

Chapel Hill United Church of Christ

Sunday Sermon

Your Best Foot Forward

Ephesians 4: 25-5:2
1 Kings 19: 4-8

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“He got up, and ate and drank; then we went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.”

Prayer: More than anything else, O Lord, may we be transformed within, relying upon your love and grace. Amen.

All of us know of the need to put our best foot forward at certain times, don't we? If you're a salesman or woman and you have an appointment with someone in their home, you want to put your best foot forward by being highly presentable, by offering the value of your product, etc. Anyone sitting down for a job interview wants to put their best foot forward by dressing sharply, right? Being courteous, attentive, thoughtful, having an air of confidence, showing the prospective employer what gifts you offer, showing that you have the right stuff... all these are putting one's best foot forward.

It also means NOT showing what may be detrimental, too, right? If you're putting your best foot forward, you are not going to air your “dirty laundry.” You're not going to reveal what everyone knows is there, the other side, your weaknesses, your not-so-polished side, what's really below the surface.

The irony is...what's down deep is what really counts! If you're putting your best foot forward in whatever you're doing, looking good is supposed to reflect that you feel good on the inside. Being courteous, attentive, thoughtful, having an air of confidence—qualities shown on

the surface are supposed to match the quality a person is on the inside. No one wants to be inspired by a person's wonderful qualities shown in their best foot forward when in reality, they are mean, nasty, and have very little underneath that matches what they show on the surface.

We, as Christians, find ourselves being transformed by God's love on the inside when we give ourselves over to Christ. Our best foot forward that people see publicly is supposed to reflect exactly our newly transformed character that we (and God) know privately.

And, this exact rendering of our best foot forward happens not just when others are around, but also when no one is looking, too. How many of us use our turn signal when no one's around? Who says "grace" when we are by ourselves for a meal? Sometimes we do, sometimes we don't?

You know recently, in the last ten years or so, these "reality shows" on TV (like "The Osbournes" or "Jon and Kate plus Eight"), social networks (like "Twitter," "Facebook," and "MySpace"), and "web cams," and such... all these give people a chance to see, follow, keep up to date with the reality of other people's lives. Honestly, I am totally baffled at our cultural obsessive interest in seeing the "reality" of another person's life. I don't get it.

But I do get that as Christians, we are invited and instructed to let God's presence in our lives be complete by making our outward behavior reflect God's inward transformative power. The author of Ephesians highlights what behaviors reflect God's transformative power and which ones do not. The reader/audience is invited to put away falsehood, unbridled anger, stealing, and evil talk, etc. People of faith are to outwardly impoverish bitterness, wrath, slander, and malice all because God has made them new people inwardly. So, your best foot

forward outwardly as a Christian person gives honor to God because it is an exact rendering of the new creation in Christ that you have become inwardly.

The story of Elijah pushes us to a deeper understanding of what to impoverish in our lives. Elijah is utterly wiped out. Earlier, he destroyed the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel, and Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab, was an ardent follower of Baal. She was furious and hunted down Elijah who was running for his life. We find him here exhausted, at the end of his rope. He'd rather die than continue on in fear of his life all the time. "Take away my life," he says to God. He was at the end of his self-sufficiency. It is only when he is at the end of his self-sufficiency that he can be fed by God (1 Kings 18: 20-40).

When was it that you came to the place in your life when you quite literally needed to throw your hands up in the air and say, "God, I can't go on any further. I am beside myself with defeat." Maybe you were at your wits end. Maybe you had just about had it with the struggle you faced. Maybe you had a sense of absolute futility in what you were doing; out of control.

Think of the person who finally comes to AA in their alcoholic existence knowing that they HAVE to do something... and now. So, they come to AA only to hear that the very first thing the MUST do, and they cannot go any further without doing this—is to sincerely admit that they are powerless over alcohol and that their lives have become unmanageable. Self-sufficiency no longer works. They can no longer continue on their own. It is right then, in utter and utmost futility they can be fed by God, who alone is the Higher Power which can restore them to sanity.

I think this is a critical lesson in putting our best foot forward. Putting our best foot forward happens when we put an end to our self-sufficiency. I was flipping through the channels a few

days ago, and I stopped for a few minutes on an Infomercial. The man was lauding the wonders of his new book called Free Money... He was animated, he was excited, and for \$30, you could buy his book that would give you all kinds of secrets on where our government is holding large amounts of cash just waiting for you! Just a few clicks with your computer mouse, and in 20 seconds, you can have a check on its way to you which you will receive in 30 days or less. WOW! He said, "Take the bull by the horns! Trust in my book! Try out these techniques, fill out a small form, and you will have lost money coming to you!" The epitome of self-sufficiency! I flipped to the very next channel, and the preacher was yelling, "Repent! Turn away from your evil ways! Turn back to God!"

If we sincerely repent and impoverish self-sufficiency, could it be that there is a direct connection to the increase of God's provisions that sustain us? It is right then, in our utter and utmost futility of trying to sustain ourselves that we can be fed by God. Putting our best foot forward happens when we become poor in self-sufficiency, like paupers before God, needing to receive what God gives, like the way a child is in need of guidance and sustenance from a parent.

Keith Miller, a Daily Guideposts author wrote that he prayed one night, "I love you, God. But to be honest, my prayer life is just not working. Please give me a hand." He opened his Bible to Matthew 18 where Jesus was saying to his disciples, "Unless you change and become like children, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18: 3). Immediately his mind recalled that the Lord's Prayer began with "Our Father..." however, Keith knew that in Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke, the prayer began with the word "*Abba*" which translates not so much as 'Father,' but '*Daddy*,' a much more intimate term. Keith wrote, "I instantly grasped

the problem with my prayer life. When praying to “Our Father,” I prayed as adult to adult as if God were a peer... When I prayed as “Daddy,” I prayed as a listening child” (Daily Guideposts 2009, Aug. 8, p.217-8).

In our impoverished state before God, we are fed a children. Jesus taught, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3). You see, it’s not a question of our natural abilities that makes us a part of God’s realm; it’s a question of our poverty. It’s not our outward virtues, our good works, our sinless behavior, or our strength of character that is our best foot forward; it’s what God puts into us, what God feeds us in our inner lives.

In our poorness of spirit, God feeds us with the word of God. In our poverty, God feeds us with food that will give us strength for all the days to come. Putting out best foot forward is needing God to feed us with the nature of Jesus Christ. In Christ alone, we will find sustenance. In Christ alone, we will find the blessings of God. In Christ alone, we can put our best foot forward, living true to our hearts. *In Christ alone, our hope is found. He is our light, our strength, our song. Christ is our cornerstone, our solid ground, firm through the fiercest drought and storm.* Please stand and sing as we conclude our worship. Amen.