

OAK GROVE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Deuteronomy 6:4–9

Romans 12:1–2

Let us pray.

God of mercy, you promised never to break your covenant with us. In the midst of the multitude of words in our daily lives, speak your eternal word to us that we may respond to your gracious promises with faithfulness, service and love. Amen.

Deuteronomy 6:4–9

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Romans 12:1–2

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Not too long ago, a friend posted this story on Facebook. There was a man being tailgated by a stressed-out driver on a busy street. Suddenly, the light turned yellow just in front of him. He did the right thing, stopping, even though he could have beaten the red light by accelerating through the intersection.

The driver who was tailgating behind was furious, honking the horn, screaming in frustration as she missed her chance to get through the intersection, dropping the cell phone and spilling her soda. As she was still mid-rant, she heard a tap on the window and looked up into the face of a very serious police officer.

The officer ordered the frustrated driver out of the car with her hands up. She was taken to the police station, finger-printed, photographed and placed in a holding cell.

After a couple of hours, an officer approached the cell and opened the door. The frustrated driver was escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects.

The officer said, “I’m very sorry for the mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, flipping off the guy in front of you, and cussing a blue streak at him. I noticed the “What would Jesus Do” bumper sticker and the “Follow me to Sunday School” license plate holder, and the chrome plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk.

Naturally, I assumed you had stolen the car.

As old as this joke is, and as many times as we may have heard it before, we laugh or we think it’s funny because, just like the police officer, we don’t expect someone who professes to be a Christian to behave in the way that the frustrated driver did. There is a disconnect between what the back of the car proclaims and the actions of its driver.

Or perhaps some of us even laugh nervously to ourselves because there is a hint of recognition in this joke. There is a disconnect between our actions and what we profess. Maybe this Christian thing doesn't come as naturally as we might want it to.

This leads us to the next aspect in our sermon series on the nature and attributes of the church. As a quick review, in the previous weeks we have talked about how God has gifted us all, how God formed the church, how God gives the church its mission, and how we are made to be in relationship with one another. Today, we look at the role of formation or education.

What shapes you? What forms you? What has influence over you? What was it that possibly shaped the impatient driver? There are a variety of ways in which we are shaped and influenced. What informs how I behave, and what I believe, what forms me to be the person that I am? What shapes you to be the person you are?

The ancient church understood the necessity to help shape and form their communities – it was inherent in their Jewish roots. The reading from Deuteronomy is known as the Shema. It is a very important piece of scripture for Jews. It is recited at least twice a day by observant Jews. And note what it says. First it starts with the foundational reminder that God is our God, and that God is one. This is pretty much a recapitulation of the first commandment. And then, after this reminder, we are told to love God with all our heart, soul, and strength. Fully love God.

And then here is where the formation and education comes in – the commandments that God gives are to be on our hearts – when you know something by heart, it is because it is something that is important, it is something that you have committed to, it is something that you have spent time with. The Shema goes further and says that not only are we to have the commandments on our hearts, but we are to recite them to our

children. We are to pass this on to the next generation. We are to share with children what it is to know our God, to love God with all our strength, mind, and soul. We are to talk about such things when we are at home, and when we are away, before we go to bed and when we get up in the morning. And if we forget, bind these words to our hands and heads and our gates and our doorposts. Perhaps you have seen observant Jews wearing a phylactery, a small little box, on their left arm or on their foreheads, it is the scripture from Deuteronomy that is written on a small slip of paper inside. Or maybe you have entered into a home and seen a mezuzah, a small box usually on the right-hand side of the door as you enter that also contains a small scroll with this passage. The Shema is what shapes the life and practice of the Jews and guides them in their relationship with God.

Both Jews and the early church faced a great deal of plurality and diversity in the culture, and sometimes it was a hostile culture to their faith. In the face of this, the leaders of the early church developed a process to nurture and instruct people before they were baptized. This process was called catechesis, and it could last up to three years long. By the time someone went through this process, they knew what it meant to be a follower of Christ, they knew how to weigh their faith against cultural norms, they could talk about and share their faith, and they were shaped for mission, for service.

As I mentioned a few weeks ago, as we continue to move into the twenty-first century, a shift has occurred in North America from a period of church culture to a post-church culture. Simply put, in this new post-church world the wider culture is no longer supportive of or helps form people in a Christian identity. Congregations that have not recognized this shift in the wider culture expect people to be fully formed Christians getting the majority of their formation from the society around them. But this attitude, in fact, can be damaging to the

faith. One writer says, “Without the scaffolding of cultural Christianity to support the church, fewer and fewer church members benefit from immersion in an integrated set of communal Christian practices, beliefs, and norms.” Without this inculcation in communal practice, belief, and norms, “many assemble beliefs, perspectives, and practices fluidly out of a variety of sources, some of which may be antithetical to core Christian commitments.”¹

My fear is that many of us, and maybe more importantly, our children are formed more by a catechesis of the culture of North America rather than a catechesis of the church, and that this catechesis of the culture is forming us in ways with values and practices that are antithetical to the Good News. One theologian, (Michael Gallagher), suggests that there are three ways that this catechesis of culture shapes us that are in opposition to a Christian way of life.

The first is individualism. Within our culture the needs of the individual come first. “We live in a culture where meeting one’s needs and wants holds considerable if not consummate value.”² Most people in America don’t wake up first thing in the morning and ask, “How will I serve the common good today?” or “How will I help my neighbor today?” Instead, it’s “how can I achieve?” “how can I make it to the top?”, “how can I get the good life?” Several Christian social commentators note that North Americans are “persuasively formed in egoist tendencies of self-concern and narcissism.”³ If there is any self-giving, it is usually a

¹ Dwight J. Zscheile, “A Missional Theology of Spiritual Formation,” Paper presented at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN, 12 November, 2010.

² Samuel Torvend, *Flowing Water Uncommon Birth: Christian Baptism in a Post-Christen Culture*, Worship Matters series (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2011) 30.

³ Ibid.

periodic or one-time act of volunteerism and not a habit of the heart. Is this a Christian sensibility?

The second way we are shaped by our culture is the way in which our society is marked by aggressive competition. Our television is inundated with reality shows where people are eliminated each week, and the entire purpose of the game is to outlast, outwit, and outplay one another to become the winner. In our economy, in our capitalist marketplace, one “must compete vigorously with others in order to ‘beat them’ at the game.”⁴ In this type of culture, the few win and are valued and approved of by the culture for their hard work, endurance, education level, and connections. Success is the name of the game. It’s such a powerful value in our culture that there are many who think that those with the most money and the biggest houses is interpreted as a sign of blessing from God. Winning at all costs, is this a Christian value?

A third way in which the culture shapes us is by commodification. What this means is that in a consumer economy, each person is told that their fundamental purpose is to consume products. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, Americans were told to get to work, and by working and producing we would defeat the enemy. After the attack on September 11th, Americans were told to consume. By shopping we would defeat our enemy. In the church, this commodification is seen by packaging Christianity into flashy worship, or entertainment for people to consume. The church becomes just one more marketplace where people shop to get the best religious goods and services to meet their needs. Is this really the gospel?

Are we shaped by what we consume, or who we beat, or by our own wants and desires, what’s best for me? Is this what it means to be

⁴ Ibid, 31.

baptized in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit? I don't think so. The church is responsible for shaping people in a different way.

One of the things I love about worship here at Oak Grove is the use of the rose on the baptismal font when someone in the Oak Grove community has been born, or when someone dies. I love this because it reminds us that in life and death, from the beginning to the end, we are God's, this small symbolic action centers our identity around the baptismal font. This small act helps shape us and remind us of our baptismal identity.

In the face of such overwhelming catechesis of our culture, I think it's important for us to pay attention to our baptismal identity; to our invitation to live as a Child of God, sealed by the Holy Spirit, and marked as Christ's own forever. And to let that reality shape who we are to be. Being formed by our baptism means to live a life shaped by the graciousness of God, the forgiveness of Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit to use our Spirit-given gifts in the service of others. When we pay attention to our baptismal identity, it means we take our formation seriously.

There is a saying that perhaps you have heard, that "you are the only Bible some people will read." Meaning, how you live your life may be the only thing that people have to know about God. Again, think about the driver from earlier. Having our actions and our faith match takes effort and practice. Paul says in Romans that we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. This is a life-long lesson plan.

Living the Christian life, Paul suggests takes practice. It takes focus, it takes determination, it takes effort. Like an athlete training to win a race, we must train ourselves.

When he was in his early 50's, my father went for a walk with my mother and some friends one evening. It was not a long walk, and not a particularly rugged course, just a nice walk after dinner. When he arrived back at the house, he was worn out and winded. He had a hard time keeping up and was out of breath. This was a sufficient wake-up call for him and a recognition that he had not taken very good care of himself. He resolved that night to improve his health. He entered a half-marathon and began training. He finished that half-marathon. He caught the running bug and went on to run several full marathons. He got in great shape. It required discipline and training. It required him to be active and not just a spectator.

The spiritual life is similar. If we are to be mature in our faith, we must be disciplined. We cannot just be spectators. One of the core practices of the church is to cultivate committed disciples to live fully into their baptismal identity. Mary mentioned last week that we have to practice at one-anothering, to be forgiving and loving to one another. The Christian life requires discipline and active engagement with our faith. To stretch the metaphor, my hope is that our church can be like a world-class gym that trains exceptional spiritual athletes to serve on God's team.

The Christian life is not easy, it's hard. Recall a couple of weeks ago when we heard Paul write to the community in Corinth to remind them that the greatest commandment is to love. Love is the mark of a mature faith. And that to love someone means that we are patient and kind; that we should not be boastful, proud, rude, or self-seeking. That we shouldn't be easily angered, that we shouldn't keep score of being wronged.

The Christian life is hard. I don't always want to be merciful or patient. Sometimes I'm rude, or boastful. Sometimes I keep score and don't forgive when someone has hurt me. Sometimes I am impatient, and

sometimes I yell. Sometimes, if I was used as an example of the Christian life, I would be disqualified. I imagine that the same can be said for most of us. And so, I train. I work-out so that I may be more loving, more patient, less boastful or rude. I practice being loving. I practice so that I can become more Christ-like. It will be something that I will have to do for the rest of my life. We practice getting better, to become more proficient, to become more skilled. We practice so that the Christian life becomes more natural for us, and so that we can show others the way.

This is the ultimate goal. The church exists not so that we may feel good about ourselves, the church is not about us. God created the church to follow in the footsteps of Jesus with the power of the Holy Spirit to reconcile the whole world. The church is about building up the community in love. That is a big mission, and it requires that we are adequately prepared and equipped to fulfill that mission. My question for all of you (and for myself) is how is the spiritual training going? Maybe you need to speak with a trainer here at this particular gym? Maybe you need a new regimen. Maybe you need some encouragement? Maybe you need to learn some new exercises? I look forward to working out with you.