rule in your heart. *Whatever you do*, let thankfulness overflow in your life. *Whatever you do*, let the word of Christ – the message of the gospel and the fullness of God’s Word – govern every aspect of your life. *Whatever you do*, worship God with reverence and joy, with heart and mind and soul and strength. *Whatever you do*, even if you’re a black sheep in a sea of white, do it all in the name of Jesus.

Lord, let it be so in us, for the glory of Your name. Amen.