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Sermon Series:
“Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations:
VI. Doing What We Want to Become”

A sermon by Mark E. Diehl

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

February 16, 2014

Matthew 20:20-28; Romans 12:1-8

I want to express my appreciation to you for hearing me out in this series on the *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*! My hope is that this series provides some potent ideas about the life and direction FPC can pursue in the future.

The practices Robert Schnase has included in his book (*Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*) are not new, and they are certainly not unfamiliar to you. First Presbyterian Church knows about hospitality, worship, faith development, mission and generosity. Not only do you *know* about these practices, you also *exercise* them as well!

I believe that the critical contribution which Robert Schnase makes to congregations that would seek to be more fruitful, more faithful, more effective in the work of God’s kingdom, is this: he portrays the *level of commitment* by the congregation which yields such results, and he characterizes the *specific attitude* which must attend that commitment.

The level of commitment is demonstrated among the church membership in two ways: the consistency in applying the five practices in all areas of the church’s life, and a broadly based ownership of each practice by all members of a congregation.

Those who implement these practices are not merely a handful of specially gifted people—everyone practices them. And these practices are found not only in one area of church life, but in them all—in worship and fellowship, in Sunday Schools and Bible studies, in committee meetings and youth gatherings, in outreach and mission.

The attitude that attends and characterizes this commitment is one of serving the needs of others rather than putting the needs of ourselves or the institution first.

Schnase is calling the church to be congruent with the Lord it follows and to integrity in the church's life. The descriptors he uses with these practices emphasize this congruence: radical, passionate, intentional, risk-taking, extravagant.

Schnase is in good company. In our texts this morning, the Apostle Paul writes about the commitment required by people of faith. We are not to die as an expression of our obedience, but *we are to live*. We are to live fully.

Paul calls the Christian community to worship by the giving of ourselves, even our bodies, in service to God. It involves a transformation, a changing of the way we view things, a renewing of our minds to see things from God's perspective.

Do you have any interest in being transformed? Quite frankly, some of us have no interest in changing.

A couple years back, I visited a man who had just celebrated his 95th birthday. I made the observation that he must have seen many things change during his lifetime. He said, "Yes, I have, and I voted against every one of them!"

Do you have any interest in being transformed? If you are like me, you might want some answers first.

You might want to know, "Is it going to hurt?" You and I might ask, "Will all the effort really make any difference?" We might ask, "What am I being transformed into?" Those are legitimate questions.

Several years ago in Charlotte, two prominent Christians were speaking the same weekend but at different venues. One was Joel Osteen and the other was Elias Chacour. You could not find two people more different.

Osteen is described as an upbeat televangelist whose message includes assurances that God wants to reward Christians' faith with financial well-being. In the newspaper, a succession of front-page articles appeared in weekend editions of the religious section of the newspaper for him. Some 40,000 people attended his multimedia extravaganza.

On the other hand, there was Elias Chacour. Chacour is a three-time Nobel Prize nominee who has worked tirelessly and sacrificially for peace in the Middle East among Christian Palestinians, Jews, and Muslims for 38 years. Barely a mention was made in the religious press. It is probably optimistic to say that a thousand heard his message.

Both claimed a Christian foundation and gave a Gospel message based on Jesus Christ, but their perspectives could not be more different; their practices could not be further apart.

Do you wish to be transformed? If so, what will characterize your transformation? Will we be self-focused and seeking our success and comfort and well-being? Or will we be other-focused? The Christian community must be discerning about the nature of the transformation it seeks.

Do you know the difference between a living sacrifice and a dead one? A living sacrifice keeps crawling off the altar. It would be easier if we were dead sacrifices—we would stay put.

In the Gospel lesson, the disciples demonstrate how easy it is to get off the altar, to become sidetracked. James and John want to sit in positions of honor, and so they politic and plead and connive to arrange it. The result of their self-serving pursuit is that everyone else gets upset. And Jesus sets the record straight about the attitude and posture of those who would join him in his kingdom: "Rulers of the Gentile

world lord it over them and their great ones are tyrants to them. It will not be so among you, but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; for the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

What will it take for First Presbyterian, for you and me, to be so transformed, to find ourselves living with the same agenda and attitude as Jesus Christ, to serve and give our lives away to others?

At its heart, the Christian community is to be transformed, to be more like Christ in affection, in action, in character.

One of the touchstones of genuine transformation for the individual and for the community is that what matters most to Jesus Christ matters most to us.

Walter Brueggemann, Old Testament scholar and theologian, suggests that people, institutions, and culture live on the basis of scripts. Scripts are the messages we believe, that we live by, that validate meaning and purpose. Those scripts may be implicit or explicit, recognized or unconscious. Everyone has been scripted through the process of nurture and formation and socialization. Brueggemann says that the dominant scripting of our society is technological, therapeutic, consumer militarism on both the liberal and conservative wings of our political spectrum.

The script of consumer militarism—that by pursuing it, we will be safe and happy—has failed. And Brueggemann says that the task of ministry is to de-script that cultural script among us. We need to enable people to relinquish a world that no longer exists and probably never did exist. And that requires an alternate community to intentionally articulate an alternate script of what gives meaning and security and happiness to the human family. The alternative script is rooted in the Bible and is enacted through the tradition of the Church.

Often well-meaning Christians have a preconceived notion of what that script, what our transformation, should look like. Typically, the pattern is for others to look like us, and for the experiences of others to duplicate our own experience.

Why should this world end up looking and acting just the same? A bunch of folks with the same color of skin and the same thoughts and the same values? How boring and tepid is that?! How limiting is such an expectation for the God of all creation and infinite diversity?

We don't need people who look like us, who act like us! We need people who are transformed into the image of Jesus Christ—into his character, into his loving action, into his passionate embrace of the hurt and alienated and poor of this world.

I wish I could display this in front of you. It would show the many facets of Jesus Christ, of his life and his continuing work. In that display would be much we could easily embrace. At the same time, many other things would stretch and challenge us to grow beyond where we are now.

- Justice and mercy.
- Tenderness and strength.
- Love and accountability.
- Life and sacrifice.
- Humility and advocacy.
- Compassion and confrontation.
- Surrender and steadfastness.
- Forgiveness and judgment.
- Peace and truth.
- Freedom and burden.
- Leader and servant.

In the person of Jesus Christ are all these paradoxes; realities held together that provoke a tension not easily resolved into one solution. The life of Jesus is something for us to live into. And that life takes on so many different expressions within each individual life found in the community of faith, and among many different communities of faith.

The motivations that get us there are as diverse as we are. It might be a deep love, a fear, the desire to become something different or more, a need to give. The motivation might be the search for knowledge and significance, the fight for equality or justice, the eradication of some disease or evil.

The motivation might be the resolution of a human need or predicament, the unveiling of beauty and form. For God, for humankind, for ourselves, for the environment, for creation, for beauty and art and science—any of these, all of these can be motivations by which we please God.

In that wonderful movie *Chariots of Fire*, a runner by the name of Eric Liddell intends to participate in the Olympics. Born in China to missionary parents, Eric plans to return there as a missionary to continue his parents' work. But he is also a gifted athlete. Every running event in which he participates, he wins. His sister Jenny believes Eric is being sidetracked from God's deeper purpose by his silly pursuits of athleticism. In one scene, Jenny chides Eric, asking him to give up his quest for the Olympics. And Eric responds: "Jenny, I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run, I feel God's pleasure."

What has God made you good at? What are your gifts to be employed and pursued and enjoyed and utilized to please God? Sometimes we give up on ourselves because our motives are not pristine and pure; they are not devoid of self-interest. Yet if we would wait until our motives are pure, nothing would ever be accomplished.

Recovery programs like AA, and those in them, know the necessity, as well as the power, of seeing an alternate reality. One of the phrases often used in the 12-step community goes like this: "Fake it 'til you make it."

That statement need not be a self-deceiving affirmation. In Recovery programs, reality is critical to wholeness.

"Fake it 'til you make it" is an affirmation that what I have been in the past no longer must dictate what my future life will be.

That is the proclamation of the Gospel. God has given us a different vision and script for ourselves: a new life that is expansive and giving, one that reflects the very nature of Jesus.

The arts, particularly theatre, know the power of shedding the known or old self. In order to creatively engage and inhabit a character in a play, the actor must empty herself of those things not in keeping with the person she is characterizing.

One of the tools actors use to learn this is something called the mask. The mask provides a place to try on new ways of acting and of being, without past or present experience interfering. For the actor, the mask can be a place of transformation.

In theatre throughout the world, the mask typically does not hide the reality of a person. The mask instead reflects the true reality of that person. Once in a while, the mask is utilized in the theatre to hide some secret about the character being portrayed, to keep hidden from the actor and the audience something that cannot yet be disclosed.

One such story is that of a wicked man who falls in love with a beautiful and genuinely good woman. The wicked man is well known in the community for his evil ways, and his appearance reflects the wickedness that resides in his heart. This man learns about the beauty and goodness of a woman, and from a distance he spies her and falls in love. He knows she will have nothing to do with him because of his evil doings and ugly countenance.

So he devises a plan. He employs the best mask-maker in the land who fashions a mask of great realism. The mask depicts a man of great honor and courage, not merely handsome but of warmth and love. The evil man begins to wear the mask and create a new identity for himself. He knows he must act in ways good and honorable to win her affection and love. And so he begins to act in that way.

The beautiful and genuinely good woman hears about this new man in the community. They meet. She falls in love with him, and they plan to be married.

But on the night before the marriage, at a banquet in their honor, the mask-maker appears. He reveals the charade of the evil man and confronts him in front of the gathered crowd, including his beloved. In shame, he removes the mask. His beloved looks at him, as do all the guests.

And then, they begin to laugh. Their laughter is not in derision—it is in surprise and joy! You see, the evil man behind the mask has been transformed—his countenance is just the same as the mask he removed. He is a new man, not merely in appearance, but in heart!

The mask is a space and a place of grace!

In conforming himself to the object of his love, in taking on the attributes necessary to win his beloved, in acting in ways consistent with what he desperately wanted to be, he became someone completely new and different. He was transformed.

What do you here at First Presbyterian want to become? We have a model, a pattern, a standard to live into in Jesus Christ. We need not live by the faulty and corrupt scripts of our culture or their cheap imitations in a religious guise of success and self-fulfillment.

The next step is to take what we know and use it. You and I have the opportunity to do what it is we want to become, by grace to live into a place of transformation.

Our sermon series has laid out sound practices that can transform a community of faith by their consistent employment *Radical hospitality* in welcoming others and anticipating their needs; *Passionate worship* that believes something at stake for the world when we gather; *Intentional faith development* that deepens and broadens our lives; *Risk-taking mission and service* that reaches out to those most desperate with no guaranteed return for us; *Extravagant generosity* that reflects the mercy and grace of our God.

The ball is in our court.

Primary resource and reference:

Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, Robert Schnase, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2007