

**Sermon preached by Tom Haynes at St. Elizabeth's, Culver
August 9, 2009
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost – Year B (Proper 14)**

2 Samuel 18:5-9,15, 31-33

Psalm 130

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

John 6:35, 31-51

“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be an acceptable offering in your sight, Oh Lord, my strength and my redeemer.”

We have an important cultural myth in America, and it involves the waterboy who puts on a uniform and is there at the team's hour of greatest need. He comes in at the last minute in the big game and makes the winning touchdown. This come-from-behind story is important to us, and we love to see the ordinary person become a hero. Just think of a movie like Rudy for example.

When it comes down to it, Luke Skywalker's torpedo that destroys the Death Star in Star Wars qualifies as this sort of story too. You would expect the professional pilots and soldiers working with computerized equipment to be more likely to hit a target than some kid firing on instinct. You can think of a lot of examples yourself I am sure. Like I said, this is an important cultural myth. It is not just in movies either.

So we have this “hero comes from nowhere and saves the day” story. There is another important cultural myth in America, and that is the whole Horatio Alger “rags to riches.” This is the story of someone who starts in the mailroom and works his way to CEO of a Fortune 500 company.

This story is a variation on the hero story I think, but there is a key difference. The hero “has greatness thrust upon him.” He is in the right place at the right time and his luck is good. In the rags to riches story, someone is given a chance and through hard work achieves more than anyone expects. These cultural myths are related, but they are subtly different.

Someone once told Arnold Palmer that he had made a lucky shot. He famously responded that “It's a funny thing, the more I practice the luckier I get.” The hero story is often a story of luck. The Horatio Alger story is story of practice.

Last week, I preached on the Ephesians reading, and I talked about community. I talked about unity in the Body of Christ. Basically it was about our dealing with differences. It was about how we should tend our own sheep and leave Uriah's sheep alone.

Today the message is about practice. The lesson talks about how to live. At first glance you might think it would make more sense for Paul to talk about how to live first and then say that unity is a product of right living. This is not what Paul did, and I would like to point out that it is not what Paul says either. He says that we are called to unity and given gifts for ministry. This is all “big picture” stuff. Last week dealt with call.

This week deals literally with both “walk” and the “talk.” What habits of life do we need to practice in order to be formed in Christ’s image? Paul gives us some specifics and challenges all of us to remember that what we say and how we say it is important in living the Christian life.

Lee Mitchell wrote a book called Praying Shapes Believing. The idea here is that we are formed by the ways in which we act on our beliefs. Attending church shapes us as Christians. Saying our prayers over time is part of our relationship with God, and we will grow in that relationship because we are investing time in it.

Now I am going to throw out a word here you don’t expect to hear at the Episcopal Church, and that word is “conversion.” There is this idea I think that conversion is St. Paul on the road to Damascus without the blindness. We do something or have some experience, and we are instantly different people. We all want the clouds to open and for God to say “Hey I need you to listen here. I am going to spell things out for you using small words. You have a piece of paper?”

The fact is that every journey has a first step. You decide to retire or take up golf. You decide to get married or join a church. So there is the retirement party or the first golf lesson. There is the decision and you start working toward a goal. We think of conversion as the decision to take up golf, but really the conversion is what happens to us as we learn to play golf. We are not instantly shooting par because we have decided to play golf. As Arnold Palmer says, “The more I practice the luckier I get.”

We think of conversion as a light switch that we flip. You know I am preparing for ordination. This is a three to five year process for most people. This period is called “formation” because we are being formed or converted through the work we are doing. The better image for us here is not the switch. It is the canyon. The water forms the canyon. It converts a riverbed into a canyon over time by steadily behaving in the same way.

You might guess that I don’t really think “formation” is a three to five year process, and you are right. All of us are being formed for ministry by the things that we do. It is a lifelong process. You take a first step and are baptized for example. You then grow in the faith and become increasingly the person God intends you to be. It is a journey.

The reading this week is Paul telling some things we can do. These things are the habits of life that form us. They are the water that converts our riverbed into a canyon. This is where it gets ugly.

I say it gets ugly here, because Paul gives us some things that are really hard to do. He writes “Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.” I am just saying that some things have come out of my mouth which didn’t give grace to those who heard them. This is a really tall order, and it is a tough standard.

How about this instead? “Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice.” I am a fairly serene guy, and I guess I am better about this now than maybe I was when I was younger, but I can get mad about things. I know deep down

that it is wrong for me to be angry or bitter, and Paul reminds me that the way I respond to people is the way I practice what I preach. We think we are Christians if we can show a baptismal certificate, and Paul is saying we need to act like Christians too. By acting like one, we are conforming to God's will, and we are converted to the image of Christ slowly but surely.

Let's look at what is Paul telling us to do here. He is telling us to speak the truth, but there are some things we can say that are true but not very nice. We are also told to use our words for "building up." It is not just words either, we are told to forgive one another as God has forgiven us.

A couple of weeks ago in the book group, we briefly talked about sacrifice and things we give up for Lent. I mentioned a Muslim student I had. I talked with Nazim about fasting once, and he was in Ramadan, where observant Muslims do not eat or drink during daylight hours. Nazim pointed out that it is not enough to abstain from food and drink to properly fast. He said our ears needed to fast from gossip and our tongues needed to fast from unkind words. This was a wonderful bit of insight to me, and I have often thought of it.

When Paul talks about the "sacrifice to God" in today's reading, he has just finished telling us not to gossip or to be unkind in the things we say. It is this same idea that Nazim was telling me about.

There is a temptation to look at a passage like this and be overwhelmed. This is a very high standard. When my father married us, basically the last thing he told me as part of our marriage counseling was from this passage. He said, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another." Have I always lived up to this? I would like to say "yes," but a more accurate answer would be "ummm... well, I have tried. I **am** getting better"

I want to come back to the riverbed idea again. The idea is not that we have a riverbed one day and a canyon the next. We have a process which slowly forms a canyon. In general, the things that we do have to fall into the pattern Jesus gives us, or we still form a canyon – just in the wrong direction. It is a rut we need to be very careful about establishing. The goal really is to be able to say you are "getting better."

So here are the takeaways this morning.

If you want to get better, it takes practice.

Waterboys get sent in to win games at the last minute, but most teams don't rely on this strategy.

Our actions and repeated actions form us in Christ's image or some other image.

This formation process is gradual, and it is the little things repeated over time that make the difference.

I have said these words in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen