

Getting to Know Jesus, the Christ

Sept 14, 2014

Barriers to Accepting Salvation - Distractions

**Psalm 98:1-5 & Galatians 5:22-23
(277, 358, 399, 400)**

This will probably come as a surprise to many of you,
but I am easily distracted.
I'm curious and love learning,
so new ideas and perspectives get my attention every time.
I've got a fair bit of energy,
so I'm happy to keep exploring a wide range of possibilities.
I like conversing with people,
so I'm open to listening for different ways of seeing things.

Now, I realize that those can be pretty positive ways of being distracted.
There are some pretty severe negative consequences of this tendency as well.

I tend, at times, to procrastinate and do things at the last minute or late.
I tend, at times, to lose sight of my core calling and become scattered.
I tend, at times, to satisfy basic needs in shallow and/or rapid ways.
I tend, at times, to try and manipulate things through verbal prowess.

Throughout his writings, Paul talks about these consequences
as the sins of the flesh – *sarz* in the Greek of his day.
It's another Greek word rich in meaning.
It can mean just what we mean by *flesh* – the muscles & sinews on our bones.
It can also mean the whole body.
When Paul uses it, perhaps influenced by the Greek philosophy of Epicureanism,
he often relates it to uncontrolled sexuality and aggression,
to the excess use of the flesh as a means of domination and control.
That's his core concern in the list of the works of the flesh
that comes just before our Memorize and Ponder text this morning –
fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery,
enmities, strife, jealousy, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.
These are serious distractions that have no place in the commonwealth of heaven
because they belittle, abuse, and exploit other human beings.
In doing so, we offend our Maker and debase ourselves.
God made us and gifted us for a different purpose, a different way of being.
That is Paul's primary positive point in using the contrast between flesh and Spirit.

To get stuck in these shallow ways of the flesh
is to be distracted from the calling each of us has,
with our own particular and potent gifts, to be blessings in this world.

The qualities of being that flow from our acceptance of salvation,
that gift of reconciliation with God we enjoy in Jesus Christ,
are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity,
faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

I found myself particularly drawn to the virtue of self-control
in my pondering this week.

It's really at the core of Paul's insight on salvation,
on our reconciliation with God in Jesus Christ,
on our restoration to God's original intent for human beings.

If we don't make our restored relationship with God the centre of our life,
if we don't focus on the gifts of the Spirit Paul has simply listed,
if we don't pay attention primarily to the energy of God in our lives,
then the multitude of distractions that bombard us every day
will literally drive us crazy.

We will be drawn and torn in so many directions
that our lives will be out of control.

The self that can control these urgent distractions
is the self that has found its deep and true rest
in friendship with Jesus, the Christ.

I got the York University alumni magazine this past week.
There was an article on the research of Stuart Shanker
in the fields of psychology and philosophy.

Shanker explores the dynamics of children's brains.
His concern is that a number of forces have been unleashed
that leave our children – and ourselves – excessively stressed.

He and his colleagues are developing techniques
that help children learn to become calm, alert, and focused
in the midst of a bombardment of distracting stress.

They are teaching them the habits of self-control.
Adult modelling of this virtue, this habit, is crucial in the child's development.

Shanker sees distractions depleting our energy,
and in that state of depleted energy, self-control suffers.

His entire work is based on the conviction that social betterment comes

When all the children in a society
are given the opportunity to develop their full potential –
physical, intellectual, social, emotional, and spiritual –
then children and adults will flourish in peace and justice.

I like Shanker's phrase "calm, alert, and focused."
I think that captures what God gives us
in the salvation that we enjoy through Jesus, the Christ.
I think, in our moments of greatest calm and clarity,
that is what we want most for ourselves, our children, and our world.

But how do we get there?
How do we stay there?
How do we encourage others to develop such habits of self-control
in companionship with God's Spirit.

It begins by accepting the reality of God's loving presence
that is around us and throughout us
every minute of the day in every breath we take.
In Jesus Christ we see most clearly
that reality in its human form,
God in the flesh, full of grace and truth.
In Jesus, we see the calm, the alertness, and the focus
that come from an intimate friendship with God.

Those virtues are sustained and developed
through prayer, conversation, and service.
Think of the Christian activists we admire today –
Martin Luther King, Mother Theresa, Nelson Mandela, Pope Francis –
they all exercise self-control through prayer, conversation, and service
that generate calm, alertness, and focus.

Different disciplines of self-control will work best for different people.
What I've found works best for me
is to have a short, but personally powerful, vision statement,
a statement of how I want to show up as a blessing.
Currently, that statement is worded like this:

Provoking SMARTer conversations that generate flourishing communities

Repeating those words remind me of God's loving, supportive presence
and open me to his ways of making me calm, alert, and focused in my mission.

Here at Brentwood Presbyterian, that statement is worded like this:

Nourishing souls to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ

I fervently pray that those words remind us all of God's loving, supportive presence
and open us to his ways of making us calm, alert, and focused in our mission.