

Sermon Discussion Information

Sermon Series: "Choosing Personal Transformation"

Sermon Title: "Inward and Outward Journey"

Sermon Text: John 17:18

Listener's Journey: I want my listener to understand that the inward and outward life are dynamically connected whether we like it or not and that a primary goal of spiritual formation is to help us lead an undivided life that chooses, moment by moment, between that which gives life and that which deals death.

Unique Quotes from Sermon:

Christians are familiar with the "Great Commission" (Go into all the world) and the "Great Commandment" (Love God and neighbor). There is a third "great" in the New Testament that is often overlooked. John 17:18 is considered the "Great Call". Jesus was praying to God saying: "[Father] As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world." (John 17:18)

The Greek word for the adverb "As" is "Kathos", which means 'according to'. So, Jesus was praying that God sends his disciples into the world according to, or in the same way that he was sent. This means that we are invited to consider the many invitations that Jesus himself opened up on his formational pathway of his life from birth to childhood, to young adult, to baptism, to desert experience, through multiple experiences in his itinerate ministry, to the passion week and ultimately through the resurrection.

We benchmark and imitate Jesus less in the interest of propagating this or that Christian religious movement and more in the interest of becoming transformed people of God. We seek to be transformed people who, while moving toward our best selves, love God and neighbor with a fierce resiliency that *binds* the ongoing wounds of society, *bends* the moral arc of the universe toward justice, and *benevolently spreads wide* the message of God's grace like the indiscriminate seed sower of Jesus' parables on the kingdom of God.

Over twenty centuries of time many brilliant Christ followers have embraced the imitation of Jesus as a formational model. And, they have proposed everything from simple to complex formational systems. These approaches, like the two roads of Robert Frost' poem "The Road Not Taken," are diverse pathways to help Christians be spiritually formed. And, the Christian movement keeps creating new pathways because none of these is complete or an end unto itself, and like a camera taking pictures of something from different viewing angles, each model gives us some needed aspect of what it means to be transformed into embodied love over our lifetimes.

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Philip Jakob Spener, born in the midst of the war, came to insist that a life of practical Christianity was more important than the constant engagement in "theological disputation." Spener and his followers promoted small group Bible studies, the development of lay ministry, simple direct preaching, and a refusal to engage in theological knife fighting.

John Weborg, another well-known modern Covenant theologian frames pietism in the following terms: "Pietists want to shorten the distance between appearance and reality, between external and internal, between faith believed and the "believing" faith... Faith, hope and love are not just what one has; they are also what one is in relation to others."¹

At this point I need to call out a major difference between the pietistic tradition and the holiness tradition in regards to spiritual formation. And, friends, I am sorry if you came here today expecting a short three-point devotional sermon. I promise to not be long, but I just can't restrain myself setting a banquet table in

¹ John Weborg, "Pietism: a Question of Meaning and Vocation"

front of us on this important topic! And, because people look at the Bible and arrive at very different conclusions as to how it is to guide our lives, some conversations require digging into the layers and sorting out that which is most life giving and like Christ, the center point of our faith.

The holiness tradition is this long held pattern of teaching that urges Christians to grow toward moral perfection. On a continuum, there are some who say you can achieve moral perfection this side of death and there are others who say you can never be perfect, but you simply need to try for all of your life anyway because God will love you more, the more perfect you are. Keep “running the race” is the credo. And, at either end of the holiness theology continuum, perfection and performance against certain theological frameworks about God and the human experience are required.

The problems here are many. At the risk of generalizing, the first would be the sense that you are being asked to live in a doom loop hamster wheel of never meeting God’s expectations nor one another’s approval. The second is that holiness framed in these terms (because holiness can be framed in different terms than this! Like, holiness is about intimacy with God, not moral perfectionism) makes an implicit commitment of the spiritual formation pathway to a meritocracy-reward-and-punishment-based understanding of God’s relationship to the creation.

The Covenant and pietistic formational practice walks a different path. The pietistic experience emphasizes the spiritual path in quite generous terms that include a commitment to reading Scripture in community to discern its meaning for our lives, expecting to encounter God’s real presence in our devotional experiences, letting our love for God move us to holistic mission in our world, and seeing connection to one another as a critically important aspect of spiritual vitality.

I find myself warmed to the invitations of pietism if for no other reason than I can’t make sense, and need help living as a Christ follower, in our fractured and tribal world. Pietism with its brushes of Christian mysticism, sees the false self as equal to the “separate self,” and encourages us to see union with God, and wild love for our neighbor, not private perfection, as the goal.

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The mechanics of the Möbius strip are mysterious, but its message is clear: whatever is inside us continually flows outward to help form, or deform, the world-and whatever is outside us continually flows inward to help form, or deform, our lives. The Möbius strip is like life itself. here, ultimately, there is only one reality.”

The inward and outward life are connected whether we like it or not and we have two key questions to keep in front of always: “What are we sending from within ourselves out into the world, and what impact is it have ‘out there’?” “What is the world sending back at us, and what impact is it having “in here”?” While living these questions we have the power to choose, moment by moment, between that which gives life and that which deals death.

Three Discussion Questions:

1. What models of spiritual growth have you heard of, and what have you actually worked on to grow spiritually? (good and bad) (Personal sharing)
2. Of the many models discussed in the sermon, what is most appealing to you and why? (Exploring the text)
3. Taking into mind the reality of life as a “Möbius strip” what have you taken in this week that has brought good or evil into your life? What is your plan for ingesting that energy and transforming it so that as it leaves you it can be transformed into life and not death? (Direct application)