

# “A PLEASING FAITH”

based on Hebrews 10:19-25; 35-39

preached on Ash Wednesday, February 25, 2009

I would like to look at two opposing pictures tonight. One is the story of the transfiguration. I trust that you remember the story, when Jesus and a few disciples went on a retreat. Jesus regularly went to quiet places to get away from the crowds. There was so much pressure on him. The demand for his attention, the desire for his touch was enormous. Anyone who has been involved in healing, even most everyone who has been healed knows how much energy that takes. When I tore my Achilles tendon a few years back I immediately and painfully became aware that an injury can occur in a second, but the healing can take months or even years.

So Jesus needed to get away to refuel. He needed some time for rest, relaxation, prayer, and spiritual renewal. While away, he had an amazing experience. His appearance changed. His clothes became a dazzling white. Elijah and Moses appeared with him. And then for all the world to hear, even though there were only a couple of people listening, the Lord said, *"This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased."* That is the scene I would like you to see in your mind. Jesus standing between the law and the prophets in human form with the Lord making the divine opinion known to all who could see or hear. It was the same message we heard when Jesus was baptized in the Jordan. As he came out of the water the heavens were torn open and the Spirit of God descended like a dove. And the voice of God declared, *"This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased."*

How did the Lord convey that message? I don't know. I don't know if it was audible or telepathic. I don't know if it was Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, Chinese or English. Usually I hear God in English and it's a pretty good thing too because I would have to spend too much time translating. But I do know that the account of the transfiguration was first written in Aramaic. It was translated into English centuries later. And thus we are able to hear, "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased." But if we go back to that form of Greek and translate it literally it says, "This is my beloved Son who gives me pleasure." Jesus makes God the Father happy. He lived in such faithfulness that when the Lord looks to my Lord Jesus, he is so proud he could bust, so giddy he could giggle. He gives me pleasure. What a picture that is on the Mount of Transfiguration.

With that picture still in your mind I want to turn to the passage read tonight out of Hebrews. There we are reminded of a time of judgment that is yet to come. I can envision huge crowds being brought before the throne of God. One by one they must stand before God so the state of the heart, soul, and spirit of each one can be evaluated. Sometimes when God looks at that person, He sees Jesus standing before him. They have been living in Christ, and now the relationship has been so close that this one is never seen through the eyes of God without Jesus being seen in him and around him. But at other times, if someone must stand there on their own to be judged, standing without the divine son, Jesus, then we hear, "I find no pleasure in you. You don't make me happy at all. I feel no joy when I look at you. You do not give me pleasure."

I remember when the President was impeached by the House of Representatives. It was an action that I believed to be necessary and I made no secret about that. After the vote was tabulated I was asked if that finally made me happy. No, it did not. But then I was not basing my opinion on my bias for or against the

President. I believe that fundamental principles of truth, honor, and basic respect had been violated. I saw no reason to rejoice over this sad event that the country had to deal with. I could not rejoice over the idea that personalities were given a higher priority than principles. I found no pleasure in that.

Often within the Annual Conference I have been given the task of interviewing people to see if they are fit to serve a United Methodist Church. We push those candidates for ministry because we know that they are going to be pushed a lot harder when they serve a church. Most who come before us are approved without question. Each year, though, a few are not. Some we like, some we don't. But we are not judging whether he or she can fit in at a social gathering. We judge their talents, abilities, and call to ministry in the midst of God's people. And I guarantee you that whenever we turn someone away, we take no pleasure in it, just like God takes no pleasure in turning someone away.

There was once a pastor who I believed to be a very talented, competent pastor. He did remarkably well in his first parish. He was moved and things were going well for a while, but then something happened. Over time disagreements grew to open warfare. Things got ugly. The church split into hostile factions. Attendance and offering dropped out of sight. And so the pastor was moved to give him a new start. But 18 months later the same scene was being played out once again. I was sent to evaluate one part of the ministry and it was quite difficult because I knew this pastor well. I worked with him and liked him. But it appeared as though this pastor had developed an understanding that the people of the congregation were supposed to try to please him rather than please the Lord. Now when I look at him, though I love him and want the best for him, I find no pleasure in him.

Other times when I have evaluated congregations I have found attitudes and mind sets that the pastor is there to please them rather than working to give the Lord pleasure. They clamor to be served rather than to serve, as though the pastor is there to give them pleasure. And yet in his preaching Jesus told us again and again that we are to deny ourselves for the sake and the service of God. We are to come together in obedience in the body of Christ, so that when the Lord looks at us, He will be pleased; so we might give God pleasure.

We are told that God's will is that not one will be lost. Yet day by day people are walking away from Jesus in defiance. Just in the past ten years or so, attendance at worship nationwide has dropped 25-30%. People live to please only themselves. And some succeed in that. But when God looks upon them, even though he loves them as much as his own Son, he finds no pleasure in them.

What is your relationship with God? Think about that relationship for a few moments. Under the law, the Jewish law, the focus was to not offend God. Paul went nuts trying to live a perfect life so God would not get mad at him. He was so zealous in pursuing the followers of Jesus because they were out there on the cutting edge. They were doing so many things, and in Paul's mind, that could not be good. The more they did, the greater chance they took that they would do something to irritate God. But the concept of pleasing God was never considered. The disciples developed a mind set that even if they tried to help, tried to evangelize, tried to heal and failed, it did not matter. God has never graded on a curve. He has always graded on a cross. God grades on faithfulness, not human results. And we are called to live a pleasing faith, to be active and involved in offering the grace of Jesus in word and deed, so that when God looks on us, He might have pleasure.

Dr. Leonard Sweet has said, and this whole idea comes from the writings and teachings of Dr. Sweet, Dr. Sweet has said that he found that the concepts of pleasing and faith were always close to one another in his life. It is just that together, they turned out a little different. Usually our relationship with God is “Please God, give me this. Please God keep me from that. Please God, become active in such a way that I am pleased.” We are called to God. We are to seek help from the heavens. But in our relationship with God are we more interested in God pleasing us than we are in us pleasing God. After living so long focused on the asking, “Please God” isn't it time that we as the children of God begin to remove the comma, that we might live to Please God.

Tonight I want you to think about your relationship with God and just where the focus of that relationship is right now. That is what Ash Wednesday is all about. It is looking at ourselves honestly in the light of God's love for us, his call to us, and his desires, his direction about the way we live our life. This is the time when we begin to follow Jesus to the cross; when we begin to realize our part in forcing Him to make that journey, to die that death. It was all necessary for our relationship with God to be healed, that we might be rectified, that we might come to God again; that we might live with God, that we might live in Christ again. Knowing all that, being connected to God once again, through the grace of Christ, what do we do with this opportunity to live in a close, loving, intimate relationship with God?

Sometimes we know people who are easily offended. Around them we find ourselves walking on eggshells all the time, always fearful that we will do something to offend them. We are afraid that we will do or say something that will set them off, and so we do as little as possible around them. But with others we have no such fear. We live life boldly, looking forward to the joy we might have together. We don't worry about offending them because we know that even if we cross a line, we will repent, and they will forgive because they care for us. They love us. And so they protect the relationship in which we live. They protect the relationship more than their own feelings. They care about us more than the stupid little things we sometimes do.

In your relationship with God, how do you live? Do you concentrate on not offending God? Do you walk on eggshells? Are you careful with every word, every action? That's sort of like a sports team playing not to lose. They don't play to win and so they rarely do. They play not to lose and end up doing just that. In the same way, when we live trying not to offend God, we come to the place where God no longer finds pleasure in us. We offend God because we withdraw within ourselves, failing to reach out in love, to reach out with grace, as Christ does with us. We fail to step out and live boldly as God has desired for us from the beginning. Or maybe we are still stuck in the “Please God” syndrome where we want and expect God to please us. But if we are to be true to Jesus Christ, our task is to live a pleasing faith. Our task is to be bold and live life to the fullest that grace might abound; that peace and joy might be a part of us forever. So today, in your life, on this Ash Wednesday, it is time to remove the comma. It is time to live and work and serve to please God, so when God looks upon us it will give Him pleasure.

As a pastor I have never put ashes on foreheads. The lectionary text for today says that we are to do our acts of piety in secret. A cross smeared on the head for all the world to see sort of seems to defeat that purpose. But I do want you to take this day seriously. I want you to turn your life back toward God, to closely walk with Jesus as he moves toward Jerusalem. To help you remember that God hopes to find

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pleasure in us, to remind you that we are to live so that when God looks at us he is so giddy he could giggle, I have created these simple cards. When you come forward for communion, take one with you and put it where you will see it regularly. Strive to remove the comma. Strive to live a pleasing faith, an active faith, a vital faith, so the Lord may say about you, "This is my child who gives me pleasure." In your life may it be so. Amen.