

Chapel Hill United Church of Christ

Sunday Sermon

Internal Acceptance, External Changes

Luke 2: 41-52
Colossians 3: 12-17

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December 27, 2009

“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.”

Prayer: O God, you have sent us our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. May we discern what we are to do now. Amen.

Quite a few years ago, a medical doctor and teacher, Dr. Paul Ruskin, published an article in the Journal of the American Medical Association entitled, “The Stages of Aging.” In that article, he described a case study he presented to his students. The person under his care he described like this: “The patient neither speaks nor comprehends the spoken word. Sometimes she babbles incoherently for hours on end. She is disoriented about person, place, and time. She does, however respond to her name. I have worked with her for the past six months, but she still shows complete disregard for her physical appearance and makes no effort to assist her own care. She must be fed, bathed and clothed by others. Her food must be pureed. Her shirt is usually soiled from almost incessant drooling. She does not walk. Her sleep pattern is erratic. Often she wakes in the middle of the night and her screaming awakens others. Most of the time she is friendly and happy, but

several times a day she gets quite agitated without apparent cause. Then she wails until someone comes to comfort her.” Dr. Ruskin then asked if any of the students would volunteer to take care of this person. No one volunteered.

Sounds like a difficult case, doesn't it? Those med students had a hard time internally accepting the enormous responsibility of taking care of a person like that. How many of us, if you were a med student sitting in Dr. Ruskin's lecture, would volunteer to take care of this person? It might be difficult. We might be hesitant internally.

But, then Dr. Ruskin said, “I'm surprised that none of you offered to help, because actually she is my favorite patient. I get immense pleasure from taking care of her, and I am learning so much from her. She has taught me a depth of gratitude I never knew before. She has taught me the spirit of unwavering trust. And she has taught me the power of unconditional love.” Then Dr. Ruskin said, “Let me show you her picture,” and he pulled out a picture of his six-month-old baby daughter (Sermon Resources for December 27, 2009, retrieved December 22, 2009).

Now, how many of us would volunteer! Perspective is important, isn't it? And, most of the time, we need all the facts before we make decisions, too. When we have internal acceptance, which is acceptance in our hearts, our minds, our spirit,

we would more likely to volunteer because those are the external actions which go along with our internal acceptance.

We've just come through Christmas. We've heard a lot about internally accepting the gift of God's Son Jesus Christ in our hearts, our minds, our spirit. But, as I said, it's important to have all the facts. And, here's an important fact that comes with the internal acceptance of God's gift in our hearts: it inspires faith growth, which requires work. Faith is not a finished product that automatically comes with our internal acceptance of God's gift. It is not 'once and done.' You start out internally accepting God and what God offers, then you have to externally change as you tend to your faith. You have to nurture it; you have to grow it. As time goes along, your perspectives change and you find yourself on a life-long journey of working, growing and developing faith.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians in chapter 13, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways" (1 Corinthians 13: 11). This means we work at faith. We work at deepening our knowledge. This means that we simply cannot read the Bible and stick to the same faith perspectives that we had when were children. Rather, I encourage us to continue to grow into an informed and inquisitive approach to scripture.

This also means that Confirmation class is not the end of our Christian education. All of us can grow more in Christian education. So, we have adult education classes offered for all of us on Wednesday nights and Sunday mornings. Our life-long faith growth means we are life-long learners.

Even Jesus is depicted in our passage from Luke as someone who was learning. I think it is an erroneous perception to think that Jesus had it all down, especially at age 12, like this painting seems to suggest. Here the wise Jesus is teaching the elders! He's pointing to scriptures...he's lecturing. But, a careful look at the text describes Jesus as a student, listening, asking questions, exploring faith. And, the elders saw in him great potential as a quick study, someone who was impressive for his age, as this painting seems to suggest.

Regardless of how impressive Jesus was, I think he had to wrestle with who he was and who he thought he should be. He had to learn and grow, just like we do. He had to discover what external changes would take place in the way he lived his life because of his internal acceptance of God's presence inside him. He was on a faith journey, like you and me.

Paul gives us an idea in his letter to the church in Colossae about what external changes we should expect in the way we live our lives that reflects the internal acceptance of God's gift to us. Through the use of one of his favorite metaphors,

which is ‘putting on clothing,’ he says essentially, now that you’ve internally accepted God’s gift of saving grace in your life and you have become God’s chosen ones, let us now make external changes by clothing ourselves with qualities fitting of Christian people. What is worth wearing, put on. Practices! In other words, practice compassion, practice kindness, practice humility, meekness, and patience. Practice forgiving each other. Clothe yourselves with love. Let Christ’s peace be the ruling factor. Practice thankfulness. These are external changes that reflect one’s internal acceptance of God’s gift to us.

I love this little story about a kindergarten teacher who was helping one of her little students put his boots on. With her pulling and him pushing, the boots still didn’t want to go on. By the time the second boot was on, she had worked up a sweat. She almost whimpered when the little boy said, “Teacher, they’re on the wrong feet.” She looked and, sure enough, they were. It wasn’t any easier pulling the boots off than it was putting them on. She managed to keep her cool as together they worked to get the boots back on, this time on the right feet. He then announced, “These aren’t my boots.” She bit her tongue rather than screaming, “Why didn’t you say so?” Once again she struggled to help him pull the ill-fitting boots off. He then said, “These aren’t even my boots. They’re my brother’s boots. My Mom made me wear them.” She didn’t know if she should laugh or cry. She mustered up the grace to wrestle the boots on his feet again. She said, “Now,

where are your mittens?” He said, “I stuffed them in my boots...” (Duncan, King, Sermon Resources, King Duncan, Collected Sermons, www.Sermons.com, retrieved December 22, 2003).

As people who have internally accepted God’s gift, perhaps one external change that we can clothe ourselves with the spiritual practice of loving God through our worship of God. When we take time to have daily prayer, it is a reflection of our internal acceptance of God in our life. When we come here on Sunday mornings to worship the Holy One, it is an external practice mirroring our internal acceptance of God. When we stand in the presence of God and lift up God’s name on high, when we sing of God’s glory and mighty works, when we praise God who is among us as our Emmanuel, these are all external practices that reveal our internal love for our holy God. Let us stand and sing, “Lord, I Lift Your Name on High!”
Amen!