

Community Care Ministries Sunday

“The Character of Care”

*“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved,
clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility,
gentleness and patience.”*

Colossians 3:12

Sunday, April 19
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Have you ever spent more than a few days in hospital? Though I haven't spent a lot of time as a patient, I have had many occasions to visit hospital. Whether for family, friends or sometimes simply being called to provide a pastoral presence, a common comment I have heard, and that would personally echo, is admiration for nurses. "The nurses are so caring," "The staff have been so nice," "They have been wonderful." In response to such remarks has come the reply, "It is a gift." I don't know what our experience has been, but for the most part, I would agree. There is something about the psyche—the personality of nurses—that lends itself to the profession. On the same vein are comments on the bravery of police, firefighters, service personnel; or the dedication of teachers, doctors; the skills of engineers or tradespeople. There just seems to be a personality type that lends itself to certain occupations and careers.

I only bring this up, because our text today deals with the personality of the Christian. Specifically, the characteristics that one might ascribe to being a Christian, and those that should, set the Christian apart from those that have a natural propensity to be caring, compassionate, kind, and patient, among other traits. As we reflect on Paul's words to the church at Colosse—*"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience"*—it would be a mistake to see these characteristics as simply natural bents of a person. Paul certainly has in mind supernatural, rather than natural tendencies, gifting that does not come through natural abilities or personality, but that come through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Paul says we are to 'clothe ourselves' with these traits, one scholar calling them the 'garments of Christian grace.'¹ There is an idea here of not just donning clothes or putting on an exterior dressing, but more so of sinking into, or being imbued by—in figurative terms, becoming what you wear; and what we are wearing is the character of Christ – *"For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ,"*^a or as Paul has already said to the church in Colosse a few verses earlier: *"you have put off the old man with its practices and have been clothed with the new man that is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of the one who created it."*^b

This morning, just before the insanity of the season of peace coming upon us, we often pause to celebrate and observe Community Care Ministries. Traditionally,

^a Galatians 3:27

^b Colossians 3:9-10

Community Care Ministries steps to the forefront at Christmas, delivering gift bags and the hosting carol sings in numerous nursing homes and senior's residences. This year it will look different, but nevertheless, numerous Activity Directors, Recreational Directors and others have expressed how appreciative they are, and how much the seniors enjoy what is a simple kind gesture—each gift bag a reminder that someone cares. So, this morning we shall engage in a little fashion show—reflecting upon and hopefully being inspired in our new wardrobe—a wardrobe of grace which demonstrates the character of care. A character that springs from the character of Christ, for it has been said that these are "...graces that were perfectly blended in their Master's character and conduct."² Hopefully, your wardrobe does not clash with that Paul describes.

"...clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience."

Compassion

Our English translations tend to combine two words into one – "compassion." In doing so we lose the richness and depth of the original language. The old KJV has, "bowels of mercies", while the NET renders is, "heart of mercy." This characteristic is one that speaks to being deeply moved or sensitive to another. Someone has said:

Compassion is not a snob gone slumming. Anybody can salve his conscience by an occasional foray into knitting for the spastic home. Did you ever take a real trip down inside the broken heart of a friend? To feel the sob of the soul—the raw, red, crucible of emotional agony? To have this become almost as much yours as that of your soul-crushed neighbor? Then, to sit down with him—and silently weep? This is the beginning of compassion.³

One of the places we see the compassion of Christ captured is in Matthews gospel where Jesus, already exhausted from travelling and ministry, comes upon a large gathering. Matthew writes: *"When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."*^c In a similar passage in Mark, the Message renders Jesus response, "His heart broke" (The Message) or "His heart went out to them." (Evangelical Heritage Version)

UNICEF, World Vision, even The Salvation Army, among others, will often show

^c Matthew 9:36

some heart wrenching images of children or the homeless— some even of doughy eyed puppies—all accompanied by morose music, designed to stir our hearts—“Oh that is so sad,” we might think—but then the commercial ends, the coverage of the game begins, and the starving little children of Bangladesh fade from our minds. Somehow, I don’t see Jesus as being so flippant or easily distracted. Rather, He was affected down to His bowels. Deeply. Powerfully. And He reminds us that what we do for the least of these, we do for Him. What we fail to do for the least of these, we fail to do for Him.

Compassion is not snob gone slumming. As General Orsborn asks:

Except I am moved with compassion,
How dwelleth Thy Spirit in me?

“...clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness

Kindness (5544)

“The ancient writers defined *chrestotes* (khray-stot'-ace) as the virtue of the man whose neighbors good is as dear to him as his own.”⁴ In the NET Bible, kindness is defined as: “that temper or disposition which delights in contributing to the happiness of others, which is exercised cheerfully in gratifying their wishes, supplying their wants or alleviating their distresses.”⁵ In the story of David and Mephibosheth we see this kindness displayed, the inspired author devoting an entire chapter to its telling.

In the ancient custom, an incoming king would have all the descendants of the previous monarch put to the sword, eliminating any competition or threats to his throne. Given the acrimony of Saul towards David, it would have been ‘natural’ for David to seek out all of Saul’s family and have them executed. However, David was a man after God’s own heart, and so he asks the question: *“Is there anyone still left of the house of Saul to whom I can show kindness for Jonathan’s sake?”*^d Though the servants of David likely expected the usual outcome, what happens next was a surprise. Even Mephibosheth came before David with such misgiving that David had to reassure him, “Don’t be afraid.” Instead of removing his head, David gave back to Mephibosheth all the land that had belonged to his grandfather, Saul, and promised he would always be welcome at the table of the king.

^d 2 Samuel 9:1

David didn't have to do this. David was under no obligation. David had every right to do away with this crippled competitor to the throne—but David was a man after God's own heart. Therefore, David displayed the kindness of God's heart. In the parable of the old and new wine, Jesus uses the same word to describe how the flavor of the grapes pervades the well aged wine. That is what kindness is—it is the character of God's own heart permeating our being. The psalmist would ask, "How can I repay the Lord for all His goodness to me?" And he knows the answer. We can do nothing. Then again, nothing is expected. God doesn't show us favor because He wants something in return, or because He needs us to owe Him a favor. He simply acts out of His nature, which is good, and shows us kindness.

As Paul points out in Ephesians:

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his **kindness** to us in Christ Jesus.^e

As compassion is being deeply moved and affected by the plight of others, kindness is the propensity to act out of that compassion. It is the grace which pervades the whole nature, mellowing all that would have been harsh and austere.⁶

That kindness is easily displayed and given because of the next character of care: *"...clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility*

Humility (5012)

In our time we have lost the sense of shock this word would hold. In the ancient Greco-Roman culture humility was despised as it was thought as a slave-like quality⁷, it was a "cringing thing."⁸ Only those of who it could be said possessed nothing; were powerless, were destitute, had no attractiveness, of only those was the word humility used. The conquered bowed in humility; the slave cowered in humility. In our time humility has taken on an air of attractiveness, and in some ways a person who is humble is admired.

^e Ephesians 2:4-7

There once was a pastor who was voted the most humble pastor in America. His congregation gave him a medal that read, "To the most humble pastor in America." Then they took it away from him on Sunday because he wore it.⁹ It's a little ironic that many Canadians boast they are not like Americans because Americans are so prideful, not at all like us Canadians who are so humble. Then again, Laurie just picked up a book for me that appeals to my humble Irish roots, the title of which is: *How the Irish Saved Civilization*.¹⁰ Your welcome, by the way.

In its Biblical sense, humility is to have a true estimation of oneself. We see ourselves as the creatures we are, understanding that all creatures have equal standing before the Creator. Those who possess humility know no arrogance, nor sense of superiority. Perhaps that's why Paul can say of the early church: *Here there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all and in all.*^f All of the animosities and old bitterness between slave and slave owner, between conquered and conqueror, between Gentile and Jew, between even man and woman, disappeared in the community of Christ, because each person saw himself or herself as they truly were; each no better or no worse than the other—or more to the point, as Paul advised the Philippian church, *"in humility consider others better than yourselves."*^g

That's why a story related by Dwight Pentecost is so shocking. He recalls a church split where each side filed a lawsuit against the other and went to court, only to have the court throw the case out and send it to a church court. There the case was eventually decided in the favor of one faction and they were awarded the church property, which sent the other faction off to plant their own church. However, during hearings it came out that the whole debacle began when an elder received a smaller slice of ham than the child seated next to him. That is not humility – though I would think it a bit humiliating.¹¹

Peter agrees with Paul, *"All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.*^h

"...clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness

Gentleness (4236)

^f Colossians 3:11

^g Philippians 2:3

^h 1 Peter 5:5-6

When we think of gentleness we should not think of it merely as delicateness. It is not just being soft-spoken, or simply the opposite of the proverbial bull in a china shop. The KJV renders it as 'meekness' – however its meaning is best captured in the phrase “power under control.”¹²

We see gentleness displayed when a mighty grizzly, whose jaws possess the power to rip apart a large salmon, can pick up without harming an unruly cub. Of Jesus the prophet said: *“A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.”*ⁱ Picture a flickering candle being deftly handled so as not to extinguish a tiny flame, or a damaged limb being carefully supported least it be harmed any further. Being gentle is the character of coming alongside the injured—whether physically, emotionally or spiritually—and holding them up, supporting them, enabling them to take that next step, or simply being one to lean upon.

Within each of you is power beyond measure. Within you dwells the Holy Spirit. When Paul was persecuting the early church, I think it significant that when confronted by Jesus, Paul was asked, “Why do you persecute me.” That is how powerfully Jesus associates you with Himself. Touch my kids, and you are touching me. You don't want to come between a mother grizzly and the cub she has just rebuked. However, I say this because sometimes Christians can be anything but gentle—which shouldn't be. That there is the term, “Bible thumper” should be upsetting. Peter cautioned, *“...in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness...”*^j

I love what the mother of Ravi Zacharias said to her evangelist son: “It makes no sense to cut the nose off of someone and then offer them a rose to smell.”

The wind and the waves can be harnessed to man's great benefit, but mishandled they can be a source of great destruction. Likewise, the Word of God is imbued with great power, yet mishandled it can have eternal consequences. Therefore, be gentle with the lost, with those bruised reeds and smoldering wicks—for you have both the power in your gentle touch to lift them up, and rekindle their light. Therefore,

ⁱ Isaiah 42:3

^j 1 Peter 3:15

"...clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience."

Patience (3115)

Are you still with me? The older translation has "longsuffering" (KJV), and I pray that is not a word you would use to describe your reaction to this morning's message. I am told that patience here is that quality of self-restraint in the face of provocation which does not hastily retaliate or promptly punish. There are times I wish Paul had left this off the list of characters we were to possess. It's not just that I am an impatient person when waiting in the car or pacing at the door upon some occasion we are to leave the house. It is an impatience that extends itself into seeing someone or something as being hopeless, as being beyond help, of not being worth wasting my time.

William Barclay writes: This is the spirit which never loses its patience with its fellow-men. Their foolishness and their unteachability never drive it to cynicism or despair; their insults and their ill-treatment never drive it to bitterness and wrath.¹³ Is there someone with whom you are losing patience? Is there someone with whom you have lost patience? Perhaps a neighbor whose dog is forever digging up a prized shrub; a child who will just not do what they are told; a boss who has never truly appreciated your work; a spouse who flies off the handle at the most insignificant of things, or who is forever squeezing the toothpaste in the middle of the tube?

It has been pointed out that of the last two virtues [gentleness and patience], the first forswears rudeness or arrogance; the second, resentment and anger.¹⁴ We all know that the Lord's patience means salvation^k--He doesn't give up on us; that is through patience we will inherit what has been promised.^l Wisdom tells us that the end of a matter is better than its beginning, and patience is better than pride,^m or as rendered elsewhere, "The end of a matter *is* better than its beginning; *better to be slow to anger than hot-headed.*"ⁿ

The reality is, these characteristics of care are not optional. We don't pick and choose, or think that as long as we exhibit kindness we need not be patient; or if humble we need not be gentle. Each is related to the other and springs forth from the character of Christ whose Spirit indwells us to the degree that it is said *"I*

^k 2 Peter 3:15

^l Hebrews 6:12

^m Ecclesiastes 7:8

ⁿ Lexham English Bible

have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.”^o

It is this character of care that enabled the early church to come together and that made them attractive to a fractured and broken world. It is this character of care that will make the faith attractive to a world as equally in need of care today.

“Christianity is a community. Christianity has on its Divine side the amazing gift of peace with God, and on its human side, the triumphant solution of the problem of living together.”¹⁵ It is the character of care that, our garments of grace, that enable us to love and serve, and care for one another.

Conclusion

On the heels of that verse where Jesus was deeply moved, Jesus turns to the disciples—and to us, and offers a plea: *“The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”^p*

What He is pleading for, is for those filled with the character of care to go out into the world and demonstrate that character. For we can not claim to possess the character of care if we simply do not care. We are urged to *“...clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.”*

None of those characters of care will ever go out of fashion; they will never wear out from use; they will never fade. As long as we continue in the Spirit the character of care in each of us will become better fitting, become more fashionable, and will attract others to the Saviour who exemplified each of these character to infinite degree. Let me go back to my earlier statement regarding the natural bent of nurses, doctors, engineers, teachers, etc. Yes, there are people of whose personality it can be said they are compassionate, they are kind, humble, patient. However, and don't get me wrong here, I am not denigrating any profession—but if you messed with their pensions, or didn't pay them what they thought they were worth, or a myriad of other employment issues—they would and have withdrawn their services.

That is what sets this Christian character of care apart—for it is not self-seeking, nor does it expect nor desire payback. It is more than natural, it is supernatural.

^o Galatians 2:20

^p Matthew 9:37-38

There is a great harvest to be gathered, we've been given our work clothes, it is time we got work. It is time to demonstrate the character of care.

Other references

The world of Paul's day did not admire humility.¹⁶

"...it is an inwrought grace of the soul...it is that temper of the spirit in which we accept His dealings with us as good, and therefore without disputing or resisting"¹⁷

Endnotes

¹ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians: The Daily Study Bible*, 2nd impression (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1961), 187.

² F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), 153.

³ Jess Moody, quoted in Lloyd Cory, *Quote Unquote*, cited by Charles R. Swindoll in *The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), 107.

⁴ Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians*, 188.

⁵ <https://netbible.org/bible/Colossians+3>

⁶ Spiros Zodhiastes, *The Complete Word Study New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1992), 967.

⁷ R. Kent Hughes, *Preaching the Word: Ephesians, The Mystery of the Body of Christ*. (Westchester: Crossway Books, 1990), 122.

⁸ Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians*, 189.

⁹ Charles R. Swindoll, *The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998), 278.

¹⁰ Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*. (New York: Anchor Books, 1995).

¹¹ Hughes, *Ephesians*, 123.

¹² Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Vol. 2, Ephesians-Revelation* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989), 138.

¹³ Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians*, 189.

¹⁴ N.T. Wright, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Vol. 12, Colossians and Philemon* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986. Reprint, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 142.

¹⁵ Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians*, 188.

¹⁶ Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 138.

¹⁷ W.E. Vine, *Vines Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 727.