

Sermon 17B 2021: A Transformation of the Heart by God

Introduction: No Heart, No Life with God

Sunday by Sunday we read a collect before we hear the readings and the psalm;

Collect is an old word implying we are ‘collecting’ our gathered prayers into one prayer;

It also acts like a topic sentence for the readings we’re about to hear.

So, if we listen or read carefully, we get an idea of what is coming in the readings;

And what the preacher might be talking about in their sermon;

The collect doesn’t always fit perfectly and the preacher may have other ideas;

But usually there’s a strong correlation as there is for us today.

The collect for this Sunday asks God to graft in our hearts the love of God;

Asks for an increase in true religion; for some nourishing goodness;

And the resulting good works that will result from all of this.

That’s a pretty good prayer for a Sunday or any day;

As it talks about the quality of the life you and I are living as followers of Jesus;

And lines up with my personal little heresy or good teaching

About the interplay between our physical lives and the life lived with God.

That is to say, that when we do physical things like pray or read the Bible or worship;

Then the spiritual life, the life connected to God is cracked open for us and for God.

Because we are offering a space for God by our physical actions;

God responds to transform us from the inside out.

So Moses, in the reading from Deuteronomy, can call God’s people

To give heed or to live by the 613 laws he’s getting ready to pass along to them;

To live by them, not to earn God’s love or to become holier than thou;

But because our attempts to live in God’s ways;

Allow us to experience that God is very near to us;

And allow our lives to serve as an invitation for others to join in.

In a similar way, James, the brother of Jesus, and head of the early Church in Jerusalem
Encourages us to not be merely hearers of the Word of God;
But to be doers of the Word, because just hearing is not enough;
There's something in the doing that allows God to change us.

And Jesus, speaking in a critical voice to the Pharisees and the crowd;
About following certain laws and other traditions as ends in themselves;
Teaches that the laws and traditions and getting it just right;
Without God in mind is not the purpose
And the result will not be transformation, but people with God on our lips;
And not in our lives.

So, one of our former clergy Associates, Kevin Moroney;
When asked about our approach to ministry and church at St. David's;
Used to boom, "Let there be Godly activity";
Not as the ends, but as the means for transformation by the hand of God.

The life in God, the Way of Love, may begin as outward following of the laws;
And doing certain things, like setting aside a time of prayer or reading the Bible;
Participating in outreach, attending worship, giving;
But they are not the ends in themselves.

These are merely the means for God to change our hearts;
So that we may experience God's presence;
So that we may be transformed by God into persons that have the love of God in us;
And who are about sharing that love with other.

God is always more interested in our hearts than whether we're getting it right;
And when we live our lives pursuing God, as we try and follow in God's ways;
With God's laws, and for God's purposes;
Then we will know that God has drawn near and we will be changed.

Trying Versus Transformation

Malcolm Gladwell, a popular author of our day;

Has written several bestselling books and my favorite is entitled Outliers;

I like it for many reasons, but especially because

It speaks to paying attention to our day to day lives;

And resonates with the scriptures we've read today.

It's a book that looks at how persons achieve their goals in life;

A book on what it is about the quality of certain people's lives

That gives them success, honor, popularity, wealth, championships;

And just a better overall experience of life.

He gives all kinds of examples of these achievers from all walks of life;

Of people who are remarkably talented and people who have very little talent;

People who got some interesting breaks in life and people who were broken;

People who had disabilities and learning challenges;

People who came from good homes or broken homes;

People who overcame difficult challenges;

And people who were born into natural advantages.

He argues that all these people had one thing in common: 10,000 hours;

Whether someone was talented or just hard headed;

Born with advantages or disadvantages, good homes or broken homes;

Each of them pursued their interest and put in the time.

You can read the book and I highly recommend it;

Because it's a reminder that everyone we hold up as an achiever or successful or gifted;

Have all put in 10,000 hours and more in the pursuit of their life;

10,000 hours at the computer; 10,000 hours shooting baskets and running;

10,000 hours playing scales and learning music;

10,000 hours caring for their family; 10,000 hours perfecting their craft.

Gladwell puts the lie to the notion that people are born successful;
And that talent alone is why people rise up;
Talent and interest are helpful, but everyone has to put in the time.

I took six years of piano growing up, with an awful, 7:00 am Saturday lesson time;
And pretty much gave it up when I was allowed;
I can still sit down at the piano and play, painfully, slowly, poorly.

Compare that to Clair or Elaine, who though they are clearly gifted in music;
Have put in the time and continue to do so and play magnificently;
And when I hear people compliment them on how gifted they are;
I smile and think yes, they are gifted, but they've put in the 10,000 hours plus.

Look around your life at the people you know personally or from afar;
Imagine the time and effort they've put in to achieve what they've achieved;
And remember that what has marked their lives marks ours as well;
When we put in our 10,000 hours plus we can grow and become and achieve.

A professional religious friend of mine, a priest, likes to send me interesting interviews
And articles about what's going on in the Christian landscape of America.
She sent me a YouTube clip of some interviews of college students over the summer;
Speaking to what they're Christian lives are all about.

Some of them were very impressive and eloquent about their faith.
About how they were living their lives in response to God's love and grace for them;
With examples of how they spend their quiet time with God;
Or what they're doing in the world to change the world for the better;
And how they are experiencing God on a regular basis;
In their spiritual practices and with other people.

They were putting in their time with God and for God every day;

And there seemed to be a strong interplay between the way they were trying to live their lives;
And the presence of God in them and God's love in their hearts.

Some of them were not quite on that line, like a young woman
Who answered the questions about her beliefs by saying,
"Oh yes, I believe in God, but I'm not nuts about Him;
I don't pray all that much and when I do I don't hear God;
I guess God is somewhere out there;
But not a very important part of my life."

The purpose of living the laws, of being doers of the word and not hearers only;
Of following God with our lips and our hearts with persistent, daily commitment;
Is to open the way for God to come into our lives more and more;
So that we may know God's infinite love for us;
So that God may transform us into the persons God created us to be;
And so that we as individuals and we as a community
May be part of God's plan to change this broken world by the power and love of God.

God, who is always very near to everyone, will make Himself known to us;
And transform our lives to be more and more like God and lead us in the Way of Love.

Opening our Hearts to God

God is calling us all to a different order in life;
An order and way of living that involves spending our time, our lives;
Seeking God, knowing God, and being changed by God day by day by day.

So, as we are considering our Godly activities today and every day;
Let me invite you to join me in starting from a different place today and every day;
Start today and each morning, inviting God into your heart;
Literally pray or say, "God, I invite you into my heart today;"
Or to pray with today's Collect asking God
"Graft your love in my heart today".

Jesus promises that if we will, Then He and the Father will make their home there;
And I can't imagine a more loving, gracious guest;
And resource for the life that is really life.

Imagine the driving force of your life and mine renewed and refreshed, redeemed and rearranged
By the love and grace of God at work in you and through you;
You may not see a change right away;
But when God's love takes hold of your heart and mine;
Then we and the world will never be the same.

Amen.