

In our Thursday discussion about the life and work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, someone said something that I hear quite often around these parts. I agree with it and yet it also makes me uncomfortable. They said, “Being a Christian isn’t what you believe, it’s how you live.” “Being a Christian isn’t what you believe, it’s how you live.”

Today’s parable helps me understand why it makes me uncomfortable. Most of the faults of the Pharisees came from over-striving to serve God. This Pharisee was living a fine upstanding life. He kept all his religious and social obligations and contributed regularly to the upkeep and functioning of the temple. To all intents and purposes he was living the way he should. But there was a big problem.

The problem was that it was all done in his own strength. He had forgotten that all he had, including his life, his advantages and his money, came from God. From Jesus’ perspective, the Pharisee was missing the point. He thought that being a holy person was all about how he lived. He didn’t realize that loving God with all our heart and mind and soul brings about an inner attitude of humility. There were many people in his community who were not so advantaged and so were not able to do all the things he did. They didn’t have the same privileges of income, education and family. But they were just as beloved of God.

That’s why Jesus contrasts him with the tax collector. Tax collectors worked for the Romans and usually charged quite a bit extra in order to pay their own salaries, plus some. They were hated and distrusted by the common people. This tax collector lived a life that was in distinct contrast to the Pharisee. He was not in any way a pillar of society. The Pharisee certainly thought that he was despicable.

Yet his prayer was more pleasing to God.

To our ears it sounds rather sycophantic and overly dramatic. He beat his breast and wouldn’t even look up to heaven... it sounds like the miserable worm theology that many of us grew up with but have left behind.

Yes, it’s overblown to our ears and I don’t for a moment think that God wants us to copy the tax collector’s behavior. I suspect this is an occasion when Jesus used hyperbole – perhaps he got a good laugh from the crowd for the vivid caricature. I think he painted it like a cartoon, the upright, well-bred Pharisee and the nasty tax collector who should definitely be on his knees begging God for mercy, and then the surprising caption, “The tax collector got God’s ear, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Let’s go back to that initial comment, “Being a Christian isn’t what you believe, it’s how you live.” Before the Protestant reformation, the church taught that you could be saved by what you did, in other words by your own power, whether that was the power of your fine upstanding life or the power of your financial donations. The central insight of the Reformation was that we are saved – we are reconciled with God – not by our actions but by the grace of God. The reformers replaced the idea that being a Christian was what *you* do with the idea that being a Christian is what *God* does.

So maybe we should change it to “Being a Christian isn’t what you believe, it’s God’s love and grace being lived out in your life.” It’s certainly not as snappy off the tongue but I think it’s closer to the truth.

So how are God’s love and grace lived out in our lives?

I really think it has to start inside with the renewal of our minds. And that is a cooperative effort between us and the Holy Spirit.

You won’t be surprised when I say that this renewal involves humility. Just like the tax collector we get to acknowledge our dependence on God. We are dependent upon God for everything. When we think that we can live without God we are kidding ourselves. When we think that our skill, our ability, our education, our money provide all that we need we are delusional. That’s the way the Pharisee thought. He thought he had it all figured out.

Often it takes a crisis to bring us to a point where we ask for God’s intervention, and then when the crisis has passed, we move on and it’s business as usual. I think the third of the twelve steps puts it very well. “Decided to turn my life and will over to God, as I understood God.” That’s what we get to do and we probably have to do it again and again. It’s called surrender, which is a very un-American term. But it is the very core and root of our spiritual life.

Unless we are turning our lives and wills over to God we are kidding ourselves that we are demonstrating the grace and love of God. Which isn’t to say that God is going to go away or that God can’t appear in our lives. But the central decision of our faith is to turn our lives and wills over to God. Everything else flows from that basic principal.

But it is a cooperative effort, so just because we turned everything over to God doesn’t mean we get to stay in bed and let the Holy Spirit live our lives. We are active partners in this project of demonstrating God’s love and grace. And our little egos continue to get involved and try to make it all about me. We continue in our old patterns and so we have to consciously look at them and through prayer, reflection and action make changes by the grace of God. The process of sanctification, of becoming holy, is a long process. We are rarely transformed overnight.

In fact we often have to come back to this same place and decide once again to turn our lives and our wills over to God. The good news is that we know that Christ has prepared the way for us, that it is possible for us to live in the joy and love of the resurrection every day.

Part of this transformation is internal, as we change the negative thought forms, the selfish and judgmental thinking that tends to rule our minds. But that is only part of it. What motivates us drives our thinking and our thinking drives our actions. If we are motivated by our desire to be in right and deep relationship with God then it will be easier to change our thoughts and to change our actions so that in all we do we are sharing God’s love.

Yet it’s still a decision. Living out God’s love and grace needs an effort of will, a choice. Without that, we get swept along by the currents of our culture, what Jesus called “the world” and our best intentions get suffocated. Because it’s a two way street – we influence those around us but we are influenced by them and by what we hear and see and read.

Our decision to live out God's love and grace will probably take us places we didn't expect, have us talking to people we aren't drawn to and engaging in activities that require effort. Because we will be following Jesus. As his disciples, with our lives and wills turned over to God, we start to live the life that was intended for us. The life that gives life. The life that overflows with the joy of the Spirit, a joy which is not dependent upon external circumstances but comes from the well of God's love deep within our hearts.

And from that life comes a gracious generosity. No longer are we caught up in feelings of lack and scarcity. We are able to give ourselves, our love, our wealth easily and with an open hand because we know that God's blessings cannot be hoarded but increase as they are shared. Love and grace are not limited but expand exponentially as we share them with all comers.

We are not Christians because of what we believe or what we do, but because of God's grace transforming us and God's love loving through us.

So let's come back again to the original statement. "Being a Christian isn't what you believe, it's how you live." Now I can see that the big problem with this is that it actually doesn't mention God. And without God we are not Christians. What defines us is not our beliefs but the work of God's grace in our lives. The Pharisee had the "right" beliefs but was too full of himself to receive the grace. The tax collector knew that everyone thought he was despicable and that helped him receive the grace. The parable says he was justified. He was made right with God.

"Being a Christian isn't what you believe, it's God's grace transforming your life."

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