

"Lives Changed for Good"

Isaiah 55:6-9; Mark 6:7-12

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

June 12, 2016 – 4th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

Jesus once sent out his twelve disciples in teams of twos into the villages of the surrounding countryside. The New Revised Standard Version says, "So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent." Another translation by J. B. Phillips puts it this way, "So they went out and proclaimed that [people] should change their whole outlook."

Jesus made it clear that it was not enough to simply regret one's past, though that is a starting point. True repentance must bring about a change in the entire direction of a person's life. When this happens we can no longer look at life as though it were a mirror in which we occupy the center of attention. Rather, we view life as through a window. We may see a bit of ourself in reflection, but most of our attention is focused on what lays beyond.

Some years after Jesus sent out his twelve, Paul wrote a letter to the young church in Ephesus. It was Paul, you'll remember, whose early purpose in life had been the destruction of Christianity. But he experienced a most remarkable change of outlook after undergoing a profound spiritual experience along the Damascus road.

He writes: "By the death of Christ we are set free, that is, our sins are forgiven. How great is the grace of God, which he gave to us in such large measure!"

As fast as Paul had been moving in one direction in life, now he was suddenly going full speed in the opposite. His life was turned around. He lived for a new purpose. His goals were all different. His relationships with people took on a new dimension. He was a completely changed man.

Terry Cummings was a professional basketball player with the San Antonio Spurs and several other NBA teams. In his professional career he scored almost 20,000 points. His early life, however, was anything but ideal. Like many others in his situation, this could have locked him into a hopeless future. It didn't, but only because something altered his whole outlook.

He recalls it in this way: "I grew up in the inner city of Chicago in a rough public housing project named Cabrini Green. For many young people, the neighborhood determines what they will be when they grow up. I can tell you it doesn't have to be that way.

"In my early teens there were a lot of police cars and jail cells for me. But at sixteen all that changed. I knew there had to be a major turn-around. I had heard about Jesus Christ and what he would do for me if I accepted him into my life. I knew this was a commitment I had to make. Many people had told me about Christ, but I had to accept him on my own.

He continues, "If you know God wants you to be something, apply yourself to achieving it. I've learned that knowing what God wants you to do in your life is like having a road map to get to

a place you've never been before. Without him you'll never know where you're supposed to go or how to get there."

Powerful words from a man who had a life-altering experience. He came to have an entirely new outlook on life, and that guides him now longer after his playing days gave ended.

Another example. Jeb Stuart Magruder was a young lawyer whose career had taken off rapidly and led to his being named deputy director of Richard Nixon's 1972 campaign staff, the Committee to Re-elect the President. Working as number two man to the former Attorney General, John Mitchell, Magruder was in heady company with some of the most powerful people in the country.

Following a bungled break-in at Democratic headquarters in the Watergate office building, things started to go downhill swiftly for Jeb Magruder. He was called to testify before the Congressional Watergate Committee that was investigating if the campaign committee had distributed money to the would-be burglars.

In April of 1974 Magruder admitted that he perjured himself as a witness in the subsequent Watergate trial. He also implicated Mitchell and John Dean for their parts in the break-in and cover-up. The next month he was sentenced to a federal penitentiary after pleading guilty to obstruction of justice.

I first met Jeb Magruder after he had served his sentence, attended Princeton seminary, and was called as pastor of a Columbus church. The man I got to know was certainly a far different person from the cocky and brash young man who lied before Congress and the courts. From being a regular in the Oval Office, Jeb now looked completely at ease in his church office. Here was a man who was totally changed.

Hearing of others, and the changes they made, raises some valid questions about our lives, too. Most of us don't have to make that 180 degree turn in whole direction that some must do, but there are likely areas of our life that require attention. There are parts of ourselves that are incongruent with the rest of ourselves. There are places where we have not yet stepped up to be the better person we can and should be. Here change needs to take place.

Change always begins with self-inventory. In one breath we may talk as though nothing matters but us, and everything else exists for our personal convenience. In the next moment we speak as though we don't matter at all, that we are helpless to affect the course of life, so why even try? So which is it?

Jesus challenges both our self-absorption and our self-doubt. He tells us that the whole human race matters, millions and millions of individuals, who each have worth in the sight of God. Jesus believed and lived this to the extent that he offered his life for the benefit of all people. He showed by his sacrifice that even a single life given over to love can alter the course of the world.

How we live is transformed once we understand the double message of the cross. On one hand, how can I feel worthless when I consider Jesus' giving himself over for me? And how, on the other, can I feel that I am the only one that counts when I realize that the love of Jesus encompasses all of humanity? I am important but then so are you.

This personal discovery of "I and thou" is comparable to the revolution in science when we learned that the sun is actually the center of the galaxy around which the earth revolves. Similarly, commitment to Jesus Christ brings about a total re-orientation of the soul. It is a personal and intentional commitment that puts God squarely in the center of our being.

Operating from this core of faith we can challenge worldly wisdom that holds you only get ahead in life by grabbing for all you can, at whatever cost it may entail. Instead, we discover satisfaction in direct proportion to how much we stop calculating everything on the basis of "What's in it for me?" Giving soon becomes even more important than receiving.

The original disciples were strongly drawn to Jesus. They enjoyed being with him, walking with him, witnessing as he healed the sick, and learning daily from him. He was both their teacher and leader. Great changes in them were being brought in so many ways.

Jesus didn't allow them to rest comfortably, though. He sent them out into the countryside, out of the reassuring circle, and up against a world that he warned would be inhospitable. They went out at his direction and announced that people should change their whole outlook. It was the only way that discipleship could work then, and it's the only way it works now.

If there are things holding us back, we need to break through our reservations and learn to trust more. The tighter we hold onto partial life, fearful of stepping out and failing to use the resources given us, the less we will live out our full calling. Jesus challenges us to take his outlook of life upon ourselves, with full trust in God, and then live and grow in the difference that makes.

So, do you need to change your outlook? The good news is that you can begin today. Have you been there and lost ground? Then you can recommit yourself right now. Do you need to work on particular areas? Identify them and pray for guidance.

You see, we're not called to perfection, but to faithfulness. So set yourself in the right direction, seek to be in touch where God through Jesus would direct you, and have the dedication to let faith be your guide.

Lives changed for good can truly overcome the darkness in the world. Lives changed for good can surely bring light to others who seek the way. This should not only be our personal agenda, but also the major duty of our work together as Jesus' Church.