



## *“Til Christ Be Formed in You”*

Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Ephesians 4:7, 11-16; Matthew 7:24-27

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Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

I want to tell you a story. It's a true story. It's true because it happened and it's true because it bears a truth larger than itself. It's a story about a man and it's a story about spirituality.

The man, John Stott, was a mentor to me as a theologian and as a pastor. It was a mentorship from afar.

For over forty years, John Stott was rector of All Souls Anglican Parish in London. His influence was international. His travels, lectures and books gave him an audience far beyond London. He was particularly influential to several generations of university and seminary students. I was one of them.

Through a providential set of circumstances, I came to know John Stott. The mentoring became personal and profound. I was at Park Street Church in Boston at the time and I invited Stott to come to Park Street to speak to our evening congregation made up mostly of university students. He graciously accepted though he expressed reservations. He was then in his 70s and worried he could no longer communicate with a generation young enough to be his grandchildren.

The evening arrived and as usual about seven or eight hundred young adults were present. To my generation, Stott is a hero, but these students had no clue who he might be. I gave a brief introduction and as he came to the podium he stopped me and whispered in my ear, "Dear brother, please pray for me." He was worried he couldn't relate to these young Americans. He proceeded to offer a brilliant retelling of Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son.

I will never forget the scene. This elder statesman of the Christian faith, with thin silver hair and rosy cheeks, never raised his voice nor gesticulated with his hands. With words, just words, he told the old story with compelling power and passion.

The story of the Prodigal Son, really a story about the Waiting Father, contains its own inherent power, but there was something about the man which gave the story much more. Who he was showed through what he was saying. The words were convincing and compelling because he was an authentic messenger. He embodied the words he was speaking. Stott was like the Waiting Father he described. Gentle strength, depth of character, and genuine faith created a genuine religious experience, a "spiritual" moment.

As he finished he appealed to the students to come home to their waiting father who misses us all desperately and wants to know us. As Stott walked off the podium, there was a moment of dead silence, then spontaneous and long applause broke out. Students waited

**Plymouth Church**  
**Sermon 15 Feb 09**

in a long line to greet him and thank this man they'd never seen before and wouldn't see again.

Something real happened that night. A generation longing for authenticity in a world of duplicity and hypocrisy saw the real deal. The norms, values and character of the Christian gospel took on flesh and lived.

There's more to the story. The response I observed that night indicates a deep spiritual hunger that is abroad in our time. Beneath the surface of life and our own lives, there is the nagging sense that the material world – a world we've been told is the only real world – is not sufficient. We're beginning to understand that we need something larger on which to hang our lives. The social and scientific progress of the past centuries, while magnificent and often breathtaking, does not satisfy the soul nor feed the hungers of the heart.

The cultural values of our time, modeled disastrously by some celebrities and the rapacious, ruthless greed of some movers and shakers of the financial world, convinces a growing number of people that our consumer-driven economy is not good for our children – or us.

Accompanying our post-modern disillusionment is the widespread recognition of and search for something beyond ourselves, something transcendent. It seems humans long for a larger meaning and purpose to life than existing, reproducing, consuming and dying.

Like or not, it seems human beings are innately and universally religious. We will have gods whether material or divine. The material gods of our time have failed us and large numbers of people are turning to the spiritual. "Spirituality" is a contemporary buzzword. The search for spirituality is wide, if not deep, but it's quite real.

The news this week offered a surprising illustration of the hunger for spirituality. It seems that after years of stagnant or declining enrollment, American seminaries – schools that train the Christian clergy – are growing again. Mainline Protestant seminaries like Yale Divinity School and Evangelical seminaries like Dallas Theological Seminary will have ten percent more students next year. Catholic seminaries are experiencing similar growth.

The article went on to explain that economic crises tend to prompt seminary enrollment. It's more than unemployed financial sector workers seeking alternative careers! Economic crises tend to expose the thin character of affluence with its god of success. And that vision reveals to many people that there are higher values and a greater God.

A stale old religion of abstract ideas and empty rituals won't do. We are hungering for the experience of God, not the idea of God. We long to know God's love, not talk about it. We want our worship to be an authentic encounter with the living God, not just going through the motions.

Christian faith at its authentic best provides a spirituality broad enough and deep enough to sustain us. A genuine community of faith has spiritual resources to feed the hungers of the heart. But not just any spirituality will do.

The Christian faith is more than a set of ideas and beliefs and more than membership in a religious institution. Christianity is a way of life that is a specific way of living. It is a particular spirituality.

At its simplest, Christianity consists of three things that are inseparable:

- a set of beliefs about God, the world, Christ, sin and salvation,
- a set of values, ethical norms shaped by the character of God revealed in Scripture and Jesus Christ;
- a way of living that embodies those beliefs and values.

Living the Christian life involves being formed – or reformed – toward that specific way of embodying God’s character and Christ’s teaching. Paul puts it in a powerful metaphor, “Christ is being formed in us.” We are in the process of becoming less of what we are and more of what we ought to be. Christ is making us “real” humans.

At its heart, Christian spirituality, this specific formation, grows out of a relationship. God made us for love: God’s love and human love. We wandered from this relationship preferring our own ways but God misses us terribly and wants us to come home and live in the warmth of God’s love.

Like any relationship, that basic relationship with God needs nourishment and growth. Christian congregations, communities of faith, exist to nurture and grow our love with God and neighbor. We learn to love God in worship, study, fellowship and friendship. Everything the church does should point in the direction of nurturing love of God and neighbor. But we are so forgetful.

In seminary Warren Wilkowitz was a star. He was years ahead of us in maturity and professional skills. He won a coveted internship at First Presbyterian Church in Libertyville, Illinois.

One of our neighbors was a member of First Presbyterian. She thought Warren was the best preacher she’d ever heard – he probably was. I told Warren. He said she’d recently told him the same thing. He was honored, even flattered, by her admiration, and told her so. Then he asked her a diagnostic question in response. “Elsie,” he said, “the real question is this. Do you love God more as a result of my preaching?”

Christian spirituality has specific content, common beliefs about God, Christ and the world, and Christian spirituality has a specific goal: to become like Christ. The next question is, what process or dynamic causes this particular formation?

Several years ago, I was telling a friend of mine, an avid motorcyclist and an engineer, about a motorcycle trip my brother-in-law and I were planning. We were going to put our motorcycles in the back of his pick-up truck, drive to Montana where we’d meet friends and ride.

He looked at me with concern and said, “Do you have a plan for getting those motorcycles into the truck?” We didn’t and he was right. They wouldn’t get into the truck by themselves. We needed a plan.

Spiritual growth, becoming like Christ, doesn’t just happen. We have to have a plan.

Here’s one plan. John Stott told me once that every morning, when he awakes, the first thing he does is greet the Holy Trinity. As he gets out of bed and his first foot hits the floor, he prays familiar words, “Glory be to the father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.” When his other foot lands he finishes, “As it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.” It’s building a relationship with the God who desires our greeting and our friendship.

The next thing he does is meditate for ten or fifteen minutes on the Fruit of the Spirit. If you are not familiar with the Fruit of the Spirit, they are a list of attitudes and character traits that St. Paul says are the result of the Holy Spirit living in us – and forming us in Christ’s image.

They are:

- love
- joy
- peace
- patience
- kindness
- generosity
- faithfulness
- gentleness
- self-control

After decades of meditation and reflection, no wonder the man fits the shape of his vision of his mature self. We conform to the texts and ideas to which we attend.

If we want to be like something or someone, it takes focus, method and perseverance.

However, our spirituality doesn't begin and end inside ourselves. Christian spirituality is, by its nature, communal. Each of us is part of a larger, living community that is inhabited by God's Spirit and growing in love together toward the image of Christ. We are in the spirituality business together.

Much, if not most, of the basics of spiritual growth lie in our common life in Christ. Worship lies at the heart of the Christian life. Worship is what the church does and what Christians do – together. And if we open our hearts to the songs, hymns, prayers, words and fellowship, it is a transforming experience over the long haul. Love for God grows in us all.

The church year offers extraordinary seasons for spiritual growth. Advent and Christmastide with their special focus are now behind us. Lent and Easter are coming quickly.

Lent is an opportunity for spiritual formation. For forty days and five weekends, the church focuses on what it means to follow Jesus toward the cross. Traditionally, Lent has included giving something up – a sort of small fast in preparation for the feast of Easter.

It's better to think of Lent as an opportunity to focus on an area of our life that needs attention and to ask God to help us grow. Christian spirituality is about a relationship, our relationship with God who misses us and wants us to be closer.

But you have to want that relationship. It doesn't just happen. We need a plan and Lent is an opportunity to form such a plan. Do you want Christ to be formed in you?

When I was a senior in seminary, like most of my classmates, I panicked. In a few months I would graduate and I needed a job. More importantly, I had to start behaving like a Christian if I was going to lead a congregation of Christians. And, frankly, theological study often shrinks the soul and mine felt small.

A friend invited me to join a small group of seniors meeting for prayer about our futures. I joined and discovered the group was also praying about the Fruit of the Spirit, that list of norms and values of the Christian faith that stand central to Christian character. Hear them again: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. I needed love and patience badly – well, I needed them all.

I eagerly joined the spirit of those prayers. I expected something "magical" to happen, some bright, spiritual light and sudden transformation. Nothing happened. I went back and nothing happened. I kept going – and hoping.

Several months passed and one day it dawned on me that I was more patient and kind than I'd been. Something was happening – I was becoming something specific. It was the consequence of a long obedience in the same direction.

May Christ be formed in you!

Amen.

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