

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Sunday, June 2, 2019
Rev. Dr. David Thompson

“Frustrating Love”

Text:

“Take the two by four out of your own eye before you try to take the splinter out of someone else’s eye.” Jesus

Should we try to change the people we care about?

Is it possible for us to change the people we love? After many years in the ministry I have decided that the answer is a definite no- the only person we can change is our own self.

But, if we do that, all sorts of exciting things can happen. **Why? People have to adjust to the new us!**

One of the world-famous sayings of Christ is centered here: he says. “Before you decide to take out the splinter in someone else’s eye, take out the 2x4 in your own!”

In the light of that saying here is a hard question that can be directed at ourselves: **How can I change myself so that I don’t need any longer to try to change the other person?**

One of the hardest things for us to learn about living with an alcoholic spouse is that the alcoholic has to hit bottom and tragically that bottom might even be their death. And that is so hard to bear or to watch. You want to do something, anything to help, but you cannot if the person who needs to be helped does not want to change.

The same thing goes for the smoker or your controlling spouse, that son or daughter who does not want to change. There is no way that we will change them if they do not want to change. Why?

Because people engage in undesirable behaviors because there are payoffs for them.

Take procrastination for example. Here are the payoffs. Procrastination allows us to escape from unpleasant activities, the things we are afraid to start, the things we are afraid to change.

We also get to blame the world for our unhappiness as we do nothing. Procrastination can eliminate failure because someone else might do it for us. Also, by putting things off we can make sure that we are not successful. That will allow us to wallow in self-pity. We won’t need to feel good about ourselves or take the responsibility that goes along with success. So, we procrastinate!

The Jesus of history was not a universally popular person. Let’s remember that he was crucified. So how did he handle rejection and people’s refusal to change?

He told two stories. One is the parable of the sower, also known as the parable of the soils. Why did the sower sow seed on the path, amongst thorns, or on shallow soil as well as good soil?

It goes back to the ploughing methods of the day. We plough the fields and scatter. In those days they sowed the seed then ploughed it in. So, the footpath would be ploughed as well as the thorn patch. It was considered good farming practice. Perhaps some seed would grow where the path used to be. But the results were usually predictable: it was on the path or amongst the thorns or in the shallow soil where the problems developed.

Lesson?

It was only in the good soil where the seed did well. But what is the good soil? **It is the soil that is ready to receive the seed!**

The second parable is also about planting seed in a field and night and day, while the farmer sleeps, the seed sprouts and grows. The farmer does nothing from sowing to harvest time. What is this about? It also is about changing people!

There are huge lessons here in these two little gems of parables and very exciting ones if we can get them! For instance, do we think that by nagging, dropping hints, outbursts of tears or withdrawal that we are going to bring about the change we so desperately seek? Doesn't work does it?

For instance, we may be absolutely right about something. We may have all the correct information. We may see the consequences clearly for our friend. We may love them as best we know how. But if the soil is not ready to receive the seed, it won't grow. Or if it does it will sprout then dry up or get choked out. The soil is everything. It must be ready!

That is a tough, tough lesson to learn when we want to change people in what we conceive to be their best interest. **For if people are not ready to change, no matter what strategy we try simply will not work.** And why should it? Are people not to be sovereign in their own hearts and minds? Are we not to respect them enough to let them make their own decisions?

God does. God never forces us, or we would lose our freedom. But a great principle applies here: **'When the student is ready the teacher appears.'** That is how God works.

The second lesson is this: **All we can do is to sow the seed.** No nagging, anxiety, no manipulation will make any difference. If the seed is sown, if the soil is ready, it will grow without our efforts. We can trust that absolutely.

That leaves us with but one task: **To sow the seed.**

How did the historical Jesus convince his hearers about who he was? I think he did one thing consistently- he loved others unconditionally. He loved without strings attached! He even loved his enemies like that. That is what made Jesus different from his contemporaries and that is what started the Christian faith.

You see the problem needs the correct frame if we are to see it clearly. Loving people and hoping to change them is all about **our need love, it is love with strings attached.** One thing for sure! It is not unconditional love and that is the heart of the problem.

We want to sow our variety of seed, our hopes and dreams, our agenda, our neediness and people instantly sense that. Guaranteed! And that is a major reason why we get nowhere. The good seed is unconditional love and it is the only seed we need to sow.

I think that it is perhaps one of the hardest things in all the world to be able to do- to love someone without conditions, to expect no return of any kind, to love freely without any motive except love itself.

But what are we supposed to do according to the Jesus of history? Sow the good seed of unconditional love and then relax about the results. We learn to let go of the outcome! When we get that, it is so liberating!!

But is it possible really to love like this or is this too hard for us?

In Hebrew love is an active verb. Any of us at any time can love without manipulation. How? By doing an act of pure kindness.

When we see a car is broken down by the side of the road and we are in a position to be a good Samaritan, that is an occasion to love unconditionally. And that love can be extended to a friend, lover, stranger, spouse or child, any time we decide, and that is our true freedom and way out of victimhood.

And here is the key: **When we love without need, without fear, without strings, I can guarantee that the person loved like this will notice the difference immediately!**

Sure, at first, they may be suspicious. They will expect the old agenda from us! But when the agenda does not come, they might come to believe that you love them *just the way they are* and that will make all the difference in the world to your relationship with them.

But you say “David, this is all well and good, but her procrastination affects me. Bill’s drinking affects us all. Are you saying that I am supposed to love him or her unconditionally **and do nothing?** That is what you seem to be saying.”

Yes, I admit it. We cannot change that special person we want to help- except for perhaps one way. **We can change ourselves!!**

In some bad situations the only thing we can do is to get out of the situation in order to protect ourselves. In other situations, it may be necessary for us to set limits and give consequences. For the truth is this: many of us do not seem to learn very well without consequences.

I was watching a little boy once trying to put a hot chip into his mouth. He was told that if he did that, he would get an owie! But what did he do?” He put the chip in his mouth anyway and got an owie. We are all just a little like that. That is why speeding tickets generally work. But consequences do not necessarily change **the desires** behind behaviors. The payoffs may still be stronger.

I have a friend who has speeded all his life. After losing most of his points he had to take a test as to why he speeded. The examiner asked him to fill out a form on which ten reasons were printed as to why he was speeding. He was to identify one or more. My friend looked them over and said, “The reason I speed is not down there.”

The examiner was scornful. He said “Look we have done the research, and these are the reasons that people speed. Were you late for an appointment? Were you impatient with the traffic? Did you want to see how fast the car would go? What do you mean that your reason is not down there?” My friend looked over the list carefully once again and said. “No, my reason is not there!” The examiner said, “Okay wise guy what is it?” My friend said, “I like to speed!” Fines and consequences have not changed my friend. He still likes to speed.

But if you have seen the light and want to change, I have some good news today.

When the soil has been readied and is prepared to receive the good seed of unconditional love- **the person can change**. The seed will grow and produce a magnificent harvest!

When the person is ready, they will hear things they never heard before, they will stop rationalizing, they will face themselves perhaps for the first time.

Lesson here? When the soil is ready, **we can help**. When we have learned to love without an agenda and let go of outcome, we can be a tremendous support to the person we love in their struggles.

The man who wrote Life’s Little Instruction Book tried to change his son Adam. As a Father he had been extremely critical of his little boy. At the age of five he tried to get his son to swim with his face under water. He said; “Adam you disappoint me. I want you to swim like a big boy with your face in the water. But you are still fearful. I’m angry at you!” And the little fellow said: “Daddy, it makes me sad when you talk to me like that.” The father realized then he was talking to his 5-year-old as if he was fifteen.

Over the years the relationship deteriorated until in high school the father really wanted Adam to try out for the football team. But Adam had registered for the computer club. Again, the father dumped all over Adam and treated him at the age of fifteen as if he were a five-year-old. Did it work? Of course not! It only drove a deeper wedge between them. When Jackson Brown saw what he was doing to his son, he suddenly stopped. **He began to work on himself instead of his son. He got rid of his 2x4! He put his own reactions under control.**

You guessed it! His son Adam was suspicious. But slowly he came to believe the change in his father. They actually began to talk together- no agenda, just talk, and slowly friendship came along and mutual trust and respect. Adam did not go out for football. He went on to become a computer whiz. And when it came time to install new computers in the family business, he helped his father install them and program them, saving his father a lot of time and expense.

Want to get rid of frustrating love? Drop the conditions. The love we all want is not based on our wants or needs, hopes fears or any other manifestation of the ego's thought system. It is without conditions. Plant that good seed of unconditional love in all your relationships and watch the harvest grow! You will be so glad that you did, for what we give out always returns to us in greater measure! As the Beatles once sang in rather profound lyrics:

***Love, love, love
There's nothing you can do that can't be done
Nothing you can sing that can't be sung
Nothing you can say, but you can learn how to play the game
It's easy
Nothing you can make that can't be made
No one you can save that can't be saved
Nothing you can do, but you can learn how to be you in time
It's easy
All you need is love
Love is all you need.***