

## They called him “Manny”

by Arnold Froese

“Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus.  
To reach out and touch Him, and say that we love Him”

We sang the chorus as we prepared for the first chapel speaker of the semester. I couldn't sing all the words. The sounds of yesterday's faculty lunch discussion echoed in my ears. Visions of Manuel, the wheeler dealer thirteen-year-old statue seller and trade maker planted themselves right in front of me. Then the boy's name took me back more than 25 years to a brief visit my father-in-law made to an investor in one of his entrepreneurial endeavors. I was tagging along. I don't remember the names, the business venture, the city, or the woman of the home, though there was one. I only remember the Jewish man teasing my father-in-law about Jesus. “They called him ‘Manny,’” he said. “Hey, Manny, want to come out and play?” It took me a little while to figure out that “Manny” was the diminutive of “Emanuel.” I thought the comment somewhat irreverent, but wasn't disturbed by it, only interested in the subtle linguistic nuances.

The faculty discussion group was about hearing God's voice--the story of Samuel and Eli--based on a devotional from *Christian Century*. I told my colleagues that I had heard God's voice from Manuel, and suggested that God's voice speaks to us frequently; we just fail to recognize it.

Manuel met us soon after we arrived in Copan. He was very small for his 13 years, and his English wasn't very good. What he lacked in size and language, he made up in persistence. When he saw I wouldn't pay money for his statues he said, “Trade you statue for your hat!” It wasn't my hat, so I chided him for jeopardizing my comfort with such an offer.

Despite the rebuff, Manuel stayed with us. He and I had a good talk early in the afternoon. Our group walked half a mile to the site of the ancient city. We had names of 4 recommended tour guides. None of them was there and I jogged back to the town plaza to find a child to look for a guide. I sent 2 girls looking and sat on the curb with Manuel. He asked me some question in Spanish. I only understood part of it, so I retrieved my trusty Franklin electronic translator. Now he was intrigued! He immediately offered to trade a statue (worth about \$1.00 in the local stores) for the translator! I asked him if he knew how much the translator cost, and laughed at the imbalance. While we waited, I handed him the translator and we entered various English, then Spanish words so he could see how it worked. The girls didn't find a guide, so I jogged back to the ruins. When we finished our tour, Manuel was at the gate, asking again about statues, and offering us cheaper horses than we had already agreed to pay someone else. Manuel walked with us back to town, offering various bargains and trades. He managed to trade a statue for a watch from one of the students. The student said he wasn't trading for a statue, but for a story! The next day, Manuel sat with me again and showed me that he had resized the Alligator skin watchband to fit his small wrist. He asked me how many meters one could take the watch under water. I examined the back of the watch and read, “Water Resistant” and exclaimed that he shouldn't submerge it at all. Too late! He had already tried it in a washbasin.

Manuel followed us around town as we shopped. In the first store, he told us we could find cheap prices. He even tried to open the locked curio cabinet when I expressed interest in a jade piece, as if he worked there. That proprietor tolerated his presence, maybe even realizing that Manuel might facilitate making some sales. At another store, Manuel stood with his friends at the door, not daring to step inside.

In one store, Manuel planted bait and I took it! He started looking at T-shirts his size, and after putting a few in front of his chest, he looked at me and said, "Buy me a shirt?" The gall! I hadn't asked for a walking tour of the shops! I didn't object to him following, but now he expected something?

"How many shirts do you have?" I asked a little sarcastically.

"Three," he said immediately. His penetrating gaze grabbed my eyes and after a brief pause he continued. "How many do you have?"

Snap! There went the trap. He knew I didn't know. And he knew the reason I didn't know was because I had so many! I told him so, and without making any commitments, I began looking for a shirt he might like. My wife, Carol, had been watching and she pulled me aside when he wasn't too close and said, "He's manipulating you!" Yep! He was, and I didn't mind. I didn't buy the shirt then, but before the evening was over, I told Manuel to find me at 1:30 the next day and I would buy him a shirt. He did. I did. Just to check a little on his integrity I asked him how many shirts he had now. He paused a little, then said, "four!" He carried it around the rest of the afternoon in the plastic bag, and showed it to his friends and to other people in our group.

What really got me was the stark truth of inequality right there, face to face, Manuel and me. I counted my shirts when I returned home. Forty were hanging in the closet. Some had been demoted to "work shirts" but I couldn't excuse them because Manuel only had work shirts. Then Carol asked if I had counted the ones on the floor that she had separated for charity--24 more. Even then, I hadn't counted my t-shirts.

President Clinton quoted Isaiah 58 in his state of the union address. "And those from among you will rebuild the ancient ruins; You will raise up the age-old foundations; And you will be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets in which to dwell." I checked the source. That prophecy is conditional on doing the right things, listed in verses 6 through 10. They include, "To loosen the bonds of wickedness, To undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke? . . . to divide your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into the house; When you see the naked, to cover him." I couldn't escape the images of Manuel even listening to the President's address.

The chapel speaker described a story from Robert Browning about Pippa, a poor, hard working girl who spends her single holiday skipping through town and singing about things being right. Unknown to her, she changes the lives of many in the village. Unknown to Manuel, he gave me a lesson in righteousness. So it's not surprising that Manuel came to mind when we sang the chorus, "Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus. To reach out and touch Him, and say that we love Him." My eyes were opened in Copan. As we left, Manuel was standing there, right beside my window, still trying to trade for "my" hat. I chuckled again, and said, "Te amo!" I saw a new look on his face then. He really was embarrassed.

As I began to compose this story, I opened my journal and looked at the page on which several children had written their addresses. There it was! Manuel! But that wasn't all. His name was "Manuel de *Jesus* \_\_\_\_\_." Thank you, Manny.