



I'm not sure how much longer I can keep this beard. Not that it bothers me. In fact, I scarcely know it's there unless I catch a random look at myself as I pass some store window. It's been growing six weeks now, in preparation for a trekking-camping journey I'm to make through the Sinai desert. But the longer it grows, the more difficult it is to keep.

The problem is the way it affects other people. Last night I attended a small dinner party and when I walked into the room it was as though I had appeared dressed in a coat of mail, or with charcoal smeared over my face. The people, all good friends, tried to ignore it, but it was the same way they ignore a man who has a huge pimple on his nose. They kept staring, and I noticed as I talked they couldn't keep their eyes off my chin. Really, it's disconcerting.

Older women have a way of pointing at me from afar off and squealing, "Ohhh, here comes Ernest Hemingway."

Younger women giggle and throw up their hands in mock defense. "Ohhh, don't kiss me with that fuzzy thing." (As if I even intended to try.)

Beardless men sneer and bearded men follow me closely with their eyes as I pass, no doubt comparing my style and shape with their own and asking themselves those universal questions: "I wonder if he shaves his neck?" "I wonder if he dyed it gray on purpose?" "I wonder if he has insects living in it, as I do in mine?"

Only the children, including my own, react positively. In their open innocence they do things like putting their hands on my face and rubbing them up and down, or saying things like, "I like it. It makes you look so handsome."

It's no wonder Jesus put children on his knee.

My own mother, when she first saw it, put both hands over her face, leaving only a tiny space between her fingers for me to kiss her on the cheek. Later she yanked it--hard. (Why would anyone, especially a mother, want to yank a beard?)

My mother-in-law, who has grown exceedingly tolerant of my strange ways, squealed and said, "Ohhh, you look just like Burl Ives." Then, when she saw I was sorely wounded, softened the blow by adding, "I mean your stomach, not your fuzzy beard."

My wife, who says she approves, comforts me in my times of rejection by saying encouraging things like, "I've always wondered what it was like being married to a 60-year-old man."

Others interrupt serious conversations with questions like, "Does it itch?" or "What do you do when you have to blow your nose through that mustache?"

Last night when a good friend asked, "Why are you doing it--growing the beard, I mean?" I gave him the same answer the old preacher, Charles Spurgeon, gave when someone asked him why he smoked a cigar.

"I'm growing it for the glory of God."

I can still hear him laughing as he staggered away.

As I said, I'm not sure how much longer I can keep this beard.