



“Habits of the Heart”

Deuteronomy 6:4-6; Romans 12:1-2; Matthew 7:24-27

Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

September 20, 2009

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

In his book, *Transforming Congregational Culture*, Tony Robinson notes that famed business guru Peter Drucker made a career out of asking two questions. The first question: “What business are you in?” The second: “How’s business?”

Those are very good questions for a church to ask itself. In the midst of all the many things a church does, it’s easy to lose our way and forget what business we’re in. The right answer to the first question, “What business are you in?” is clarifying, simplifying and energizing.

The answer: we are in the business of human transformation. The burden of the biblical narrative is simple: something is dreadfully wrong with our world and God is in the long process of making things right. That, of course, means transformation. The world needs to change, and God’s business is changing it.

The heart of the Christian gospel is human transformation. God sent Jesus Christ into the world to save lost humans and to change the trajectory of our lives and the life of the world. The Christian community is commissioned to do God’s work in the world and that work is transforming lives. Jesus’ last commission to his disciples was to “make disciples everywhere for all time.” Making disciples is to engage in human transformation.

Our business is to be changed and to change things. That requires continuing, transforming work in us and through us.

The contemporary church phrase to describe human transformation is “spiritual formation.” Christian spirituality has content and purpose. God wants to form us, reform us, transform us. Spiritual formation is our business; it’s your business.

We are a community of people being formed in order to assist God’s transformation of the world. As our Epistle text puts it, “...be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so you can discern God’s will in your life and in the world.”

The Old Testament Lesson and the Gospel Lesson provide vivid images to describe our spiritual formation. Deuteronomy 6 is part of a summary of the law given to Israel. In short, the law is instructions about how to love God and love your neighbor. It’s how to be a community of faith in a faithless world; how to be an ethical people who reflect God’s character.

So, the text argues, immerse yourself in God’s law. Make it part of raising your children. Put the law in the center of your home and your work. Keep it in front of your moral vision and use it to guard your ethical life. Live yourself deeply into God’s word.

Some Jews take the images of the text very literally. It says bind the law in front of your eyes and bind it on your arms. Put it on the doorposts of your house.

Several years ago I was in the Amsterdam airport waiting for an El Al connecting flight to Tel Aviv. We were confined to a secure waiting room. It was time for morning prayers and an Hassidic Jew took out his prayer book, prayer shawl and phylacteries. The phylacteries are small leather boxes with Scripture inside. Long leather straps enable the user to tie the boxes on their forehead and upper arm. As he ties on his phylacteries, he was putting the law between his eyes and on his arms like the text says. He asked an obviously secular woman to hold his prayer book and for the next fifteen minutes or so he prayed quietly while the woman studiously paid no attention to him.

I'm quite sure the text doesn't require that kind of literal obedience but rather suggests that if we want to live in peace with God and our neighbors, it takes some concentrated devotion to the ethical instruction of Scripture which often runs counter to our most basic instincts.

Spiritual formation requires exposure to God's revelation and devotion to making part of our faith and our character. And it takes a lifetime to grow into God's heart and mind.

The Gospel Lesson provides the second image of spiritual formation. Matthew 7:24-27 is Jesus' wrap-up of the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount is a summary of Jesus' teaching to his disciples. It is a long, rigorous, and revolutionary way of life intended to regulate the attitudes and behavior of Christians.

Jesus' conclusion to his teaching is the familiar story of the man who built his house on rock. Firmly grounded on solid ground, the fury of the storms could not shake that house. How different from the man who built his house on sand. The wind and the rain of the storms flattened that house. It had no solid foundation.

Jesus explains what the image means. Build your life on my teaching and your life will be like the house built on the rock. Spiritual formation is the consequence of a life built firmly on Jesus' words.

My good friend Jim Hagman died a couple of months ago. Jim owned a construction company that built lots of big buildings in the Twin Cities. I asked him once what kind of foundation was required to build a skyscraper. He explained he had to dig down in the earth until he hit bedrock. Then he drilled deep into the bedrock to form a caisson. The larger the building the deeper and wider the caisson.

The application is clear. We need to drill down deep into Jesus' teaching, for in it we find God's character revealed as the formative power of that which forms Christian disciples. In other words, if we want to have a strong and beautiful life, we have to expose ourselves to the content and character of God revealed in Scripture.

The church has always known the priority of spiritual formation. But we're forgetful and easily distracted. In our tradition we were distracted for centuries by a modern way of thinking. We confused information with formation. We thought the way to form Christians was to pour knowledge into their heads and with sufficient information they would become mature disciples. It didn't work and it can't work. Information alone cannot form a soul.

A number of years ago, our pastoral staff, feeling our academic oats, proposed a curriculum designed to produce mature Christians. We asked, "What knowledge does it take to form a Christian disciple?" We came up with a body of knowledge and set out to produce courses to give that information to our people. Imagine how disappointed we were when no one showed up! I suspect our congregation knew better than we that knowledge doesn't necessarily form disciples.

Children's ministry in most churches knows a better way. We immerse our children in the biblical stories in a setting of joy, love, nurture and protection. In other words, we offer children a living experience of faith and Scripture. And our children experience the grace and love of God through texts and living transmitters of those stories.

Contrast the typical confirmation experience in our tradition. We take early adolescents and meet with them once a week. For a year we pour the content of the Christian faith into their heads, even test them at the end to see if they "got" it. The point is to introduce them to the Christian faith and involve them in "official" membership in the congregation. They graduate and we seldom see them again.

Why? Because the exercise never engages them in the living experience of being a Christian and an active participant in the life of the church to which we are introducing them. In fact, the only way we usually get confirmands to attend church – the living experience of our faith – is by threats. They never experience the faith we offer them. No wonder it seldom works.

Recently, however, we've experienced a dramatic shift in our culture and the church. The old "modern" way of thinking is being challenged and, some think, overthrown. We are losing faith in information as the means of formation. We are learning to appreciate and promote experience as a way of learning and knowing.

I've told you about Beth. Her story bears repeating. Beth was an intellectually gifted young woman. She graduated from high school at age sixteen and went off to Smith College. Smith is hardly a place that nourished faith, and I worried what would happen to Beth there.

When Beth was home for a break, I took her out to lunch and inquired about her faith experience at the college. I needn't have worried. Beth smiled at me and said, "Oh David, for my generation (of women) the issue isn't whether or not God exists. The question is: What is god's name?" I knew then something new and powerful was in the air.

Further evidence appeared in the last month. In a poll, scientists were asked if they believed in God. Twenty-eight percent of scientists older than sixty-five believe in God. Scientists under forty years of age? Forty-two percent! Something is happening to the spiritual life of our culture.

More and more people are not asking the old question about whether or not God exists or Christianity is true. They're asking, How can I have a have a spiritual life? How can I know God? How can I get in touch with the sacred?

Have you ever noticed that Jesus never engaged people in philosophical or theological debate? Rather he invited everyone to enter into a way of life that features relationships. He taught about life and how to have a spiritual life. Over and over he said to his disciples, "If you are my disciples, then do what I teach you." And the content of his teaching was that Great Command, "Love God with all your being and love each other."

Jesus knew what we often forget: God is not known by an intellectual quest by lone individuals seeking verification of the divine. God is known by seekers willing to risk the adventure of faith, hope, and love in a community of seekers who experience God in one another, Scripture and worship.

Spiritual formation in such communities transforms ordinary people into real humans, people learning to live like God designed us to live.

My concern in these crucial days of this new church year is that our quantitative growth in numbers will be matched by an equal qualitative growth in spiritual formation.

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How that happens in congregations is both simple and complex. While Christianity is learned and experienced communally, faith requires a prior personal commitment. Christian faith is a long obedience in the same direction – a continuing act of the will.

Gloria and I lived in the Twin Cities for nineteen years. During those years we had six major surgeries between the two of us. The pre-op routine was the same each time. We arrived early in the morning the day of surgery. We were interviewed, checked over and hooked up to an IV line. Then we waited until our name was called. The two of us, accompanied by a hospital volunteer, would walk down a long hall. At the end, the one undergoing surgery turned right and went through double doors alone. The other turned left and went to the waiting room for a long day of waiting. When I walked alone through that door into the operating room, I got up on a table and waited for the medical team to put me under, cut me open and fix me. It was an act of the will in which I gave myself into the care and keeping of others – for my transformation.

Christian faith begins with an act of the will by which we enter a way of life in which we ask God and the Christian community to fix us. We have to admit we need fixing and we have to trust God and the community to do the job. It is an act of daring faith.

On that journey of faith, we are transformed by rituals both sacred and ordinary. Our tradition fought against rituals for centuries. But we are becoming wiser. Rituals carry extraordinary formative power and to avoid them can be spiritual suicide. To be a follower of Christ is to engage in rituals that change us.

Each Sunday we experience God in this place in the rituals of word and sacrament. Over and over again, we hear the word and we come to the table. During that larger ritual we sing and pray. The songs are old and new, the prayers ancient and modern. In the familiar rituals of worship we join a worldwide people and, at the same time, we enter into an ancient tradition. We, Plymouth Church, are part of the Church of Christ around the world and through the ages. It is a powerful and formative experience.

Throughout the year we join the church of Christ in keeping the church calendar and celebrating its seasons and rituals. Last Lent we worked hard at making the season a time of spiritual growth with rituals new and old. Advent is coming and we are planning to make it a season of spiritual growth by means of its unique story and accompanying rituals.

Some rituals seem rather ordinary but they are sacred too. The coffee hour after church seems mundane, but wisdom suggests it is not only the worship service continued, but -- in those simple ritual acts of food, drink, and friendship -- we are being formed in significant ways.

Throughout the year we will eat together in ritual meals and ordinary sharing of food and friendship. Such rituals are no less sacred and significant than Sunday morning habits of the heart.

Hopefully, this year will see the start of a small group ministry at Plymouth. Small groups of people will covenant with each other to be together on the journey and to grow together along the way.

In it all, we stand firmly and joyously in an ancient tradition that is strikingly contemporary. It is our living experience of the Christian faith. I once heard a man say it was exhilarating to be part of a tradition that is five hundred years out of date. He was right, of course. But it is equally thrilling to be part of an ancient tradition that is being experienced here and now.

We are learning the power of faith by entrusting our lives to God – and one another.

Amen.

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