

St. David's Presbyterian Church

September 23, 2012

St. John's, NL

17th Sunday after Pentecost

“God's Surprising Ideas about Promotion and Success”

Dr. J. Dent

One of the things you'll notice as you read the Bible more and more, or even as you listen Sunday by Sunday, from the Scriptures is how foreign the book is to us. And I don't mean how Middle Eastern, or the fact that most of the books are millennia old. What I mean is that God's point of view is often in direct contrast to our own. Given our sinful tendencies, this in itself should not come as much of a surprise. Yet, every time I take seriously God's revelation of who He is, who we are, what we are going through in life, I am often surprised.

I am surprised when God says to me, from Luke 6:26, Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount, “Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.” This is a surprising reversal of what I hope to receive. And please, don't everyone start speaking poorly about me at once, I don't have the faith or the maturity to accept congregation wide criticism. Yet I do want to be able to hear both the positive and the negative. What God is saying, is that God has the final word on how things are going at church, and at work, and at school. Don't get too cozy with compliments or complimenters, because they mightn't have the whole picture as God does. And please don't give up complimenting and making kind remarks, as God is not against compliments, but against things that aren't true, misrepresentations of reality, if you will.

Next week we are going to do contemporary music with a band throughout the service. We are doing this as a way to experience varieties of worship and music. We already experience many types of music throughout the year: classical, hymns, worship songs, contemporary, jazz, gospel, etc. We hope you will enjoy a slight change in the worship for some, a larger change for others. This is a pilot project for this year, at the end of every month we will have a band instead of solo piano or organ. We want your feedback. And the elders are willing to hear whatever you would like to say about this type of service.

I'm trusting the Lord for the direction of our congregation. The Session is doing the same. We are asking for wisdom from above as James instructs us

in the letter we have been studying here on Sunday mornings for the last several weeks. Part of what we are constantly asking in our leadership meetings is what makes this place, this organization, this community exactly what it should be in God's eyes. We share our building with the community and other Christians. We look to increase the ministries here and creatively offer new things in every area of the church.

We want to encourage young people and people from all cultures and backgrounds to be at home here, with the gospel of Jesus Christ at the center. How to do this becomes challenging at times. Some have said to us when we presented a set of questions to the congregation last year that we need to have a more formal service, with greater dignity and reverence in our times together. Others have said to us that they want a less formal service, one where they can feel more at home and they can be themselves. As you can see, it will be difficult to keep both these parties happy. So we do some of everything.

A church leader recently told me that if you are getting complaints from both sides of a changing or challenging situation, then perhaps the balance you are achieving is just right. Now don't hear me wrongly, I'm not encouraging you to complain. I am encouraging you to speak out what you need to say, so that we can become better together.

James often uses stronger language than I would use. He notes that we should guard what we say and be aware of what's going on inside ourselves when we say it. He says we should particularly watch out when we are envious inside or have a strong selfish ambition. Envy is when we feel we lack something we see others have as a strength. Envy can turn to bitterness as we feel we get the dirty end of the stick, while someone else gets it easier or better. Selfish ambition is where we care only about our own reactions to what is happening and our own promotion in that.

Each of us needs to be sensitive when we consider where others are coming from, their backgrounds, their needs, their concerns. This does not trump our own, nor does it make our own needs inconsequential. No. We need the wisdom from above, in all parts of our lives, at work in what to say about our faith, at school in how to make sense of who we are as believers when that might be ridiculed, in the church, when we sometimes disagree over important matters and less important matters. We do need to tell others how we feel.

James says that we are to look for heavenly wisdom. He doesn't exactly give us what that will sound like. But it will be characterized by purity, peacefulness, being considerate, submissive to authority, i.e. respectful, full of mercy, good fruit, i.e. words and actions go together, impartial, i.e. at least trying to go beyond our given subjectivity to a larger picture of everyone involved, and sincere.

Sincerity comes from the Latin "sine ceres" which means "without wax." Now lest think of our ear wax or car wax, you should know the ancient context. Pottery was often sold in the ancient market place. Pottery was used to cook hot foods in, retain liquids and be a way to make hot drinks as well. Pottery came in many sizes, shapes and quality. Some unscrupulous potters would sell broken and chipped pottery. And the way they would mend the pottery was with wax. They would pour a little bit of the molten wax into the cracked pots and sell them as whole until the customer would go home and use the pot and immediately know they had been swindled. Sincerity is showing your cracks and brokenness, not trying to paint yourself as something you are not. Insincerity and hypocrisy are often condemned in Scripture.

And God goes farther than that. He talks about being very aware of what is going on inside us when we are in conflict with others. We cannot control what they say and do. But we can control what we say and do. We cannot make them apologize or ask forgiveness, but we can admit where we are wrong and ask forgiveness of others. God then becomes the one we submit to in our conflicts rather than the other person. There are many losses to admit in this way of doing things. But as we humble ourselves before God together, many wonderful healings take place. I wish life were easier sometimes. I wish the church were a perfect place of grace and mercy. But of course, if the church were perfect, I couldn't be a part of it, because of my many sins and imperfections.

So perhaps Jesus' teaching puts it as simply and as surprisingly as it could be put. As the disciples were arguing about who was going to be greatest in the kingdom, perhaps planning the Cabinet positions with Jesus as Prime Minister, Jesus stops them in their tracks and says "seek the lower position." Seek the serving position. Maybe it's cleaning toilets and taking the hair out of drains that equips you more than your eloquence or money or social

position. Jesus surprises us. Promotion comes to those who serve in small ways, perhaps in ways that others might consider not worth their time.

Jesus says we need to welcome children here, which is in part why we have been pleading with you for being a Sunday School teacher, at least some of the time. As we care for the little ones, so we care for the whole body, and show that we care about what God thinks about what we are doing, more than just what I think.

God's idea about what a successful ministry looks like here might be different than my idea or your idea. What we need to do is seek God together which is what we are doing right now, and in the prayers.

We are in this together. I appreciate that you have a ministry where you are just as mine is with you. I am trusting God for all that we need in this coming year. We hope you will pray for the leadership as we get together this coming weekend, Board and Session, in order to vision for our future as a church, in every aspect of who we are.

Let us pray.