

Sermon for 1-24-10

Radical Transformation

Luke 3: 15-23

Every human being hungers and thirsts for more than food and drink. We hunger for acknowledgement from others. Karl Barth, perhaps the most famous theologian of the 19th and 20th centuries said, “More importantly, and truthfully, all of us wish that God would be well pleased with us – not only good and pious persons, but also the bad and the unbelieving; indeed, these more than ever wish it, and often far stronger than the good and pious.”

The Bible records Jesus’ childhood. It is said of him, “Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.” (Luke 2:52) In other words, he “increased in divine and human favor.” To be in God’s favor is the highest blessing. I wish Charles, who was baptized this morning, and his parents may be blessed by this baptism, which signifies entering into the realm of God’s favor.

The Bible also records John the Baptist’s childhood story. “Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “What, then, is this child going to be?” For the Lord’s hand was with him. (Luke 1:66) We also would like to see what Charles is going to be in the future, for God’s hand will be with him.

Today’s scripture reading, Luke 3:21-22, was a story of the baptism of Jesus. Jesus was baptized at thirty years old. It is right after his baptism that Jesus started his ministry.

I looked for a commentary of the Bible to see how the biblical scholars interpret Jesus’ baptism. That Jesus was baptized by John is historically certain. Why did Jesus admit his baptism by John? It must have been embarrassing to the early church that their Lord had taken on the ritual sign of repentance. For, thus, in some way or another, Jesus seems to have regarded himself in the light of John’s preaching of confession of sins and return to God.

According to scholarly interpretation, in Jesus’ baptism was his radical act of humility and obedience. His act is definitely radical to us. His acts reflect radical humility, radical obedience, radical hospitality, radical forgiveness, radical love, radical salvation and radical transformation. “Radical” is an essential word in describing the acts of Jesus. The etymology of the word, “radical,” literally means “arising from the root, or going to the root” of things. Jesus’ everyday acts and interactions with others were connected to the “root,” of all things, God our Father.

Jesus Christ, our Lord, was a “radical” transformer. A “root” transformer. Everything he taught and performed were radical in the eyes of the Pharisees and the people who followed Moses and the Old Testament teachings.

He was so radical that few people could hardly follow him. He teaches us to give first, to forgive first, to love first without conditions and expectations, waiting for reactions from others.

He said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ But now I tell you, do not take revenge on someone who does you wrong. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, let him slap your left cheek too. And if someone takes you to court to sue you for your shirt, let him have your coat as well. And if one of the occupation troops forces you to carry his pack one mile, carry it another mile.”

He teaches us also not to start worrying, “Where will my food come from or my drink or my clothes?” Instead, be concerned above everything else with his Kingdom and with what He requires, and He will provide you with all these other things.

When Jesus was asked by the rich young man, “What must I do to receive eternal life?” Jesus advised him, “Sell all you have and give money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven; then come and follow me.” Jesus was too radical for us to follow. We think that Jesus’ teaching is neither realistic nor practical, but fantasy. But, I think it is possible, when we meet Jesus, whose power is the Holy Spirit, transforming us.

There is a fascinating story which tells of how Jesus transformed a person. One day, Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a rich man but he was not favored by the people because he was the chief tax collector and was not good-looking and very short. Zacchaeus heard about Jesus, but had never met him before, so he wanted to see who Jesus was. But, being a short man, he could not see Jesus because of the crowd. So, he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” So Zacchaeus came down at once and welcomed him gladly. Later, he said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anyone out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” Later Jesus told him, “Salvation has come to this house. You are also a son of Abraham.”

What made him propose to give half of his possession to the poor? I can think of two reasons that frightened him: Jesus called him by his name, “Zacchaeus.” And, Jesus acknowledged who he was and suggested that he stay at his house. This was a moment of radical transformation for Zacchaeus.

When I was in fourth grade in Korea, my home-room teacher was a female teacher. When she was assigned as my home-room teacher, she recognized in me that I had a little talent for music. Later, I learned that she was a member of a choir in which my elder brother was the choir director. I didn’t know how she knew me, who I was.

The first day she was assigned to my class, she called my name in front of sixty class mates, boys and girls, and told me to direct the Korean National Anthem in front of the students while we were to sing the Korean National Anthem every Monday. So I did. I was so pleased and proud myself when each Monday came along, and I got to direct the National Anthem in front of the whole class. From that day, I loved her class and studied hard for her. The acknowledgement from a teacher gave me the incentive to study harder. I still remember her name even today. Being acknowledged by another person can become powerful energy within ourselves. When Jesus was baptized, he was praying and heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

The role of the Holy Spirit is confirming, comforting, encouraging and endorsing us, "You are my child, whom I love, with you I am well pleased." When we can hear this voice through the Holy Spirit, everything is possible for us to do, whatever Jesus calls us to do. There is simply that in a human being that wants and waits to hear such a voice, "With you I am well pleased!" If we can hear from God, "To me you are just right the way you are! I acknowledge you. I like you! Now be and remain what you are and the way you are, for you are good and right!" it would be the greatest event we could possibly experience.

If God could approve of us and praise us, then we would know for the first time how free and strong the human being was created to be, know the kinds of power that sleep inertly within us, know how much all the things we experience within could be and must be dependent on the power of the Spirit. Paul mentioned through his experiences, "If God were for us, who would be against us?" (Romans 8:31)

The Savior will become for us a mirror, then we may realize that we belong to God and hear God speaking to us, "You are my beloved children!" Then, we may know and feel that God will bless us all and make it well with us all.

When I heard others remarking about my grandson, Benjamin, "Benjamin looks just like his grandfather!" I was so pleased and I don't know why. I was eager to see my grandson. Just like this human father, God saw in our Savior as in a mirror. God saw in him no stranger, but God's own image. When God saw his son at the baptism, He rejoiced in his son, acknowledged him, gave him all his love and exclaimed, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Cosmetic surgery is greatly in fashion these days, especially in Korea, among young ladies, and even young men! In Korea, it is noted that many young ladies look very much alike because of the same patterns of changes made in the facial features among the cosmetic surgeons. There are funny stories among the young ladies who had cosmetic surgeries. A lady was walking with her daughter on the street and met an old friend, but the friend didn't recognize her.

She introduced herself and her daughter to her old high-school classmate. The lady looked very different from what she had been before. So, this old friend asked, "Who is this girl?" And the mother of the girl said, "This is my daughter." The old friend looked at this lady and her daughter, and repeated, "Is this your real daughter? She doesn't look like you at all!" The mom had had cosmetic surgery, but the daughter hadn't.

When God recognizes his image in us God will delight and say, "You are really my child!" When we look at ourselves, we have to say: We are what the family in which we were born has made us; we are what the education that we enjoyed and the social conditions in which we grew up have made us; we are what good and bad influences have made us. Somehow, we too come from God, have our origin in God, but so much has come between us and God. We lost the image of God hidden in us. Because of that we are estranged from God.

However, through baptism, God gives union with Christ that only God can give. What are our deepest needs? First and foremost, we need mystery. That is, we need God. Specifically, we need to be in communion with God, to belong to God, to be in right and loving relationship with God.

I have had car insurance with State Farm Insurance Company for twenty years. My insurance agent was a long-term affiliate at my church. One time, she participated in my Bible study. But she didn't admit herself as a Christian. One year, during the Christmas season, I sent a Christmas card to her with a note, "Have you not secured insurance for your soul for that long? I wish for you to have insurance for you soul on Christmas day."

On Christmas Eve, she attended Christmas Eve Service at my church. And, few years later, she was baptized and admitted as a member of the church. She is a poet. So, she and I made a contract that if she would die earlier than I, I would officiate at her funeral, and if I should die earlier, then she would read a poem for me at my funeral.

The Lord said, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again." (John 3:3) You and I are children of God, called to be and to look like Christ, our Lord. Recovering the lost image of God is meant for the baptized people for the Kingdom of God. Radical transformation, transformation going to the root, is possible by the Spirit of the Lord, who is the root of all things, saying, "You are my child, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." To be children of God is our purpose to live.