

Sermon: "An Extreme Makeover"

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida  
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## AN EXTREME MAKEOVER

If you've watched any TV at all these past few months, you may have noticed a new genre of show, something called the extreme makeover. These extreme makeover shows take basically two forms, the extreme home makeover and the extreme person makeover. Since I'm mildly interested in home repair and design, I occasionally watch the home makeover shows. I especially like the before and after shots. It's amazing what a little paint and major demolition can do to change the look of a home!

But, I can't watch those shows that do extreme personal makeovers. In some cases people are able to get some cosmetic physical problems fixed, but there is just something sad about people who are so dissatisfied with their appearance that they undergo a complete makeover on national TV, including plastic surgery! I certainly do not see it as entertainment.

But, the makeover shows continue to thrive. I predict that in the not too distant future cable will have a "makeover channel," and we'll be able to see extreme makeovers every day of the week. I can't wait.

The more interesting question for me is this, "Why are these shows so popular?" Perhaps it is because many of us are really dissatisfied with our life.

We dream about being able to change our home, our appearance and our job. We think that if only the crew from "This Old House" would select us as their next project, then we could die happy.

But, of course that's not true. No matter how much we change things on the outside it is the inside that really counts. It's what's in our hearts that really matters. According to the Bible, men and women look on the outside, but God looks at the heart. Don't try to change a problem with your heart by tiling the kitchen or getting a facelift. It won't be long before the floor is stained and the facelift falls. External fixes are always temporary.

## GOD'S MAKEOVER

But, internal fixes can last a lifetime and beyond. Paul suggests in our passage for today that an even more extreme makeover is possible and necessary. It comes directly from the master builder who can change us where it really counts, on the inside.

We really don't know what the apostle Paul looked like, but Scripture suggests that in some ways he wasn't impressive. He wasn't a very good speaker, and he had health problems that may have affected his appearance. From a human point of view, Paul may have been a candidate for an extreme makeover. But, this is precisely what Paul preached against, regarding others from a human point of view.

Paul suggests that we quit playing by the world's rules. Instead of playing the world's game of spending our life trying to look better and live in a grand fashion, we should long for a different

kind of makeover, a makeover that only God can give. And unlike the makeovers we see on TV, this makeover is available not just to the lucky few. This makeover is available to the whole world.

Paul knew what he was talking about when it came to internal makeovers. He himself had been one of the first to experience the power of this almighty change. A man named Saul was on the road to Damascus one day. His mission? Persecute and imprison those who were Disciples of Christ.

But, on that road Saul had an ambush makeover from above. And everything about his life changed. His name changed. No longer was he Saul the persecutor of the church. Now he was Paul the foremost preacher of the Christian faith. What he used to brag about, his education and his religious credentials now became like garbage in his eyes. This new man, Paul may have looked the same on the outside, but on the inside the Spirit of the risen Christ changed him in an instant. It was as if he were a new creation.

Paul didn't think that his transformation was in any way unique. Indeed, Paul felt like that God was in the business of transforming everyone and everything. The whole world was God's stage, and each of us has been called to do our part in the drama that God had started with his Son, Jesus. We, all of us who are called by God in Jesus Christ, are in the business of doing "extreme makeovers" for the kingdom of God.

Now how can we do that? We look at people with new eyes. We don't view people from a human point of view (2 Corinthians 5:16). We view people from a divine point of view. We view people through the eyes of Christ. That means we view others through the eyes of Christ's forgiveness.

We believe that Christ died for the sins of the world, not some theoretical perfect world but this crazy, unpredictable world in which we live. If we really believe that, then we no longer have the luxury turning a blind eye to anyone. Everyone we meet is an important person because they too are a part of the world that Christ came to redeem.

In the verse that precedes our lesson for today, Paul puts it this way, "And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them." 2 Corinthians 5:15

I have become convinced that the worst thing in the world is to live a totally self-centered life. The self-centered life chokes on its own narcissism. And yet we are bombarded daily with advertisements that suggest the good life is the life centered only on me and mine.

We have to die daily to that idea. We have to learn how turn the values of the world on their head. As Christ was crucified on the cross, we crucify the desires of the flesh. We must learn to ridicule the idea that it's all about us.

It's not all about us.

It's all about God and God's plans for the world as revealed in Jesus Christ.

And yet, as we become a part of those divine plans, we undergo an internal change. Sometimes the changes occur dramatically. Like Paul, some of us can point to a specific time and place when our whole world was turned upside down by radical divine makeover.

A GRADUAL CHANGE

But, for most of us the change is more gradual. Bit by bit and day-by-day we replace the worn out, self-centered ways of this world with the values of God's kingdom as revealed in Jesus Christ. And usually that kind of radical change takes time and struggle.

One of the plots of most makeover shows is that the house or the person is supposed to be finished in 48 hours or a week or some short, fixed period of time. The idea is that we are amazed at what can be accomplished in such a short period of time. Some people approach spiritual growth the same way. When Paul says that if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation, then some people think, "Okay, new creation. In 48 hours I should be entirely different. All the bad habits and negative thoughts should be gone. I'm a Christian now. It should be easy."

But, of course it's not true. Internal makeovers take more than 48 hours or a week or a month or even a year. Internal makeovers take a lifetime. Have you seen that old poster that goes something like, "Be patient with me. God's not finished with me yet?"

I believe that's true. We often point to the apostle Paul as one whose life was almost "magically" turned around by his experience on the Damascus road.

But, in fact, Paul was not an effective evangelist for several years after his conversion experience. Immediately after his conversion he spent three years in the desert of Arabia, perhaps meditating upon what had happened to him.

After this, his first attempts at preaching were made in the synagogues. His arguments were logical and powerful, but apparently they were also ungracious as well. In fact, the Jews at Damascus were so angry at what the apostle had to say that they wanted to kill Paul. He was only able to make it out of town by having some friends lower him over the wall in a basket.

Then Paul made his way to Jerusalem. There he managed to stir up so much trouble with the Hellenists, the Greek Jews, that once again his fellow believers had to intervene and send Paul out of town to Tarsus.

We don't really know what happened to Paul in this 8-10 year period when he was in his home. But, we can infer from what he says after this period of obscurity that this is the time when he begins to preach with some success to Gentiles as well as Jews.

And so, when the apostle reappears on the scene, his theology is now fully developed. He is indeed a new creation. Paul, more than any other early Christian apostle understood the scope of what God had done in Christ. It was not just about the salvation of a small group of people. The gospel had universal implications. The message of salvation was for the whole world, Gentiles as well as Jews.

My point is this.

Even Paul's conversion was not a one time experience on the Damascus road. It was the result of a lifetime of struggling to understand and proclaim the gospel. There were high points and low points. There were great successes and great failures. But, through it all Paul saw the hand of God.

And so it is with us. Our internal makeover will take more than a week or a month or a year. It will take a lifetime.

AMBASSADORS FOR A NEW CREATION

More than that, it's not just about our makeover. It's about making over the whole world. It's about a new creation. It's about believing that there's a new world coming, a world that is greater and more glorious than the one in which we live.

And it is that hope which gives us the courage to live this day as God's representatives in a hostile world. We are a part of something that is bigger than just our own personal change. Paul said that we are "ambassadors for Christ." God is making His appeal through us. We are God's spokespeople.

Ambassadors, of course, are official representatives sent on behalf of one country to another. And the work of an ambassador is often difficult. For example, ambassadors from our country may be called upon to live in places where the customs are strange and the resources are few. Sometimes in these foreign countries there is even hostility toward who we are and the values we represent. As we learned in Iran and in other places, ambassadors and other foreign diplomats can be subject to violence.

But, there are people who are willing to take these difficult assignments because they believe the interests of our country should be represented all over the world. The existence of our embassy in a foreign land is, in a way, a statement about who we are and what we believe.

In the same way, we are the official representatives for the kingdom of God in this world. The church is a kind of embassy in a foreign land, and we are ambassadors for Christ. We seek to embody the kingdom of God and so influence the world for Christ.

Now, sometimes, of course ambassadors and those who make foreign policy are not successful in conveying the noblest and highest ideals of our country. When that happens our influence and respect is lessened in the world.

And sometimes the church and Christians do not convey the message of Christ's kingdom either. Sometimes our actions are a denial of who we are and what we are called to be. And when that happens, the Kingdom of God is harmed. We bring dishonor to the name of Christ.

## RECONCILIATION

But, for those of us struggle to be faithful and for those who do not know Christ, the message of the kingdom is still a hopeful one. An extreme makeover is still possible for all of us. We can be all that we are called to be in Christ Jesus. That is, in a nutshell, the message of the gospel. It is what Paul calls the message of reconciliation, and that is the message to which we bear witness.

Understanding this ministry of reconciliation is the key to understanding this passage and what it means to be an ambassador for Christ. In Paul's day this word translated "reconciliation" was a word used to signify a change in relationship between individuals or groups of people, often a change that involved a financial transaction.

This financial image is reminiscent of what Paul told the Corinthians earlier, that they had been "bought" with a "price," that is the death of Christ. (1 Corinthians 6:20; 7:23) Jesus himself interpreted his life using this same financial image. Jesus said that his life was a "ransom" for those who followed him. (Mark 10:45)

We can summarize the message of reconciliation very well in the few words that I say each Sunday after the Prayer of Confession. "In Jesus Christ we are forgiven." Our "debts" were paid on the cross of Calvary. God loves us and accepts us with no strings attached.

And thus, we are forgiven and thus freed to live in a different way. The good news we proclaim to the world is that you don't have to be bogged down by hatred and fear and retaliation. There is a world of forgiveness based not upon who we are but upon Whom God has shown Himself to be in Jesus Christ.

## EARLY EASTER

A Palestinian priest told of a Palm Sunday service at his church in Israel - one in which he thought about the fact that many people in his congregation were at odds with each other. In fact, he realized that there was, in reality, no peace among his people.

At the end of the service, he made a startling decision. He walked down the center aisle and at the back of the church locked the only two doors to the church and took the key. He told the people both that he loved them and that he was saddened to find them so filled with hatred and bitterness for one another. Then, in the midst of stunned silence, he announced that only one person could work the miracle of reconciliation in their village: Jesus Christ.

"So on Christ's behalf, I say this to you. The doors of the church are locked. Either you kill each other right here in your hatred, and then I will celebrate your funerals ... or you use this opportunity to be reconciled together before I open the doors of the church. If that reconciliation happens, Christ will truly become your Lord."

Ten minutes passed, and no one said a word. The people sat in silence, locked inside their church.

Finally, one man stood up. It was Abu Muhib, a villager serving as an Israeli policeman, who was in his uniform. He stretched out his arms and said, "I ask forgiveness of everybody here, and I forgive everybody. And I ask God to forgive me my sins." He and the priest then embraced, with tears streaming down Abu Muhib's cheeks. Within minutes, everyone in the church was crying, laughing, embracing and sharing Christ's love and peace.

The priest then announced that "this is our resurrection! We are a community that has risen from the dead, and we have new life. I propose that we don't wait until Easter to celebrate the Resurrection. I will unlock the doors, and then let us go from home to home all over the village and sing the resurrection hymn to everyone!"

Extreme makeovers can be dramatic - as they were for this congregation in Israel. Suddenly reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, they reached out to each other and to the world. After years of being choked by conflict, they were finally able to breathe again. After years of blame and fear, there were able to become a new creation through the ministry of reconciliation. In Jesus Christ, they were forgiven.

It is that revelation which makes all the difference. It is that revelation which can change the whole world. And it is that revelation which can change us. We don't have to be the way we are forever. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven and freed to live in a new way.

## A BETTER SONG

In the film, *Educating Rita*, Rita was determined to gain an education and rise above her menial state. But, it was no easy matter to move from the slums of London into the sophistication of university life. At one point she nearly decided to quit, but one little incident drove her to continue.

Her family and friends were at the local pub singing along with the jukebox when Rita looked across at her mum and saw her crying.

Her mum said;

"There must be better songs to sing than this."

It was that insight which changed Rita completely.

She became a new creation because she was wished to sing a better song.

And so can we.

My prayer for us is that we too can learn to sing a better song, perhaps a song like Charles Wesley wrote long ago entitled, "Love Divine." One verse goes, "Finish then thy new creation, pure and spotless let us be .... Perfectly restored in thee."

May God restore the image of Christ in us and may we be God's faithful ambassadors, bringing the hope of peace and justice to a world filled with conflict.

Amen