

"A Good Work in Progress" (part 1)

A REALITY CHECK

I want to talk for a moment about the state of our church family. We all know we have been blessed with a new place, a new bishop, and in a couple weeks a new Anglican Church in North America when a 39th Province of the Anglican Communion is established. During the last six months, many have contributed to making our new place - home - by giving of their resources – time, money and energy. Many have said how blessed they have been to be part of our move and how they are inspired by our new bishop, Dr. Bill Atwood. Many can see how God has worked to carry this whole thing out.

I know of only three former members who did not come with us because of our move out of the Episcopal Church. There were a few others who didn't come but that is not because of the move but for other reasons prior to our departure. This is quite remarkable given the size of our congregation of over 1000 members.

And while we can give thanks for what God has done and is doing, at the same time there will always be a percentage of our church family that while supportive of all that we are doing, still stay at a distance. In fact, there may be some who are very involved now but by next year may have lost interest. This is not unusual, it is true of every family and it is true of every church family: those who, for whatever reason, end up not keeping a close connection or not keeping in touch.

There are a number of reasons for this. Sometimes going to church never had been a real priority, or maybe they have gotten bored, or maybe they are disappointed with God, or feel spiritually stagnant. There are all sorts of reasons. Some may have never really been born again, while others may have, but are going through a "dark night of the soul" where they feel like God has abandoned them. Whatever the reason, we need to understand that while we may come to a point of giving up on them, God doesn't. He never gives up on them, or us.

The truth is when you come to know Jesus Christ, if you have accepted him as Lord and Savior, God is going to do a new thing in your life! The Bible says, that ***"If anyone is in Christ he is a new creature; the old has passed away, behold the new has come."*** (2 Cor. 5:17).

What is this new thing? We find the answer in **Philippians 1:6**. Please turn there.

A CONFIDENT PROMISE

Recall that I always say that we live by faith in the promises of God. Now listen to this wonderful promise. The Apostle Paul is writing to the Philippians and he says, ***"For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect (complete) it until the day of Christ Jesus."*** (Phil. 1:6).

Isn't that a great verse? Isn't that a great promise? Paul is saying with confidence that God is going to complete ***the good work*** He began in your life. Now we may not feel that way, but Paul says that's the reality.

I mean, Who is the one who began the good work in us? God. The first words in the Bible are “*In the beginning God...*” Everything begins and ends with the Lord. And that is certainly the case when it comes to walking with Him. And notice what He has begun?

A *work* – that means He is doing something for us, in us and through us. And what kind of work is it? It is a *good* work. Everything God does is good. Why? Because as Bishop Atwood said last week, God is good because of His *nature*! God is faithful, He is a loving God, and He wants to do a good work in us so that we may know that not only does He loves us but He wants to be in an intimate relationship with us.

When does the good work really begin at a point where we can measure it? When we are born again. Now some people can point to a date they accepted the Lord while others don’t know exactly when but they know they are a believer. God has begun a good work in you.

And then notice what Paul says, *He will perfect it*– the word here literally means “to make complete.” One day God will make us complete. When will that day be? “*the day of Christ Jesus.*” In other words, we won’t be totally perfected or made complete until Christ returns to establish His Kingdom in the new heavens and earth once and for all. This means that the good work God does in us will take time, it is a process which will not be fully complete until the return of Jesus Christ.

What is the good work God is doing in us? Our spiritual transformation. Transformation into what? To be like Jesus. Do you remember another promise the Apostle Paul gives us in **Romans 8:28**: “*For we know that God causes all things to work together for good for those who love the Lord and are called to His purpose.*” And then he says that “*God has predestined us to be conformed to the image of His Son...*” That means God is reworking us to be like Christ! Not in His divine attributes of omniscience, omnipotence, or omnipresence, but in His mind, His character, and attitude. The good work that God is doing in us is to so transform our minds and wills that we be like Jesus and then do the works of Jesus. Jesus said, “*Greater works than these will you do because I go to the Father.*”

So that is the end, that’s the goal. And it takes time, a lifetime. But in this age of instant gratification and instant everything, we don’t like to wait, do we? We want overnight transformation. We want true spirituality right now. I mean wouldn’t it be nice to just push a button, and out comes true spirituality.

“GO GET MAMA!”

I am reminded of a story I heard some time ago, about a fellow who was raised in Appalachia. Never wore shoes in his life. Wore overalls and old tattered blue jeans and he married a girl just like himself. Both of them were true hillbillies and they had never been to a big city.

God gave them one son. They named him “Junior.” And when junior reached the age of 13, the father realized that their son had never seen a big city, never seen the big city lights. The father thought what a great thing it would be if they could just save up some money and take a vacation to the big city and just at least stay a few nights in a grand hotel he had heard about.

Sure enough after three years of savings, they whipped up enough money to spend five nights in this hotel. So they piled into the pick-up and drove 4 1/2 hours to the big city. It was the first time they had seen a such a sight – the lights and the neon signs, the skyscrapers. And so they pulled up in front of the hotel. And the father said to his wife, “Mama you stay here in the pick-up, Junior and I are going to check things out, and we’ll come back and get you.”

So they went inside and the first thing they saw was the chandelier hanging from about three stories up. He and “Junior” stared at that chandelier. And they looked around and heard water falling. First time they ever saw an inside under the roof waterfall. He looked down a hallway and he saw an inside under the roof mall - stores that opened onto vast walkways - people and the music. But then he heard something click behind him and he turned around and saw this little room where lights would flash above the door and the door would slide open and people would step into this room and the door would close. And a little while the lights would come on and the door would open. He said, “Junior, look at this room, look!” And about that time, an old wrinkled lady came shuffling up to the elevator, and the door opened and she walked inside. Thirty seconds later the door opened and this beautiful blonde walked out. And he said, “Junior, go get mama. Tell her to come quick!”

DON'T SLOW THE PROCESS DOWN!

How wonderful it would be if our spiritual transformation happened that way – like a push of the button. But the fact is it doesn't. True spirituality is not an overnight job. Now while we can't speed up our spiritual transformation (because it is God who is doing the work) we can slow it down. And the way we slow down God's good work in us is by our sin. In fact, the reason why it has taken so long for mankind to progress to where we are today technologically and socially is due to the sinfulness of mankind.

Please turn with me now to **1 John 1:5-9**: *⁵This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. ⁶If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. ⁷But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. ⁸If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and His word has no place in our lives.*

What is the issue here? Our sin. If we sin we don't remain in Christ and we aren't filled with the Holy Spirit. We, in essence are cut off from the power of God. Not the Person of God but the power of God.

Now while God saves us from the eternal penalty of our sin through Christ's death on the cross, it does not mean that we are free from our struggle with sin in this life. We still will struggle with the old selfish nature. St. Paul tells us that *“those who belong to Christ have crucified the desires of the flesh.”* (Gal. 5:24). In other words, it is something we must choose to do. We must be proactive in this matter not passive. Human nature is to take the path of least resistance. Human nature is to ignore the sin problem.

I like what our former prayer book said *“sin is choosing to do our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, other people and all of creation.”* We can never lose sight of this insidious problem. If we aren't proactive in confessing it, in accepting God forgiveness for it and seeking to stop it, it will slow down the process of the good work God is trying to do in us.

Mankind always seeks to downplay the sin problem. Like, for example, what's going on in Great Britain. You may have heard about this on well known Christian and Prison Ministry leader, Chuck Colson on his radio commentary, *“Break Point,”* this past week. It seems as though former church members across the country are getting “de-baptized.” A recent issue of Time magazine reported that, *“More than 100,000 former Christians have downloaded 'certificates of de-baptism' in a bid to publicly renounce the faith.”*

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They have downloaded these certificates from the group called the *National Secular Society*. It's president, Terry Sanderson shared some theories as to why his group's idea has found unexpected popularity. He told Time that "*churches have become so reactionary, so politically active that people actually want to make a protest against them now. . . . They're not just indifferent anymore. They're actively hostile.*" Well, maybe. But as Colson noted, "the Church has always been active in public life, standing against wrongdoing in the culture. And there have always been people who resented that."

Sanderson went on to say that the "*de-baptism*" rite is meant to "*mock the practice of baptizing infants too young to consent.*" But again, infant baptism has long been a subject of debate within the Church. There's nothing new about that either.

What is the real reason behind the NSS idea? Colson tells us by pointing to the statement found on the NSS website, which reads in part, "*Liberate yourself from the Original Mumbo-Jumbo that liberated you from the Original Sin you never had.*"

My friends, that's the heart of the issue. Not recognizing that we are sinners in need of help, and that apart from God we are evil. And while it may feel "liberating" for our post-modern therapeutic society to not believe in personal sin or evil, the truth is, sin and evil infect our human nature. And the only way we can truly be free from it is by turning to the grace and mercy that is found in Jesus.

But once we come to Christ, while we may be saved and forgiven, we still have to do battle with the sin in our lives. The only difference is that now we can do it with God's power and grace through His Holy Spirit. Now we can be more than conquerors, we can truly be transformed so that God's work is not only for us, but in us and *through* us. And as a result, we will then be able to reach out and be God's agents of His transforming power and love. But this will only happen when we deal with our sin problem daily.

So next time you sin, confess it. Ask God to forgive you and pledge to do better. Remember that you are a good work in progress, and that God will transform you in His time. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN!