

"Believing is Seeing"

Rev. Melissa Potts-Bowers
First Presbyterian Church
Independence, MO
Sunday, July 29, 2012

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON - Psalm 133

NEW TESTAMENT LESSON - II Corinthians 5: 12 – 21

¹²We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart. ¹³For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. ¹⁴For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. ¹⁵And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

¹⁶From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

The Rabbi's Gift
(from the book Community by M. Scott Peck)

Once a great order, a decaying monastery had only five monks left. The order was dying. In the surrounding deep woods, there was a little hut that a Rabbi from a nearby town used from time to time. The monks always knew the Rabbi was home when they saw the smoke from his fire rise above the treetops. As the Abbot agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to him to ask the Rabbi if he could offer any advice that might save the monastery. The Rabbi welcomed the Abbot at his hut. When the Abbot explained the reason for his visit, the Rabbi could only commiserate with him. "I know how it is," he exclaimed. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the Abbot and the Rabbi sat together discussing the Bible and their faiths. The time came when the Abbot had to leave. "It has been a wonderful visit," said the Abbot, "but I have failed in my purpose. Is there nothing you can tell me to help save my dying order?" "The only thing I can tell you," said the Rabbi, "is that the Messiah is among you." When the Abbot returned to the monastery, his fellow monks gathered around him and asked, "What did the Rabbi say?" "He couldn't help," the Abbot answered. "The only thing he did say, as I was leaving was that the Messiah is among us. Though I do not know what these words mean." In the months that followed, the monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the Rabbi's words: The Messiah is among us? Could he possibly have meant that the Messiah is one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, which one of us is the Messiah? Do you suppose he meant the Abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even so, Elred is virtually always right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. Of course the Rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? As they contemplated in this manner, the monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah and in turn, each monk began to treat himself with extraordinary respect. It so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the beautiful forest and monastery. Without even being conscious of it, visitors began to sense a powerful spiritual aura. They were sensing the extraordinary respect that now filled the monastery. Hardly knowing why, people began to come to the monastery frequently to picnic, to play, and to pray. They began to bring their friends, and their friends brought their friends. Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the older monks. After a while, one asked if he could join them. Then, another and another asked if they too could join the abbot and older monks. Within a few years, the monastery once again became a thriving order, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.

In the pressures of everyday living, when we struggle to provide for our families, to find a sure path through economic minefields, to fend off the slings and arrows leveled at us, our tendency may be to blame, discount, criticize, even strike out at another. But the scripture text today requires us to pause.

No one is beyond the circle of Jesus' love. If we are in Christ – a part of his family, a beneficiary of his death and resurrection, a guest at his table – we must treat all others as valued fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. We can no longer regard them from a human point of view. This text is calling all of us to a re-evaluation of how we treat one another and to the spiritual basis for that treatment. We are called to be consistently gracious, merciful, and forgiving. Because of God's mercy we are forgiven and made new, again and again. Let us see one another not from a human point of view but with the eyes of Christ. Then let us live in an abundance of love. Christ's death and resurrection have changed everything, so that "from now on, we regard no one from a human point of view" (5:16). Paul acknowledges that he once regarded Christ from a human point of view. Of course, Paul never met Jesus in the flesh, but he met his followers. And he had heard of Jesus. An attention grabbing heretic who misled good, law abiding Jews and seduced them into his crazy cult by pretending to heal people and perform miracles. Attracting the attention of Rome and causing riots that resulted in bloody violence.

From Paul's human point of view, Jesus' followers were heretics following a false Messiah, apostates who deserved to be thrown in prison or killed. All of that changed when the risen Christ encountered Paul on the road to Damascus. When he experienced the transforming power of the living Christ, Paul learned in a dramatic way how completely wrong human judgment can be. In what seemed to be foolishness and disgrace – God's Messiah suffering a humiliating death – God was at work to reconcile the world to himself and to make all things new.

Just as Paul's view of Christ was dramatically transformed, so his view of all people is transformed by the love of Christ. "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (5:17). Paul's words have surely been needed in every time and culture, but it strikes me that they are especially needed in a time and culture such as ours.

We are obsessed with externals – with youth and beauty, accomplishments and credentials, productivity and profit. We are constantly tempted to judge our own worth and that of others according to "a human point of view." We are tempted to view worldly success as a sign of God's favor, and some ministries even teach this outright! Conversely, to view weakness and suffering as a sign of God's absence or even God's punishment. There's a psychological/sociological term for this – it's called "blaming the victim". It keeps a community's tendency to judge by externals intact by defending those who radiate the youth, beauty, and material wealth (regardless of how they got them and what they have to do to maintain them. I'm thinking of how commonplace expensive and dangerous procedures like facelifts and tummy tucks have become when there are still hundreds of thousands of people in our nation that don't have access to basic health care). Even those folks who seem to have it all need to be regarded in this way – they need someone to "see Christ in them" – see them for who they really are, too.

See the eternal goodness and worthiness in them that God sees in them. To be regarded equally because they are human – not temporarily elevated in importance because of what they might be able to do for us. They also need to be seen with the eyes of Christ – as simply worthy and important because Jesus would regard them that way if he were here in the body with us today.

There's an old piece of wisdom that says that the true measure of a person's character is how he treats those who can not do anything for him.

How we treat the powerless, the weak. How we treat those who can never tell on us, who will never be able to hold us accountable. Who will never be able to do us a favor, give us a leg up, or bail us out. There's also a proverb that says that seeing isn't believing, but believing is seeing. What we expect is what we will get. How we judge someone else says more about our character than about theirs.

West African Folk Tale

The Traveler

There was once an elderly and wise gentleman who lived in a village. He would often spend his days sitting in the shade of a big tree in the center of the village, reading books and talking to passersby. One day, a traveler came upon his village and stopped and said, "Old man, I have been traveling across the countryside, and I have seen many things and met many people. Can you tell me what kind of people I will find in your village?" The elderly gentleman looked up at him and replied, "Certainly I can, but first tell me what kind of people you have found on your travels." The traveler scowled and said, "Old man, I have met people who cheat, steal, and aren't kind to strangers, and people who don't look out for one another." The elderly gentleman looked up and, with a faint look of sadness in his eyes, said, "Oh my friend, those are the people you will find in my village." The traveler kicked the dirt under his feet, scoffed, and marched off towards the village. By and by, as the elderly gentleman continued to enjoy his day, another traveler came walking through the village. Once again, the traveler stopped and asked, "Please kind sir, I have been traveling across the countryside, and I have seen many things and met many people. Can you tell me what kind of people I will find in your village?" The elderly gentleman said, "Certainly I can, but first tell me what kind of people you have found in your travels." The traveler replied, "I have found people who are kind and welcoming of strangers, people who care for one another, and people who love. These are the people I have met in my travels." The elderly gentleman looked up and, with the faintest smile in his eyes, said, "My friend, those are the people you will find in my village."

Christ died for all, so that we might live no longer for ourselves, but for him who died and was raised for us. In Christ we are a new creation, even in our weakness and vulnerability. We are reconciled to God and entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation as agents of God's reconciling love for the world (5:17-21). So, when we honor each other we honor Christ. When we see Christ in another person, we are truly seeing Christ, loving, serving Christ. "for if you do it unto the least of these then it's as if you have done it unto me."

Human beings are naturally and primarily motivated by our feelings. We gravitate towards people we admire and who make us feel good about ourselves. We tend to avoid people who don't agree with us, don't share our interests and values, and who's presence confronts us with our own shortcomings. But that's just human nature, and there is nothing wrong with feeling this way – its very natural, very human, and feelings are neither good nor evil in themselves. It's not for us to judge or criticize ourselves or to feel guilty for wanting to do this, but it is the

responsibility of persons of faith to become aware and to resist this as the sole basis for forming and maintaining relationships. For people of faith the primary question isn't "what makes me feel comfortable, good about myself, and confirms my opinions and beliefs"?

The important question for people of faith is, "what motivates me to shape my life in a way that is honoring to Christ?" How can we develop new habit of recognizing that tendency to consistently judge people from a human point of view only, and not move into seeing deeper, seeing the very spirit of infinite love in them?

Paul's answer is this: that we possess a sure conviction of the truth that one died for all and therefore all died (v.14). Paul understands that he is identified with Christ in his death and resurrection, with its experiential reality, "the love of Christ." It is this truth, which "compels" his right living. The indwelling nature of the living God, his character of love, "Christ's love", is daily at work within. This nature of love, so foreign to us, is shaping us, driving us, "impelling" us forward in the Christian life. Christ's life-giving resurrection power, his indwelling character of love, is compelling us to live as he lived, to love as he loves.

So, be convinced of what Jesus has done for you and be changed from within. Begin to practice seeing Christ – the eternal nature, the spark of the divine, the spirit and soul of person behind the personality. Begin to treat them with extraordinary respect not for what they can do for you, but simply God has placed them in front of you. Jesus taught clearly that serving anyone is the same as serving Christ himself. So we reshape our vision NOT just by seeing people in a new way, but by seeing new things in them! New dimensions of a person, new possibilities for who they are now and might become, new relationships that we might share with them based on this extraordinary love and respect, new dignity that we can afford them by treating them as a participants in the very life and existence of Christ. Let's pray.....