

WHAT KIND OF PERSON AM I GOING TO BE TODAY?

Leviticus 20:7-8,26

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Sermon presented by The Rev. Richard D. Raum, at Old First Presbyterian Church,
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There was an item in the paper recently about a man in Vienna, Austria, who was apprehended by police on the roof of a prison, trying to get back in. "Life is so much easier on the inside," said the 23 year old ex-con. "They feed you, do your washing, and let you watch TV – which I can tell you is a lot more than my mom does."

The story is interesting on so many levels, but perhaps none more than the fellow's acceptance that the benefits and rewards of control outweigh the burdens and responsibilities of freedom. None of us would make the same choice, of course, in his situation, and we shake our heads and wonder "what on earth is wrong with this guy?!". But in our own situation there is this ever-present challenge: is my life engaged in such a way, that I keep learning and growing and risking, doing the things that Jesus teaches, acting out of a heart that keeps changing into his; or, do I instead keep trying to find a way back into prison, back to whatever securities may be found in the former and the familiar?

Dallas Willard, who writes on spiritual renewal and also teaches at the University of Southern California, writes that the most important question a human ever asks is: "What kind of person am I going to be?" But many never ask that question. We may get so caught-up, or bogged-down, in the demands of daily duty that we lose energy and interest to seek after first principals. But the Christian faith and tradition does not permit such complacency. Willard goes on to propose that a Christian ought to be engaged continually in "the process of establishing the character of Christ in the person . . . taking on the character of the Christ . . . under the direction of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God." So, the most important question a human ever asks isn't just, "what kind of person am I going to be?" as though that's ever a settled issue, once and for all, but, "what kind of person am I going to be . . . today?" Because each day we are called and confronted by the Spirit to be in the world that day as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Jerry Bridges is an author and Bible teacher, best known for his book *The Pursuit of Holiness*. Bridges writes: "I begin each day by reviewing the truth of 2 Corinthians 5:21 – 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.'"

I think this verse might be difficult to understand. Years ago I bought a New Testament at a yard sale. When I got it home and looked at it, I noticed that over-and-over again in the columns was written: "Ask the minister." This note was made beside many of the toughest teachings. "If someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn and offer him your left." "Ask the minister." "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." "Ask the minister." I wondered who that beleaguered minister might have been! And the note appeared here, too, beside the verse before us today: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

The sentence has three parts. Let's parse it, phrase-by-phrase.

First: "For our sake . . ." it begins. God acted in a decisive way – and we shall see in a moment what that decisive way was – God acted "for our sake," on our behalf, in loving regard for our human situation. So, in this matter, as in all matters, God acted "for our sake . . ."

What exactly did God do? Second, now: "For our sake . . . he made him (meaning Jesus Christ) to be sin who knew no sin." That is: God has transferred my sin to Christ. My pride, my selfishness and self-indulgence, my cruelty and unkindness, my irritability and impatience, all this sin no longer adheres to me. My wrong-doing has been transferred to Jesus Christ, my sin to him who knew no sin.

What's the point of the transfer? Why did God act in this way? Let's turn our attention the final phrase: ". . . so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." In other words: the transfer flows both ways. Not only has my sin been transferred to Christ, but his righteousness is transferred to me. I can be in the world today in a Christ-like way, not by sheer force of will, but by the righteousness that Christ imparts. In the words of the Christmas carol: "God imparts to human hearts the wonders of His heaven." Absent this power of God to transform the heart, to make all things new, we might as well retreat to the prisons of mind and soul which have met our needs and served us adequately in the past. But equipped with the power of God to make all things new, we go forth with faithfulness and commitment.

We might imagine our situation like that of a child, getting ready for school on a May day like Friday, when it was rainy and blustery and cold, but the winter coats have already been packed-away for the season. The child puts on a thin summer windbreaker, and heads for the door.

"You can't go out that way," his mother says. "You'll freeze, and get soaked, and catch a cold. Take that little thing off."

So he does. The child hands the flimsy jacket to his mother. But if that's all a parent offers, a stern warning that the child has to change, then that's no help at all, and it's certainly not loving. The next step is for the mother to bring forth a heavy, warm coat, more suited to protect the child from the elements, and to help him put that on.

Too often our false idea of God is like of a parent who tells us what we're doing wrong, and insists that we stop it, but leaving us on our own to figure-out what to do next. Scripture teaches that this is not the way of God. The way of God is to take from us all those flimsy things of this world in which we wrap ourselves, but which in truth provide no real protection, and then to surround us with His power and strength, such that we may go forth fit to face the storms of life. This is the great transfer which defines our relationship with God. God takes our sin and weakness upon himself. Then God clothes us in righteousness.

So, the question comes to us: "how then shall I live?" "What kind of person am I going to be?" And it comes to us each morning with particularity and urgency – "what kind of person am I going to be . . . today?"

This time of year the air is congested with commencement addresses. It's a peculiar form of public speaking, since almost without exception no one in attendance wants to hear it. But occasionally an artful speaker captures the moment perfectly. A few years ago Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer spoke at Stanford, and although Breyer isn't known for eloquence, yet both his purpose and his prose were unexcelled when said to the graduates that day:

Money can vanish overnight. Power disappears. That bubble reputation can evaporate. But character – personal integrity – is a rock that is secure and that no one can take from you.

Breyer is Jewish, but speaking here out of the deepest streams of spirituality shared by Christians and Jews. Recall the passage read this morning from the Hebrew Scriptures, Leviticus chapter 20, verse 26: “You shall be holy to me,” says the Lord; “for I the Lord am holy, and I have set you apart.” To be “set apart” doesn't include a warrant for exclusivism or self-righteousness of any kind. Rather, it's God's counsel to turn away from the things the world counts as important – money, power, reputation and the esteem of others – and to decide for oneself what kind of person to be.

God grant that we may be among those who resist any inkling to burrow back into false securities we have known, and instead to go forth freely by the courage and imagination of the Holy Spirit.