

"Taking Shape, Transformation of Others"

Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, January 23, 2011

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON - Psalm 66
NEW TESTAMENT LESSON - 1 Peter 2:11-17

Alabama's newly elected governor, Robert Bentley, told a church crowd last Monday, just moments after taking office, that those who have not accepted Jesus as their savior are not his brothers and sisters. "Anybody here today," said Bentley, "who has not accepted Jesus Christ as their savior, I'm telling you, you're not my brother and you're not my sister, and I want to be your brother." The Anti-Defamation League was shocked, and the Associated Press reported that critics are questioning whether Bentley can even be fair to non-Christians.

Clearly, his comments were politically misguided, but whether they were unchristian depends on how Bentley understands his relationship with non-Christians – how Bentley treats those who are outside our family of faith.

The Apostle Peter dealt with the same issue nearly 2,000 years ago and was lead to find that being non-Christian does not necessarily make someone a bad person, and surely that it does not mean they stand apart from God's creation or are somehow misshapen within the divine order of the world. God revealed three essential truths to Peter:

One – secular society *is* part of God's creation and fits within the divine order of things.

Two – that God uses all creation to bring about God's peaceable Kingdom,
And three – that we as Christians, aren't to go around demonizing secular society or distance ourselves from other religions, but rather we should be forming partnerships in the world to bring about peace and social justice.

Last week, we began a four-part sermon series titled "Transformed in the Faith," looking at how Jesus directs us outward toward others, and thus, brings us an abiding sense of joy in service to Christ, even in the midst of any struggles or hardships we may face. Today, we look at how we should act toward people and institutions outside the Christian faith, and what we can expect from them in response. In other words, how God uses our faith to transform and reshape the world we live in.

After Gov. Bentley's comments went public, his office released a statement saying he understands himself to be the governor of all Alabamians: Democrat, Republican and Independent; young, old, black and white; rich and poor. ... Gov. Bentley believes his job is to make everyone's life better."

So, although as a Christian, Bentley feels a special kinship to those who follow Christ, he still embraces a responsibility to serve all people equally, a responsibility that may very well come from his Christian faith. Monday's declaration of his beliefs doesn't make Bentley a bad Christian *or* a bad governor, just a really poor campaigner.

Bentley seems intent on using his Christian values for the betterment of all people, regardless of their religious beliefs, political views or social standing. Likewise, Peter says to the community of 1st Century Christians, "Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that ... they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge."

Here, Peter speaks into the Christian hope that even the Gentiles – even those outside the faith and with no belief in God – do nonetheless glorify God when we let them see that our lives have been shaped by honorable, Christian practices, because even with those who have different beliefs/practices we act accordingly.

1 ← Non-Christians and secular society *are* part of God's creation, and they do exist within the divine order of things. Even "the emperor as supreme," says Peter, or "governors, as sent by him" are instruments of God employed to "punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right."

Perhaps the church has spent too much time demonizing culture and too little time working to engage it – to find times and places to reach out to others with Christian love and support rather than waiting for them to come to us.

Writer Pat Morley is concerned about this tendency of the church to bash popular culture while ignoring the reality of people's lives. For instance, he says, "Often we get upset with men because they won't leave their families and come to our [men's ministry] meetings so that *we can tell them* they should spend more time with their families." Morley is challenging us to recognize – and celebrate – when people live into our sense of Christian values *even* if they don't exactly fit into the same mold as us.

In an article titled "Church, no; Christianity, yes: Leaving the Flock," the Kansas City Star reports that 83% of Americans identify themselves as Christian, and yet 28% do not attend church. And that three out of five U.S. adults who don't attend church are self-described Christians.

The next time you're standing five-deep in the checkout line, imagine that three of the five people ahead of you *are* followers of Christ, they're just not being led to church. And then, as you exit the store, ask yourself should I be following them, should I take the lead, or should we be walking along side each other, even if they don't go to church.

Peter would have us walk along side. According to Peter, we as Christians should "honor everyone. Love the family of (faith). Fear God. Honor the emperor." In other words, our culture and its government are just as subservient to God as anything else – including us – and as such, 2 ← God uses us, our culture *and* our government to preserve order and bring about peace.

If this is true – if both religious and secular institutions are used by God to reshape the world in God’s image, what is our role as Christians in walking alongside those outside the church – those whom Gov. Bentley might call “not my brothers; not my sisters?”

Adam Hamilton, in his book *Confronting the Controversies: Biblical Perspective on Tough Issues* asks, “What is the role of individual Christians and the Church in influencing culture?” If you participate in either adult *or* youth Sunday school at First Presbyterian, that question might sound familiar, since all the classes are discussing Hamilton’s book right now. (I think the adults watched the video last week and will discuss the issue of church and culture after worship today. The youth are a week ahead and watching a video today on creation and evolution. Anyone interested is welcome to attend; just see me or any of the ushers if you don’t know which class to choose.)

Anyway, Hamilton asks the question: How – or even should – Christians seek to influence culture, in general, and the political process specifically? He worries that “we have capitulated to the news media and to Hollywood, allowing them to become the dominant forces in shaping our culture ... Children left to choose without guidance,” writes Hamilton, “often watch television programs that depict values that conflict with those they learn at home or in church... shows that are saturated with gratuitous violence and focus on careless sexual activity ...”

Another voice advancing this anti-culture perspective is that of Irv Kupcencik, who asks, “What can you say about a society that says God is dead and Elvis is alive?” Or there’s the preacher who said, “I still remember Sunday afternoon as a time for visiting relatives and neighbors. Now Sunday afternoon is a time for football.”

And the Spanish philosopher who observed that “the world in which we live is the most technological there ever was, but spiritually, also the most empty.” Add to these this provocative comment by Eugene Peterson: “The North American Church has, to use the (Prophet) Hosea’s image, ‘gone a-whoring.’ We have lost our first love and bought into the culture.”

My question for Hamilton / for Peterson / and for you is: Is there *really* anything inherently wrong with culture, with technology, with Sunday afternoon football, or heaven forbid, with wishing Elvis were still alive? The answer is no. There’s nothing inherently wrong with any of these, unless we find certain aspects of our culture are misdirected, that some piece of technology is being misused, that Sunday afternoon football is ... Well, there’s really nothing wrong with Sunday afternoon football? And the only thing wrong with wishing Elvis were still alive is the risk of elevating *that* king over Christ the King.

3 ← As Christians, our job isn’t to demonize secular society or even distance ourselves from other religions, but rather to form partnerships in the world to further the cause of peace and justice.

Around Christmastime, I put an insert in the bulletin and invited you to give me your Christmas Wish List for sermons this year (there are more inserts on the credenza in the Parlour). Someone wrote on one of them that they want to hear a sermon on “social justice

issues,” which were characterized on the Wish List as “immigration, homosexuality, fair housing, the widening gap between the upper and lower class, (and) responsible civic attitude. Our church and the Presbyterian Church,” it said, “have taken a back seat on these issues for too long.”

That may be. But the fault does not lie with the denomination, or with the local church. If we want our faith-based institutions to be more active in social-justice issues, then *we* as individuals need to get more active in social-justices issues. *And*, I suspect that there is a lot more going on out there than anyone knows.

For instance, when I visited pcusa.org – which you might want to do also when you get home – I found a link for the General Assembly Mission Council which has ministries for Compassion, Peace and Justice, ministries that help Presbyterians individually and in partnership with outside entities respond to the needs of the world’s most vulnerable people.

The list of ministries includes the Enough for Everyone partnership, which helps the world’s minority populations achieve sustainable living, as well as Environmental Ministries and immigrant-farmer ministries; programs addressing the Global Food Crisis, Human Trafficking, Child Advocacy, Responsible Investing, Peacemaking, Disaster Assistance, political activism, Public Education, and racial and gender equality.

You don’t have to get involved actively with any of these ministries – or even the many ones happening through our church – though for some of you this may be a New Year’s calling. But just by educating yourself at pcusa.org or fpcindep.org – our church website – you can pray for and discuss with others all that your denomination and church are doing.

When Peter urges Christians, as servants of God, to live as free people, he cautions us not to use our freedom as a pretext to harm – *or* ignore – others. Part of being a Christian is working to bring about a better world – a world that is *taking shape* around the Christian values of self-sacrifice, brotherly and sisterly love, and global peace.

By setting aside our differences, reaching across political divides, knocking down social barriers, and partnering both within *and* outside our faith community – we can help to bring about a world in which all creation – both secular and religious – begins to take on a more heavenly shape, and, thus, truly glorifies God.

Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER:

God of light and truth, so many of us live in the shadow of darkness. We pray that your love and light would shine on all those who suffer — giving hope to those whose lives are obscured by war, persecution and servitude. Help them to know the power of your life-giving light. Guide all the leaders of this world to govern with compassion and justice.

We pray for all who are weighed down by stress and fear — attempting to muddle through their days relying on themselves instead of you. Turn their faces toward you, so that in their times of difficulty, you are the beacon that guides them.

Shine your healing light on those who suffer the darkness and loneliness of depression. Vanquish the demons that wreak havoc in their lives and restore them to wholeness. Bring healing to those who live under a cloud of pain and suffering, comforting them in their pain, with the warmth of your light.

Comfort also those who walk in the valley of the shadow of death, that even in the depth of their loss they are bathed in your glow.

Fill each of us with your Spirit so that all who encounter us see the light of your love shining on our faces. We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ, who placed as a beacon in our lives the prayer you taught us to pray, saying...

Our Father, who art in heaven,
 hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
 thy will be done,
 on earth as it is in heaven.
 Give us this day our daily bread;
 and forgive us our debts,
 as we forgive our debtors;
 and lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.