

Our Destiny: Conformed to Christ's Image

From the sermon series: Until We Take the Shape of Christ

Text: Romans 8:11, 29

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Spring Lake, Michigan

Pentecost Sunday, June 7, 1987

Transcription of the spoken sermon

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he ...will give life to your mortal bodies also through the Spirit which dwells in you.

Romans 8:11

...predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brothers and sisters. Romans 8: 29

On this Pentecost Sunday we inaugurate a brief series of message entitled, "Until We Take The Shape of Christ." The message was expressed very beautifully in the song and movement of a moment ago, for it is true of us in our Christian experience that we are no longer what we were before, nor are we what we yet will be. We live in that tension between what we were and what we are destined to be. And what we are destined to be is to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, to be shaped like Jesus Christ. I would like that image to burn into your minds and consciousness for the next couple of weeks as we reflect on God's purpose for us who are diverse in so many ways and come from so many different places and who yet in Jesus Christ are called to a common destiny - to be shaped like him, to realize in our own human experience the marvelous freedom, the total confidence, the joy that was present in Jesus Christ, our Lord, who is the model of what God intends us to be.

Until we take the shape of Christ. We are people in process. We are people on the way. We are caught in that tension between what we were and what we yet will be and, in the meantime, we have the assurance that God is with us, for today we celebrate the gift, the presence of His Spirit. Today on Pentecost we celebrate the fact that the Eternal God has made Himself known to us in the face of Jesus Christ and, through the Spirit of Jesus, indwells us, permeating our every pore, pervasive throughout our world - that God is with us.

Pentecost is the day which brings to my mind more acutely than any other time the promise and the impossibility of my task. Pentecost is the day in which I know the impossibility of my task, for I point you to a reality and to an experience which is beyond the possibility of knowing and which is beyond the possibility of defining in rational discourse. There are many things that I could teach you and I try from week to week to speak in a reasonable and in a rational manner so that there is a kind of logic and movement and so that the message is understandable, so that there is some point to it that may be grasped and understood. And yet the impossibility of preaching is that I point you to an experience that is beyond knowing. Preaching is the attempt to express the inexpressible, and our attempt to know God is an attempt to comprehend that which is incomprehensible. There is no time like Pentecost in which I am more acutely aware of the impossibility of this task to speak rationally of that which lies beyond reason, to speak reasonably of that which can only make itself known to us, being apprehended by us beyond the intellectual grasp of which we are capable.

And yet, Pentecost is also the day when I am aware of the promise of preaching, because I know that the very God Who is beyond our knowing sometimes takes the expression which points beyond itself to the inexpressible and creates the experience of His presence. So, today we stand before the impossibility and the promise of preaching that points to God in order that God may be experienced and our lives, thereby, transformed.

Our religious practice is not just a social custom; it is not just a duty and an obligation. Our search after God, our quest for God is not just a matter of intellectual knowledge. We long for our lives to be changed, that our consciousness may be altered, that our inward life may be developed from the inside out, that we, as persons, may be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. And it is God's intention that that human transformation be occurring in the ongoing experience of our lives - that we may be changed until we take the shape of Christ.

It is a fascinating idea. The theme runs through the New Testament. A week from today on Trinity Sunday, we will look at that word from Paul to the Corinthians when he said that we all reflect as in a mirror the splendour of the Lord. We reflect as in a mirror the splendour of the Lord. Thus we are transformed into the likeness, from splendour to splendour. Such is the influence of the Lord Who is Spirit. And when he was writing to the Church at Galatians with whom he had a controversy and about whom he cared so deeply, he said at one point, "I am in travail, labor pains with you over again until you take the shape of Christ." And in this eighth chapter of Romans, he says that we have been predestined to be conformed to the image of Christ.

On this Pentecost Sunday I am pointing you to a great biblical truth which is beyond our comprehension – and beyond my ability to effect in your life, beyond our human possibility to trigger and to cause to happen. And yet a great mystery

that through the grace and the power of the living God, does happen and can happen and will happen. Our human personality will be invaded, penetrated, permeated by the presence of the Living God Who is Spirit and thus we will be transformed and moved on the way until, finally, we take the shape of Jesus Christ. We are no longer what we have been, and we are not yet what we will be, but we are a people in process who are being shaped by the Spirit of God more and more to reflect Jesus Christ, our Lord.

I stand before an impossible task, and yet I keep doing it because of the promise of Pentecost. In preaching, one is always pointing beyond one's possibility to a mystery that now and again, here and there, in this one and in that, erupts into the fullness of the presence of God.

A couple of weeks ago when I visited my son Joseph at his headquarters I saw what I expected to find - total chaos. There were computers all over the place, some of them were all together, some of them looked as though they had disgorged their bowels. There were computer chips and wires and cables and pieces and parts sprinkled liberally with empty Diet Coke cans and unwashed coffee cups. The scene of frantic activity in the midst of a setting that would make a mother cry. And as I saw it all, I thanked God that now my life is nearly over and I think I will escape having ever to touch one. But, as I looked at the bowels of the computer with their circuitry and all of their mystery, I said to myself, "If my life depended on it, I could master this technology. If my life depended on it, and I were willing to give the time and the energy to it, I could come to understand the computer inside and out." Being as old as I am, now in the springtime of senility, I don't even have to face that problem. But, I know that that mystery which is so terrifying to all of us who were born before 1950 - that mystery can be handled. That knowledge can be harnessed. It would be possible for all of us in this room, given the time and the energy and the instruction to master the mystery of the computer. Because finally there is no mystery. Finally it is reducible to the laws of electricity and whatever else is involved in the physics of that phenomenon.

Son Joseph is fortunate because he deals with a mystery that is solvable. His father is not so fortunate, because he deals with a mystery that will always elude him. And so, one is destined to face that impossibility. But on Pentecost, the possibility, the promise that God will make Himself known, that we will apprehend what we cannot comprehend, that we will catch what we simply cannot research and master, that God, the Living God, will be present to us changing us, shaping us after the image of Jesus Christ.

As we embark on that effort we are not left in a vacuum as though God has not spoken, as though there is no place to turn, as though we might just close our eyes in a vacuum and have something hit us or strike us or dawn upon us. What we are about as we look to that mystery is involved with a great tradition, with data that we can look at, that we can think about and reflect upon and believe in.

In the eighth chapter of Romans and the 11th verse, for example, we have Paul pointing to those events in our history that we have just so recently celebrated. He says there that if the Spirit Who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in us, then the Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead will also enliven our mortal bodies. And if you would read that text carefully, you would find all jumbled up God, Spirit, Jesus. If you read the New Testament carefully you will find that Paul is indiscriminate in his designation of the active presence of God in our midst. Sometimes he talks about the Spirit of God, sometimes he talks about the Spirit of Jesus, sometimes the Spirit of Christ Jesus, sometimes the Holy Spirit, sometimes just the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not a person apart from God, but simply the presence and the power of God active, here and now. And what Paul is saying in that 11th verse, which is the joy of our Pentecost celebration, is that as we have just celebrated the Easter glory and life from the dead in Jesus Christ effected by the Spirit, that same Spirit of God is present and available to us to move us from mortality to immortality, from death to life, to enliven us.

As we quest and thirst for experience of God, it is not as though there is not some hard data for us to look at and to be exposed to and to open ourselves up to. Paul is saying that something has happened in our history - God raised Jesus from the dead. God raised Jesus from the dead by Spirit, by breath. And that breath of God that raised Jesus is the breath of God that makes us alive. If we are in Christ, we have the Spirit - that's the promise. We have to take God at His word. We have to trust that, as we have entrusted our life to Jesus Christ, that the Spirit of Christ dwells in us, making us alive, giving us new life, getting us underway, moving us toward that high destiny which is to be shaped, conformed according to the image of Christ.

There is a tradition then, there is a biblical tradition, there is a story of the action of God through Jesus Christ our Lord. And as we hear that, as we open our lives to that, it is that story that becomes a vehicle, the message through which God dawns upon us and His grace is experienced.

Perhaps the most important book published this year, and the most critical look at America's society in a long time is the book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, by Allen Bloom of the University of Chicago. It is an especially close look at the college and university generation and the work that colleges and universities are doing. It's a very frightening analysis of the loss of clear thinking and philosophical understanding in our academic centers. He was at Cornell in the 60s when the students came and took over the administration and the campuses generally went wild, and his comment is that the students, through their rebellion, gained freedom of speech, only to find that they had nothing to say!

Now, we who are in the Christian tradition don't just babble on in a vacuum. There are certain data that is the raw material, the exposure to which puts us in the place where we might suddenly feel a fire in the belly and the dawning of life and the experience of God. Paul says the God Who raised Jesus from the dead

dwells in us by His Spirit, bringing life to our mortal bodies, in order to move us on the way to that high destiny which is ours. He says we know that all things, all of the ingredients of our lives, God works together for the good of those who love Him, those who are called according to His purpose. God knew His own before ever they were, and predestined that they should be conformed to the image of Christ in order that Jesus might be the elder brother with many brothers and sisters in the family of God.

Pentecost is about the presence of God, the Living God, full of Grace, here to transform us, to change us so that we can sing, "We're no longer what we were, nor are we what one day we shall be, but we are a people on the way," the most mature of us but a babbling infant. And yet, even a babbling infant is beginning to learn the language that one day will open the richness of all of history and the promise of heaven.

If the Spirit by which God raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, then that Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead will enliven you, will bring life to your mortal body, and you will be on the way, all the ingredients of your life working together for the realization of that purpose which is God's for you, that you might be shaped in the image of Jesus Christ.

Pentecost is the day of that great freedom and liberty of the children of God. Pentecost is that day when we break loose and celebrate our freedom, and celebrate our trust in the goodness of life and the future that God has for us. The Church of Jesus Christ has become, in its institutional form, the most conservative institution in the world. We had the graduates here at the first service, and as I saw them sitting before me, I realized what we do to the younger generation. We try to hold them down. We try to save them from all the pitfalls that we experienced. Believing in their potential and loving them so deeply, we would like so much to be able to guide them in very narrow tracks for the ultimate realization of their full humanity. But, of course it doesn't work that way. The Church has become a very conservative institution. There are those who don't even want to be a part of the Church, but who believe that the Church is important because it's the glue of society and keeps the chaos at bay.

But, haven't we come a long way from Pentecost, when the Wind of God swept through the upper room, when those disciples were absolutely consumed by the fire in their belly, when they went out in their generation to turn the world upside down? Haven't we tamed the beast? Haven't we domesticated the Spirit? Haven't we sought to bring God down and fit Him into a neat little box, tied up with a ribbon, so we can say, "There, we can handle that. We can control that. We can manipulate this mysterious power." Not so. God is Spirit! God is alive! God is in the business of human transformation. God says to us, "Turn over the traces! Break out! Break loose! Open your life to a mystery beyond yourself!" Allow Him to realize through you all of the potential with which you were created, because you were created in the very image of God! You have been destined to be

conformed to the image of Jesus, and so open yourself to the Living God Who, here and now, even in a moment like this, in a setting like this, can somehow or other break through to us, illumining our minds with that which we cannot grasp, but which we can sense.

A very important sentence which has always stayed with me from Rudolph Otto is this: "The experience of God is the feeling that remains when the concept fails." A sermon can only deal in concepts. Rational discourse can only point beyond itself, and then it is that we all stand helpless, waiting, waiting, waiting 'til God makes Himself known to us, and there is a surplus of meaning beyond the content of the concept. Pentecost is the promise that there will be a feeling that will remain when the concept fails. Open yourself to the transformation of the Spirit, as the Living God would turn you inside out and shape you into the image of Christ, that you might know the fullness of being fully human, fully alive.

Let us pray.

O Holy Ghost,
come down from heaven's height, give us Thy light.
O Father of the poor,
all gifts to us are Thine. Within us shine.
O Comforter beyond human comforting,
O Stranger sweet, our hearts await Thy feet.
In passion, Thou art peace,
rest for our laboring, our cooling spring.
O Solace of our tears,
upon the secrets of our sins and fears,
pour Thy great light.
Apart from Thee,
we have no truth unfamed, no good unstained.
Our hearts are dry.
O River, flow Thou through the parched ground.
Quicken those near to die.
Our hearts are hard. O bend them to Thy will, Eternal Lord,
to go Thy way.
Thy sevenfold power
give to Thy faithful folk who bear Thy yoke.
Give strength to endure,
and then to die in peace
and live forever in Thy blessedness,
through Jesus Christ, our Lord.
Amen.

(Prayer of Stephen Langdon, Archbishop of Canterbury, c. 1200)