

“The Virtue of Virtues”

But not only that: living out our virtuous character can not only make us happy, but it makes God happy. In chapter 3 of Colossians there is a little phrase that is an aside in Paul’s main argument, but the phrase should not be overlooked. In verses 9 and 10 Paul writes that our old self and its ways have been stripped off of us, and you have clothed yourselves with the new self “which is being renewed according to the image of its creator.” In this little line we have a significant reminder that all humans have been created in the image of God. God’s hope in creation was (and still is) that we be image bearers. But human nature (our first nature) is not to live that way. So part of God’s mission in the world is to see this restored: that humanity comes to bear God’s image in the world through the very character of the lives we live. If we work at that, we are fulfilling what God hopes for you and me...and hope fulfilled brings happiness. Thus Paul’s encouragement in the opening verses of chapter 3: “So if you have been raised in Christ, seek the things that are above.” Yes, coming to have this second nature takes intentionality and discipline, but we also have help. To go back to verses 9 and 10 again, our old self and its ways have been stripped off of us, and you have clothed yourselves with the new self “which is being renewed according to the image of its creator.” “Is being renewed” by God. God wants you to bear God’s image that is made most clear in the life lived by Jesus. It’s so important that God helps us to form this character.

Jesus was a Jew, and much of what he taught was the Jewish faith as the Pharisees understood it and taught it themselves. In fact, in the beginning of Jesus’ ministry the Pharisees saw Jesus as a “rabbi” (a teacher) just as they were, and they held Jesus in great respect. But what set Jesus apart among the teachers of his day were the leaps he made in theological thinking, and the implications those leaps had on the life we are to live. One of those leaps was all about what we’ve been talking about: coming into a personal character of virtue, growing into this second nature. And it was a leap in thinking! For the Jew in Jesus’ day faithfulness was about living life in accordance with the Jewish law. What Jesus taught represented a seismic shift in thinking. He taught that—yes—faithfulness was about fulfilling the law, but if we have certain principles (like “love your neighbor”), priorities (like live as a servant of others), and values that get expressed through virtues that are engrained in our very character, then you will fulfill the intent and essence of the law. He was calling people to make a shift from living under the guidance and direction of rules to changing the very nature of our hearts. And that’s what God wants: God wants your heart, and the changed heart will desire to adopt and grow into these virtues. And as we live them as our second nature people will see the very image of God lived out in us.

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Text: Colossians 3:1 - 17

Rev. Peter Coutts

30 years ago in our congregation in Sidney BC there was a young man who was a meter reader for the local utility company. His job required him to go along a street, house to house and enter back yards. Sometimes those yards had dogs—a job hazard, but an inevitable one. One day at one house the resident dog lit up with much barking. That brought the home owner out, who then proceeded to tear strips off the meter reader for upsetting his dog. The home owner’s tone was very angry and his language was filled with swear words. A few months later visiting the same house the incident was repeated, with the very same reaction from the same home owner. The home owner really wasn’t being fair to the meter reader, because it was the guy’s job to go into backyards. The thing the home owner didn’t know was that the meter reader’s father was a Presbyterian minister. Consequently the meter reader knew that this home owner was also a Presbyterian minister. The home owner’s behavior was not worthy of his calling. Assuming himself anonymous his behavior that day was probably his natural disposition....and I would wager that he would have behaved differently had the home owner known that he was known!

This story introduces us to an idea from a bygone age: virtue. We don’t hear that word so commonly today. Virtues, quite simply, are good moral habits. Habitual character qualities such as kindness and patience (qualities not evident in the minister of our story). Virtues are character traits that are so woven into our personality that they become “second nature” for us. “Second nature”—a common phrase—but think about the implication of something being *second* nature. The phrase implies that there is an original, first nature. Virtues are second nature, because they must be learned, adopted and practiced to the point when they become our very nature...our character. The minister in our story, it would seem, lived out his first nature. We are not born virtuous—it comes through discipline.

The word “virtue” doesn’t feature in the Bible (it appears only once in Proverbs) but the Bible does speak volumes about virtue. Think about the character qualities of Jesus. Jesus talked with women, he touched lepers. He even went as far as have conversation with an officer of the Roman army who represented the power of the brutal dictatorship the Jews endured. Using today’s language, Jesus was inclusive of others dramatically beyond what

was socially acceptable in his day. We read how Jesus continued to heal and meet people's needs even when he was well past the point of exhaustion. He lived in the service of others. Time after time Jesus showed patience with his disciples when time after time they still weren't cluing in to Jesus' teachings. And what about the willingness to self-sacrifice for the sake of others? Jesus' life is a character study in the nature of virtues.

In Christian spirituality, it has never been enough to simply hold the right beliefs and to have a right relationship with God. As followers of Jesus we also follow in how we live our life. This is Paul's encouragement in the passage we read from his letter to the church in Colossae. In the opening verses of chapter 3 he set up the argument for why we should live the virtuous life. The essential point is this: in our rebirth into Christ, our old life had died and has been put away. So Paul can then say (in verse 12) that we are "God's chosen ones, holy and beloved." God's chosen: that we are Christ's because of God's grace, not how we lived. Holy: that God sees us as renewed in Christ (even if we are not living our lives that way). Beloved of God, first and foremost, and that is why God has chosen us and sees us now as holy.

So, because we are God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, in Paul's mind the consequence is that we are to live into the way God sees us now. We are the beneficiaries of such a gift in Christ that we should feel compelled to follow Jesus in how he lived his life. Paul next lists some of those Christ-like virtues that he says should become so ingrained in us that it becomes our very character: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forbearance, forgiving. Earlier in chapter 3 Paul wrote that our renewal in Christ literally stripped us of our original nature... our first nature. And so, stripped of who we were Paul says "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves..." with these virtues. Clothing ourselves takes our own conscious choice and effort. And what we choose to cloth ourselves in is what the world sees. In living out these virtues, Paul is saying "by the way you live let people see the Christ within you." Paul goes on: for this outfit you are wearing—these virtues—the belt that sets it all off is the virtue love...love, which Paul says "binds everything together in perfect harmony." As I've said before, living into our changed, renewed life—weaving virtues into our second nature character—is our evidence for the existence of God that we show forth in the world.

So how does one grow into virtues?...making virtues the very nature of our character? Start by observing exemplars: people who exhibit virtues in such a way that their lives are living illustrations of virtues. Jesus, of course, comes first to mind—and should!—but we can turn

to others as well. Paul himself recognized the usefulness of exemplars, and a couple of times in his letters he even pointed to himself, to live the Christian faith do as I do. But we can have modern exemplars as well. Some obvious ones. Compassion: Mother Theresa. The pursuit of justice, regardless of the cost: Martin Luther King. Meekness as a strength of character: Ghandi. Forbearance and forgiveness: Nelson Mandela. Choose the exemplars that will mean the most to you...of whom you say "I want to live like that." And your exemplars don't have to be famous. 20 years ago there was a man in our congregation whose second nature was to be uplifting and encouraging of everyone he met. After a conversation with him people would go away always feeling a bit better about themselves. Doing that for others was just woven into his character. It was wonderful. Like others, I received the benefit of that as well. After worship he would always have a positive, encouraging word for me: "beautiful prayer...thoughtful sermon, thank you." One Sunday he came to the door, shook my hand and said, "Nice teeth." Apparently there was nothing to affirm me in in the worship service that day! But that didn't stand in the way of his nature. He is an exemplar of mine. A gift of love we give to others is to uplift their spirit and encourage their living of life. Whether the gift is big or small it is still a gift.

How else does one grow into the virtues? Through participation in the community of faith. Here. Pilots learn to fly planes in a flight simulator before instructors let them into a real cockpit. Varsity Acres is your flight simulator. We are a community of followers of Jesus. Among this people we all aspire to learn how to cloth ourselves with the same virtues Jesus lived. Here we know well individuals who are exemplars of different virtues—they are our instructors in our flight simulator. We know people here of exceptional generosity, of great compassion, consistent kindness, enduring self-control, faithfulness. And Varsity, like every church, is enriched and enlivened because those exemplars are simply living out what has become their second nature. And Varsity, like every church, reaps a benefit from these people who are just being themselves. But these exemplars are also mirrors for us. We can look at the generous person or the kind person and say to ourselves, "that is what real generosity, real kindness looks like." And when exemplars become mirrors for us, their example can help us see how we are different, to see the work we can do in our own life. Exemplars can be motivating for us. By appreciating the impact these people have on the congregation we can glimpse the potential impact each of us can have—here at church, but also in our families, at work, in life—the impact we can have if we intentionally work at our second nature, making those virtues our second nature. The Greek philosopher Socrates wrote that this was the true source of happiness: growing into and living out a virtuous character, for in his understanding there was nothing more fulfilling.