

“A Holy and Simple Life”

Psalms 131 Romans 12:1-3

September 17, 2017

Leading up to the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation on October 29th, our worship services are featuring a sermon series on important reformation doctrines and beliefs that shape our faith today.

A key Reformation principal is that we are saved, made whole, justified by God's grace through Jesus Christ. We do not deserve this. We cannot earn this. Salvation is given to us. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life (John 3:16).

That being true, what is our proper response? “Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.”

Therefore, loving/serving God becomes the focus, priority, center of our lives. We put God first. If God is first, then I am second.

God is first, I am second

Paul encourages us to become a living sacrifice for God. But, what does that mean?

Remember that the people of Israel worshipped God by offering grains, fruits, and slaughtered animals. Nevertheless, Old Testament prophets critiqued this sacrificial system because it encouraged an attitude that claimed that it does not matter how I live because I can always make amends with God by offering a pleasing sacrifice.

The prophets argued that living a life of justice, mercy, love, and care for the poor is a more pleasing form of worship to God. This is what Paul calls becoming a living sacrifice. How we live is the only worship acceptable and pleasing to God. Other kinds of sacrifices to appease God or to seek forgiveness are irrelevant because Christ has already done that for us.

So we offer ourselves moment by moment as a living sacrifice of gratitude and commitment to God because of God's amazing love. As a living sacrifice, God is first while I am second.

When God is first and I am second, we do not follow the dictates of our own heart, but we live to discern and do God's will. We subordinate our concerns and instead apply our best efforts to God's commandments. We do not seek what is expedient for ourselves, but live and die for God. We are free from the obsession of trying to establish our own importance and see can ourselves for who we truly are: children of a loving God.

However, putting God first in our lives and being in second place is not easy. It is not the way of the “me-first” world in which we live. How do we escape from conforming to this “me-first” world?

One approach that many find helpful is called “the imitation of Christ.” Mentally and emotionally, we consciously try to become more Christ-like. “What would Jesus do?”

However, Oswald Chambers suggests something different. Rather than imitating Jesus, he suggests bonding with Jesus. Enter into a relationship with Christ and grow in that relationship. Let everything else go. When Christ is in us and we are one with him, then the Christ within us emerges in our daily living. Transformation comes from the inside, from the Christ that is within us. It is not so much an imitation of Christ, as it is an impartation from Christ

Through this inner transformation, our minds and hearts are renewed and we become the living sacrifice that Paul described. This inner transformation has an exterior impact on how we live our lives. This effect on how we live our lives will be explored in this Reformation sermon series.

Last week Lewis spoke about humility.

As he spoke, I remembered an elder from a previous congregation who always responded to the greeting, “How are you doing?” by exclaiming: “How am I doing? Why I'm doing great! In fact, if I was humble, I'd be perfect!”

During Lewis' sermon, my mind should have gone to Christ, who though he was the Son of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself taking the form of a servant... He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death on a cross – for us.

When God is first and I am second, the more i bond with Christ, the more I am transformed into his likeness, and the more I exhibit humility in my daily living. It is humility that keeps us from thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought – as Paul

This week I am going to briefly explore what the reformers called “a holy and simple life”

The process of becoming more holy as we bond with Christ is called sanctification. It is not so much imitating Christ as it is letting the holiness of Christ manifest itself in our lives. It is not drawing from Jesus the power to imitate Christ or the ability to become more spiritual, more holy.

It is drawing from Jesus' holiness itself. The holiness manifested in him is now demonstrated in us, as he is in us and we become one with him. Repeating Oswald Chambers – it not so much imitation as it is impartation. Holiness not a result of something we do. Holiness is the result of being imbued with holiness from the Christ that is within us.

The traditional spiritual practices of worship, prayer, Bible study, meditation, and service to others help Christ's holiness take hold of our lives.

But what about a life of simplicity?

Nathan Foster (who is coming to speak at our Church on October 18) speaks for many when he says, "Romantically, I'm drawn to a simpler life. When I see an Amish carriage putter down the street I fell nostalgic longing and jealousy...[but] The truth is that I want an oceanside castle complete with adjoining forest, lap pool, tennis court, skate park, theater room, with lots of fountains and birds...box seats at Sundance and NBA games."

One obvious obstacle to living a life of simplicity is the power of consumerism and materialism. Rather than deliver a ranting screed against consumerism and its devastating effect on our lives, let me share a story (Matthew 19:16-22).

Once, a person approached Jesus with the question: "How do I gain eternal life?" [Let me interrupt to story to observe that the question may be broader than life after death. How do I gain a full life, a meaningful life, LIFE?]

He explained he was a good person who had kept all the commandments. Yet he did not feel fulfilled. Something was lacking in his life.

Jesus suggested that he sell his possessions and give to the poor, explaining that by doing so, he would experience heavenly treasure. "Come, follow me."

Surprisingly, he went away grieving because "he had many possessions."

He came seeking LIFE...and he got a great answer. It was specific, measurable, achievable, and directly related to his goal of LIFE. Nevertheless, he chose his possessions over LIFE.

Apparently, materialism is not a new thing.

How about you? What about me? Are we immune to the lure of materialism?

I must confess that this is a particularly ironic and awkward question for me. Judy and I are moving to a new house tomorrow. It is time to downsize, do less yard work, more living on one floor, etc. However, after 44 years of marriage, we have so many boxes of stuff to move! I cannot help but wonder about the true cost of all that stuff – not to my pocketbook, but to my spirit.

Which is worse? Failing in a dramatic moment like the seeker in Jesus' story? Or succumbing to the seductive power of materialism through a lifetime of small, individual decisions?

Nathan Foster observes that simplicity is not about depriving ourselves of worldly things. Simplicity is about being content. It is about living free from the trappings of the world that keep us from following Jesus, that prevent us from following Jesus' counsel to "seek first the kingdom of God."

What good is it to gain the whole world, but to lose our soul?

Foster suggests three key attitudes for living a life of simplicity. What we have is a gift of God. What we have is to be cared for according to God's will. What we have is to be shared with others.

Friends, in response to God's amazing love for us, let us put God first while we become second.

Let us fully receive the humility, holiness, and simplicity that the Christ in us wants to impart to us.

Put God first, be second! This is not something merely to think about. It is something to do!

Put God first, be second!

Did you catch the play on words as I speak to the people of Second Presbyterian Church? Be Second!

That play on words is more than amusing. It is instructive because it is in the context of the church, the body of Christ, where we help one another be transformed, where we help each other to put God first, and to be second. It is in the church where we can help each other allow the Christ in us to emerge in lives of humility, holiness and simplicity.

So let's not just think about it...Let's do it, Let's be it.

Put God first, be second as individual believers.

Put God first, be Second as a community of faith

Put God first, be s(S)econd!