

Series: Words & Deeds Part 1: “They Matter”
“Ears, Eyes, And Hearts”
Jeremiah 28:5-9
Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18
Romans 6:12-23
Matthew 10:40-42

Many of us hold the notion that the better one thinks and the harder a person works, things detrimental for a person to live a full and blessed life will one day be overcome. Just work harder and smarter.

Four times in my 41 years as a pastor in the Presbyterian Church (USA), I have had the privilege of being a part of the *Presbyterian Panel* which is a group of randomly selected ministers, elders, and members several times. Over the course of a three-year period, this group responds to approximately twelve surveys, to give insight to what’s going on in the life of our denomination. One survey that grabbed my attention was about “Presbyterian Colleges and Universities.” One question stood out: “How important in your selection would be the potential for Christian growth offered by the school?” 79% of the pastors, 63% of the elders, and 60% of the members responded affirmatively. Geneva Presbyterian Church is not a college, yet I pose a similar question: “How important in your selection of a church would be the potential for Christian growth?” Do you expect Christian growth to be a part of your experience here at Geneva?

Jeremiah 28:5-9, Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18, Romans 6:12-23, Matthew 10:40-42 endorse living the good news of the gospel in a challenging way not a sugar-coated version. The gospel well preached and taught, will foster prophetic conflict and competing visions. But one’s

illuminating relationship with God sorts through the conflicts and visions. A person who follows God experiences the worst and best of life, all the while growing in faith and impacting the lives of others. Grace provided by God incarnate, Jesus Christ, does a work for each one of us that we cannot do for ourselves.

Romans 6:12-23 asserts a strong mandate for Christian growth. The text makes three points. First, verse 12 states the expectation. Do not let sin exercise dominion in and over your life. There is freedom from gossip, hoarding, sexual immorality, anger, and cheating to name a few sins. Freedom from a rule or obligation “never leads to a flourishing life unless it is linked with “freedom for” a higher, heart-felt commitment.” Second, verse 13 delineates what we are to stop doing and start doing. Stop doing sin with the “members,” the parts, of your body. What you do with your mind, emotions, words, thoughts, and extremities is critical. Start speaking words and doing works of righteousness. This then is working for the common good. And third, verse 14 gives the reason why we can succeed at Christian growth. Through obedience, grace kicks in. God is faithful. Change happens.

Matthew 10:40-42 are Jesus’s words about the stranger; the one who is not like us. And Jesus defines himself as a stranger. Many Christians like to believe that they do not define the community of faith in which they participate by letting in only those who are like themselves. However, we often do just that. We like to be around people who are like us in religious, political, and social convictions. We struggle with those who are different.¹

¹In the three paragraphs of textual analysis above, I have benefited from the thinking of Robert A. Ratcliff, Stephen Breck Reid, J. Clinton McCann Jr., Renata Furst, Dean K. Thompson, Mihee Kim-Kort, and Nibs Stroupe in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby and Carolyn J. Sharp, editors, *Connections, Year A, Volume 3* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 102-104, 104-107, 108-110, 111-113, 113-115, 116-117, and 118-119.

Jesus asks us to investigate the quality of welcome that we offer to one another. When we welcome the stranger, we welcome none other than Jesus. Diana Butler Bass writes, “Our grandparents and parents may have been very good at the doing of religion, the how of faith, but, in their world, there was no need to engage the interior questions of meaning...In a fractured individualistic culture, there exist no compelling reasons to enact familial vocations in work and prayer and many compelling reasons to depart from old ways.”² To welcome the stranger requires nothing less than an engagement with the interior questions of meaning. And when we do not focus on the interior questions of meaning, we often fall prey to sin having dominion over our lives. Our words and deeds become abusive to the stranger. Do not let sin exercise dominion in and over your life. In Christ, there is freedom from gossip, hoarding, sexual immorality, anger, and cheating to name a few sins.

A transformed life occurs when we expect Christian growth from the church. There is new life in Jesus. We integrate our new identity with the corresponding words and deeds of our identity in Christ. Harold Masback, pastor of The Congregational Church in New Canaan, Connecticut writes, “Since being precedes doing, better being may now naturally issue forth in better doing.”³ Jesus lives his life in and through each of his followers.

Jesus lives his life in and through us for the sake of the stranger. Brenda Salter McNeil, the author of *Roadmap to Reconciliation*, writes, “Reconciliation is an ongoing spiritual process involving forgiveness, repentance and justice that restores broken relationships and systems to

²Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion* (New York, New York: HarperOne, 2012), 141.

³Harold E. Masback III in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 163.

reflect God’s original intention for all creation to flourish.”⁴ Yes, make the story of “the other” a part of your story and yours theirs. Journey together, in reconciliation.

On this Fourth of July Weekend, we lift up the value of freedom. Yet, many of us are put off by Paul’s admonition in the Romans text for us to live as slaves to Christ, a poignant statement about Christian growth, particularly with our country’s civic creed of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” We are forced to rethink the intended and unintended consequences of arbitrary freedom and to reexamine the values we hold, the good and the bad, as we celebrate being American.⁵

Do you expect the church to assist you in Christian growth? I hope so! Jesus invites you to participate in the universal story of God’s redemptive unconditional love, acceptance, and grace. Be authentic. Christian growth occurs when you reach into your own brokenness and the brokenness of others, seeking reconciliation with God, self, and others. Therein lies the complexity of living Christianly. Truly, the Spirit will give us ears to hear, eyes to see, and hearts to receive so that we continue in conversion, transformation, and welcome. Amen.

*This sermon was preached on Sunday, 02 July 2023
by the Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh at Geneva Presbyterian Church in Laguna Woods, California*

Copyright © 2023
Steven M. Marsh
All rights reserved.

⁴Brenda Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 22.

⁵Ideas adapted from Harold E. Masback III in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 183.