

Sermon: "An Attitude Adjustment"
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
9/29/02
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor

AN ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENT

An attitude adjustment.
That's what my father used to say that I needed when I was behaving badly.
Having an attitude adjustment was not a pleasant prospect.

Many people approach being a follower of Jesus Christ in the same way. When Paul tells us in his letter to the Philippians that our attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, we naturally recoil from the idea. Why? Because Paul spells out exactly what that attitude should be.

It is not a pleasant prospect.

As Jesus emptied himself and became a servant to all even to the point of dying on a cross, so we as his disciples are called to have the same attitude. We too are called to be a humble, self-giving people.

Did you catch how strongly that is stated in our lesson for today?
Listen again to the apostle's words,

"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. [4] Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others."
Philippians. 2:3-4 (NRSV)

UNREALISTIC?

How in the world can we be expected to do that?
Is that not just the opposite of how many of us are taught to think about things?
We need more than an attitude adjustment. We need an attitude revolution.

We are a competitive people.
We are taught from a very early age that winning is everything and that the most important task in life is to look out for number one.

And yet Paul tells us that our attitude should be like that of Christ Jesus who gave up the glory of heaven in order to become a human being and dwell among us. Isn't that a bit unrealistic?

Can we really change that much?
Can we really go from being self-centered to being Christ centered and other centered? Can we really change just by asking, "What would Jesus do?"

I must admit that I've struggled with this very important part of the gospel for a long time. My attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. But, often it's not. I know what Jesus would do. But, I'm not so sure I can or will do the same thing.

How can I change?
How can I adjust my attitude or how can God adjust my attitude?

When it comes to attitude adjustment, quite often it is helpful to know why we need to change in a certain way. Faithful Christian discipleship is not so much a matter of following rules and regulations trying real hard each day to be like Jesus. The best we could hope for using that approach would be a pale and somewhat ineffective imitation of the original.

A CHANGE OF MIND

And besides that, this passage tells us something different. We are to have (as the NRSV puts it) the “mind of Christ.” Attitude change is brought about by a change of mind, by a change in how we look at things.

Let me give you a silly example. When I was in high school, my room was terribly messy. Nothing my parents could do or say could convince me to clean my room properly. The reason? I didn't see why it was important. It was my room. Why were they worried about it?

I was unable to see the problem from their perspective. I had a bad attitude because I had never really been responsible for the upkeep of a house. I was unable to understand their desire to take pride in a home.

Later, of course, that changed. I acquired a home of my own, and I learned what it meant to make a house payment and be responsible for the repair and upkeep of a home. These changes in my life brought about a complete change in my attitude.

In fact, my attitude changed so much that my mother once commented that it was hard to believe that this person insisting on a neat home was really her son. My attitude and behavior changed not because people told me to do this or do that. My attitude and behavior changed because I began to understand and empathize with my parent's point of view. I had walked a mile in their shoes.

EMPATHY

The important word is empathy. Empathy means the ability to walk a mile in another person's shoes to have some understanding and compassion for another person's situation.

When I was learning to be a counselor, understanding this concept was very important. The ability to actually “feel with” the other person was thought to be the key to therapeutic success.

I like the definition of empathy proposed by pastoral counselor, Ann Jervis. She writes,

“Empathy connotes not just listening to another's story but also participating in the other's story, so that the listener not only hears and believes the facts of another's experience, but actually feels the experience at some level. To have empathy with another is not simply to believe what that person says but to feel along with that person, to participate in that person's experience.

Thus to take an empathetic stance towards another means that I am able to transcend myself and my own experience in order to enter into the experience of another. Those who have received such empathy from another will know that there is nothing more healing or more validating than this.”

THE EMPATHIC GOD

Now the Bible doesn't use the word empathy, but I would contend that much of the Bible is about empathy. It is about the empathy that God shows toward the world. The God of the Bible is a God who understands our experience.

And the God of the Bible is a God who participates with us in our experience.

That is what we learn in the person of Jesus.
God in God's love became one of us.
The incarnation is the ultimate act of empathy divine empathy.

And, just as empathy from another human being is (as Ann put it) validating and healing, empathy from God is healing and validating to the ninth degree.

Now, I think that it's important for us to understand that this view of God is unique to Christianity. When Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians, the world did not think of God as having empathy in any sense of the word.

The prominent philosophers of the ancient world, the Greeks thought that the gods were by definition above and beyond human problems. To talk about a God who could feel the pain of His people much less one who would die on a cross for His people was the height of foolishness. (See I Corinthians 1:23)

That's still a hard thing for many people to understand and accept.
And yet, from my standpoint, it is the key fact of faith.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE INCARNATION

If God was in Christ, there are some very significant implications for us and for our world.

First of all it means that God understands us.
God understands our weakness.
God understands our struggle to do the right thing.
God understands our fears.

If we believe that the stories of Jesus are the record of a divine encounter with humanity, they become a remarkable source of hope.

If God was in Christ, we learn that God understands and brings salvation for the big problems of human existence. If God was in Christ, we learn that God is in the business of forgiving and healing. God is in the business of bringing life where there is death.

In a world filled with shame and guilt, sickness and fear, is this not good news?
Is this not what we need to hear?
I think it is.

THE COST OF EMPATHY

But, more than just understanding our needs, if God was in Christ, we learn that God's empathy is also costly.

There is always a personal cost when one dares to be empathic, when one dares to walk a mile in another's shoes,
and Jesus is the epitome of that costly love.

Facing sin and sickness and death was not an easy thing for Jesus to do. While his ability to heal is unique to him, his consistent willingness to be with those rejected and feared by society set him apart. Jesus is portrayed in the gospel as spending his time with lepers, with sick and dying people, with those who were deformed, and with those whose morality was in question.

It was his willingness to empathize with the bottom rung of society that characterized the ministry of Jesus. And it was his empathy with these untouchables that eventually led to his rejection by the religious leaders of the day.

But even rejection did not overcome the empathic heart of Jesus.

Jesus' heart was broken in his compassion for those who mourned, for the sick and for the confused masses that Jesus described as "like sheep without a shepherd." But, his heart was also broken for his enemies those he also came to save but would not hear his message.

There is a cost to empathy. And the cost comes at the moment when the capacity for empathy crosses over into the activity of empathy. When we do something about our compassion for others, we risk our own life as well. When compassion for others changes our viewpoint, it is then that our attitude and our life is profoundly adjusted.

Of course, in the end, the empathy of Jesus brought him the ultimate sacrifice of death on a cross. Crucified by the very ones he came to save, Jesus' dying words were ones of forgiveness and understanding. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them because they don't know what they are doing."

CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST

And, amazingly enough, we are called to have the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus. We too are to have that costly empathy which extends to those who have been broken by the pain of life. We too are to try and understand when our enemies show by their actions that they "don't know what they are doing."

We too are called to be (as Paul put it) "crucified with Christ." (Galatians 2:20)

Paul didn't mean that we would literally be crucified. He meant that we would be called to abandon the old way of life for a new way of living ... an attitude adjustment. This would not be done and indeed could not be done by our own power but by the power of God's Spirit Christ in us.

Being crucified with Christ seems like a dismal prospect. And yet, it is in this crucifixion of the old life ... in this looking to the interests of others before our own that we, paradoxically, really find life.

A COMMUNITY OF THE CROSS

More than that, we are called to create a community in which that kind of self giving spirit becomes the norm.

This is the part of this passage that takes the most faith ... to think that the church as we know it today is to be a model of the self-giving love of Christ. Usually it is quite the opposite.

It was Christmas time and for the small group of pilgrims from a Washington, DC church it was their first trip to the Holy Land. They had been delayed on their way to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and it was getting dark when they arrived.

Muslims being in control of the Holy City, a Muslim policeman was posted in the church as a security guard. Later, when the group returned home, the pastor preached a special sermon in which he described the pilgrimage experience to his congregation. This is what he said about the time spent in the Holy Sepulchre Church:

"I must confess that I was not very turned on by the Ecumenical Movement until I became radicalized by our trip to the Holy Land. We stumbled into the darkened Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the traditional site of Jesus' Crucifixion and Resurrection, and they gave each one of us a little candle. I looked around through the candlelight and noticed that there were plenty of light fixtures, but none of them had been turned on.

"Why," I asked, "do we have to stumble around with candles?"
The Muslim policeman patiently explained to me that the Christian groups who use the Church fight among themselves about who should pay the light bills. Consequently, the Muslims had to shut the power off in order to stop the fighting.

This is the Middle East I am talking about. Where in the world is there more urgent need for a witness of unity and brotherhood? Here we were the Christians, in this great Christian Church, witnessing to disunity.

That's not the end of it. At precisely five p.m. the Muslim policeman gently but firmly requested us to leave. I protested because we really hadn't seen much of the church yet. Again, the Muslim policeman patiently explained that because Christian groups constantly fight among themselves about who is to have the right to open and close the Church, the key had to be taken from them.

This sorry episode opened my eyes to the urgent need for us Christians to be the signs of unity which we are called to be, rather than the signs of division that we so often are."

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

The mission of the church is quite different from what many people today seem to think.

The mission of the church is not to control the keys to the church or be in charge of the world's holy sites.

The mission of the church is not success as the world defines it.
Our mission is not being able to say that our church is the strongest or the largest.

Nor is the purpose of the church is not to be able to say that we have the whole "truth" while others do not.

The purpose of the church is to model the compassion and love of God through the Spirit of Christ. The purpose of the church is to give the world a concrete example of empathy God's empathy into action.

By ourselves we cannot accomplish this.
But, together, in the power of the Spirit, God can enable us to do the impossible.
God can and does enable us to adjust our attitudes in a way that does not come naturally to us.

Gordon Cosby, the founding pastor of The Church of the Savior in Washington, DC, told of a sculpture created by one of the church members. The work depicts Jesus with basin and towel as though ready to wash the disciple's feet.

They placed the sculpture on the lawn of the church's Christ House Mission home. This is a half-way house for street people who are sick but not sick enough according to the city's standards to qualify for hospitalization.

The sculpture has a basin that is constantly being replenished with water, and I suspect you can imagine the kind of indignities to which the sculpture was subjected in its location.

Cosby told of a drunk who came by and shared his drink with Jesus, leaving the container in the basin .. and then, after a moment's reflection came back to take the brown paper wrapping off so the gift would be more seemly.

Another passer by brought a dead Christmas tree and placed it in the basin. And so it went. The pastor found himself continually cleaning the basin so that the flow of water might not be interrupted.

As you can imagine, there were many who thought that the sculpture needed to be moved so that it wouldn't be subjected to such mistreatment. They said, "It is so dirty and vulnerable in its present location."

But, in the end, they decided not to move it.

The pastor explained that from a practical standpoint, moving that fine sculpture just seemed like the prudent thing to do.

"But," he said, "is that not also symbolic of what we want to do with Jesus? We want to move him to a 'safe' place. We want to move him out of this 'dirty' world so that the unpleasant realities of life won't always be on our doorstep.

We want to move Jesus by listening only to those words which match our hopes and dreams and ignore those messages which challenge our comfortable, familiar way of life."

So they left the sculpture of Jesus where it belonged ... the dangerous, dirty and hurting world. And, by the way, that church continues to provide a ministry to that same world providing a wonderful example of what it means to disciples of Jesus Christ ... a people whose attitude and actions have been shaped by the life and ministry of Jesus.

I think the same can happen to us as well. We can grow beyond the petty arguments that are such a big part of most churches. We too can have an attitude adjustment. Through the power of God's Spirit, we too can learn to humble ourselves and be of service in God's name.

Amen.

Sermon: "Going Through Deep Water"

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A STORY OF CRISIS

Every community has a story which shapes its life.
Preacher Carol Noren told the story that shaped the life of the church she now attends.

It seems that in the 1920s this large church experienced a period of rapid expansion and change. The community was annexed into the city of Chicago, bungalows were constructed on what had once been prairie, and a high school was established (though there was no money to build a new building for the high school.)

The church saw those developments as both a challenge and an opportunity. They would build a new high school and expand their ministry. An ambitious building program was launched. A gymnasium, chapel, theater, kitchen and many Sunday school rooms were added. Every square foot was used by the growing congregation and the new high school.

Then came the stock market crash of 1929. The congregation was deeply in debt. Many were unemployed. The trustees saw no way to make the mortgage payments. They feared the bank would foreclose on the loan.

Then the women's society proposed a course of action. What if everyone in the church agreed to stop what they were doing at 10:00 each morning and pray for God's help with the overwhelming debt? The church council agreed to the plan, and the majority of the congregation went along.

That's not all they did of course. There were ice cream socials, Wednesday night suppers, and other fund raising activities. But what they did most of all was implore God's help.

And the mortgage was paid step by step ... little by little.

Money came from unexpected sources. Events made more profit than they ever dreamed possible. It was a defining chapter for that generation in the church. They paid off the mortgage ahead of schedule and had a great service of celebration and praise.

From then on, whenever troubles came to the congregation, the older members would tell the story of when "they all prayed together at 10:00 every morning." In their minds, they didn't do the impossible. God did. All they did was raise their hands in prayer.

They were a people in a desperate situation, but God led them through those deep waters to a better day.

In a way, our story from the Bible is like this story. Except in the case of our story for today the stakes were much higher. The people of God were not just putting their money on the line. They were putting their lives on the line betting that God could deliver them from the hand of their enemies, the Egyptians.

And so God did leading them straight through the deep waters of the Red Sea to salvation.

DEEP WATER IN OUR COUNTRY

After this past year, I think this particular story of deliverance holds greater meaning for us. Out of nowhere we found ourselves surrounded by enemies. What we thought was a stable world turned out to be a world fraught with danger and evil. Deep water.

We've been through quite a bit of deep water in our country, and "deep water" experiences can alter our life forever.

This past week as people reflected upon last year's attack on September 11, more than one person talked about the probability that many people will suffer from post traumatic stress syndrome. That's what they used to call being "shell shocked" in the army. But, we now know that any life threatening or life changing event can cause this syndrome to occur.

According to psychologists, it's important that people not pass through the "deep waters" alone. All of us need to know the signs of this problem and how to reach out to someone else for help.

Psychological help is helpful and needed, but I believe that the challenge of deep waters requires spiritual help as well.

Indeed there are some waters which are too deep for even the best counselor or friend.

There are some waters which can only be crossed by the aid of divine intervention.

MARCHING INTO THE DESERT

So it was long ago when Moses led the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt. You know the story. God called Moses, a lonely nomad in the desert to come and proclaim a word of judgment to Pharaoh. And, reluctantly, Moses did just that.

But, as Moses feared, Pharaoh didn't listen. It took many plagues and the death of the first born in every household ... including Pharaoh's ... before the monarch finally allowed the children of Israel to leave. Indeed, after this last plague, Pharaoh and the people of Egypt roused their slaves in the middle of the night and begged them to leave. He and all of his people were afraid that they all might die if they did not let God's people go.

So Pharaoh finally did let God's people go, and the people of God began their long journey to the promised land.

Like a mighty army they took their possessions ... and the silver, gold and clothing that the frightened Egyptians gave them and followed their new leader, Moses out into the wilderness.

A FATAL MISTAKE?

But God commanded Moses to do an unusual thing. Instead of instructing him to take his people over the usual routes routes that would have caused them to pass through heavily fortified checkpoints and into possible military conflict God had Moses take his people through the wilderness straight toward the Red Sea.

This looked like a fatal mistake.

No doubt the Egyptians took note of this. The people of Israel looked like they were wandering around in the middle of the desert with no clue as to where they were going.

I think that Pharaoh and his servants decided that this was an opportunity too good to pass up. It looked like the perfect set up for an easy military victory.

So Pharaoh's heart was once again hardened, and he said to his servants,
"What were we thinking about when we let our servants go?
We need to go bring them back."

Now in every period of history professional armies have had one great weapon of war, a weapon which struck fear into the heart of their enemies. In the ancient world, the chariot was such a weapon. And Pharaoh was prepared to use this terrible weapon in battle against his runaway slaves. The scripture tells us that Pharaoh prepared to do battle with his army and six hundred of his best chariots.

It's important to picture the hopelessness of the Israelite's situation. They were surrounded. Pharaoh's chariots were thundering up behind them. To their left and right was nothing but desert. And the way forward was blocked by the deep waters of the Red Sea.

BLAME AND FEAR

What do we do when we find ourselves hemmed in on all sides? Quite often we blame our leaders. And that's what the people of Israel did. They said,

"Why didn't you listen to us Moses? Didn't we tell you that we were willing to stay in Egypt as slaves? It would have been a lot better to have remained a slave in Egypt than to die here in the desert."

Why didn't the people of Israel have more faith?
Hadn't they witnessed the power of God in the plagues sent upon their captors?
Didn't they know the salvation of God when the angel of death passed over their homes because their doorways were stained with blood of the lamb?

Why couldn't they believe that God would save them in this new situation?

We shouldn't be too critical of the Israelites because I think that we are the same way. No matter how many times we have experienced God's power and care for us, we are uncertain in new situations.

When Pharaoh's army approaches from behind and all we can see ahead is deep water and desert, we too are inclined to ask ourselves in our heart of hearts,

"Can God really help me cope with this situation? There doesn't seem to be any way out. Oh, if only I had done something differently. If only I hadn't come to this place, maybe I wouldn't be in such trouble. Where can I find salvation now?"

Where can we find salvation when we are hemmed in by all sides?

THE BATTLE BELONGS TO THE LORD

I believe that salvation still comes from the Lord.
The battle belongs to the Lord, as our praise and worship song put it.

I believe that God still brings his people salvation by moving them forward.
I believe that God still calls His people to go through deep waters that seem so impossible to cross.

But, with God, nothing is impossible.
The presence of God can change any situation.
And sometimes God intervenes in the most hopeless of situations so that we can use that story as a paradigm of hope.

That's why our lesson for today is so important. It is not just a story about how God saved some people way back when. It is (as it has been used by Jews down through the centuries) a catechism of hope for future generations.

Tell this story to your people.
This is what God is like.
God brings salvation to his helpless people.

The Scripture tells us, "The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them." Exodus 14:19

With the Egyptians blocked from pursuing the Israelites by the cloud of God's presence, God ordered Moses to stretch out his hand over the waters of the Red Sea. Moses did as he was told, and God parted the waters. There was a wall of water on the left and on the right, and the people of God passed through the waters to the other side on dry land.

FAITH TO MOVE THROUGH DEEP WATER

Have you seen Cecil B. DeMille's movie, The Ten Commandments? I think his portrayal of the crossing of the Red Sea is wonderful. That elaborate wall of water in the movie seems to accurately describe the biblical account.

Think of how much courage it took for the children of Israel to pass through the deep waters of the Red Sea. God parted the waters, but the Israelites had to have enough faith to walk through those deep waters to the other side.

This is the message of this passage. This is why this story was passed down from generation to generation. People of every age still need to know. God can still part the waters. God can still lead us through to the other side.

But, we must have the faith to walk through the deep waters.
We must still have the faith to go where God leads us.

We must believe that God is always present ... even and especially when we think the worst is about to happen.

A CREATION MIRACLE

As I've told you before, most miracles in the Bible are what I would call creation miracles, and that is true of today's miracle as well.

In the book of Genesis when the world is created God says,

"Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear."
And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. Genesis 1:9-10

In my mind, the parting of the waters of the Red Sea is reminiscent of the creation of the world. In the Bible, the water represents the forces of chaos and destruction, but God holds those waters back and creates dry land.

God creates by holding back the forces of chaos.
God creates by making a space that is not overwhelmed by the water
... a space where dry land appears.

In this case, God was creating a free people who would have a story of salvation to tell the nations. It was the first act in a drama that would have its fulfillment in salvation proclaimed by Jesus Christ.

WATERS OF DESTRUCTION

The Egyptians pursued the Israelites into the deep waters, but even the most modern of warfare technology was no match for the God who created everything.

The army was thrown into a panic.
The wheels of the driving chariots were clogged with mud and the great war machine slowed to a crawl. Moses stretched out his hand as God commanded, and the waters covered the pursuing army.

All of Pharaoh's army that followed the Israelites into the water were killed.

The people of God gave thanks for the victory. In fact, the whole 15th chapter of the book of Exodus, devoted to praise over the fact that Israel's enemies were destroyed. I guess it was only natural. After all, do we not cheer our military victories as well?

But, later, as God's people thought about this story, they also recognized that their deliverance came at great cost. Their deliverance caused suffering for others. Rabbi Johanna showed great spiritual insight into this fact when he wrote,

"When the Egyptians were drowning in the Red Sea, the angels in heaven were about to break into songs of jubilation. But, the Holy One silenced them with the words, 'My creatures are perishing, and you are ready to sing?'"

SALVATION FOR ENEMIES

The Rabbi had it right. We believe that God was in Christ.
And the God revealed in Jesus Christ is a God who loves the world. How does that familiar passage from John 3 go? God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved. (John 3:16-17)

We must modify this old story with insights derived from the new. We must remember that this was just the first act in the salvation drama and that the ultimate purpose of the God who created heaven and earth is not destruction even of enemies.

The ultimate purpose is redemption.

That's the message of the cross isn't it? Jesus died for us all on the cross ... entering the deepest water of all for our sakes, the deep water of death. And because he entered that deep water, we know that even that terrible deep water is not too deep for God's power.

He delivered Jesus from death as a sign of his power and hope.
And one day it will be the same for those who have died in Christ Jesus.

They too will be raised to praise God's salvation in glory.
They too will rejoice over on the "other shore," but it will be more than celebrating a victory over enemies. It will be a celebration of victory over the final enemy even death itself.

My sermon title for today was inspired by the famous old hymn, "How Firm a Foundation." We're going to sing that hymn today, and I want you to pay particular attention to the third line of that hymn. It goes,

"When through the deep waters I call thee to go,
the rivers of sorrow shall not overflow;
For I will be near thee, thy troubles to bless,
and sanctify to thee thy deepest distress."

Friends, don't fear the deep waters.
God delivered His people through them long ago. And God will deliver us even today.

Amen.