

We are what You made us
Ephesians 2: 1-10
Reverend Heather Miner
November 25, 2007

Is there anything better than a child's smile when he knows he has pleased his daddy?

Steven Curtis Chapman, one of the most prolific and award-winning Contemporary Christian artists, released an album in 1999 called *Speechless*. When I heard the song called "The Change" I saw in my mind's eye one of the young men who was part of a youth group some years back.

He wore a cross, he didn't know what his life should be;

He gave, not just a little money, to the youth offering...though his mom and sister did not attend church.

He slouched, his underwear always showed, the same adults who often complained about the dress of the teenagers asked him to be a Deacon;

He spoke looking at his shoes, he sang in the youth choir;

He never worked to get the grades at school, he went on every mission trip that was offered.

It was this young man who entered my mind when I heard Chapman's song "The Change."

Well I got myself a t shirt that says what I believe
I got letters on my bracelet to serve as my id
I got the necklace and the key chain
And almost everything a good Christian needs yeah
I got the little bible magnets on my refrigerator door
And a welcome mat to bless you before you walk across my floor
I got a Jesus bumper sticker
And the outline of a fish stuck on my car
And even though this stuff's all well and good yeah
I cannot help but ask myself

What about the change
What about the difference
What about the grace
What about forgiveness

What about a life that's showing
I'm undergoing the change yeah
I'm undergoing the change.

Chapman's lyrics capture well the inner challenge for our Christian commitment to make a difference in our soul. Our insides don't seem to have changed enough. Old issues cycle about. We stay stuck as my young friend often seemed stuck. Hanging around church didn't make him a better student, make romance any easier, or give him a clearer path.

Yet, while these "what are you going to do with your life?" were too often the subjects of my questions, perhaps they weren't the things that really mattered. He came to church, not so he could get better grades, but so he might be part of a community of grace. He came to church, not for a clearer path, but so that he might live a life of forgiveness. He came to church...not for girls...well, yes, there was one girl...but even when one romance failed, where others would drop away, this young man continued to be part of the group. He came to church that he might please God.

How many times did I shake my head in wonder when I saw him at church yet again. I suspect his friends would laugh at the idea of him donning a robe to sing in church. He was so willing to do whatever we asked...so willing to serve.

It isn't a surprise, then, that he became a soldier. He went to Iraq and Afghanistan.

People from the church wrote to him. They sent pictures. They prayed.

When he returned, the first stop on his itinerary was church and there was a party. The fellowship hall was filled with those who were students with him, veterans of other wars, mothers, children, grandmothers, granddads, fathers. They all stood and applauded. And, Jason smiled.

Our passage from Ephesians begins by placing all of us in the same category. There are no divisions of those who are more or less faithful than another. There is no talk about who might be the most successful in their lives--no talk of grades or girls or beauty or fitness. Instead Ephesians begins that, at one time, we all were slouching screw-ups staring at our shoes.

"You were all dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived,

following the course of this world,

following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient."

A number of years ago there was a soap opera called “As the World Turns.” In typical soap opera fashion, lives were broken again and again so that we might get to the next emotional scene, the next place of romance. This was the course of the world...as the world turns, so do our lives.

Was it a soap opera because what we saw was in desperate need of cleaning?

These days we have reality tv shows where people are thrown together in the same house. The producers create an element of competition and cut down the dialogue into those places where the ruler of the power of the air breaks through.

Was I the only one who felt in need of a shower after watching one of the Survivor episodes long ago?

While these shows go to extremes, our souls recognize the truth in them...that when we allow this world, or the competition of the moment, to be greater than all else, we lose our desire to please God.

The theological world view out of which the ruler of the air comes refers to the belief was that the devil’s stronghold was in the place between the heavens and the earth, in the air itself. So while those who choose a reality tv show are put in a place where the air is thick with that which is not of heaven, we all are exposed to competition, to a desire for romance, to all those many things which can lure us away from God. Each breath we take holds the temptation of leading us to follow other desires, to make our homes in a place that falls short of the eternal. We fall victim to those freeway signs that say, “You could be home now.” The air we breathe fills us with the desire to be among the familiar, to live in that which is of our own making. This is the power at work among those who are disobedient.

Following the ruler of the power of the air is a phrase unique to Ephesians--meant to contrast another phrase, also unique to Ephesians, that occurs in chapter 1. Paul writes “so that you may know...the immeasurable greatness of [God’s] power for us who believe...”

What is this power?

Ephesians gives an answer...”God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places (1:20).”

The power we are meant to know, the power we are meant to live in that is not of the air that has us spinning along with our world, but rather is the power that raises Christ from death to life.

God doesn't want us to stop short of heaven.

“All of us once lived among them (trespasses and sins) in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.

But God...”

But God raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”

But God...

These two words are the basis of God's actions throughout our scripture. They form a litany which points to God as the one who seeks to give us life, a litany that speaks of God's refusal to let us go.

Genesis 50:20 Joseph says to his brothers who sold him into slavery: “As for you, you meant evil against me; *but God* meant it for good.”

1 Samuel 23:14 David is pursued by Saul who seeks his life... And David stayed in the strongholds in the wilderness, and remained in the mountains in the Wilderness of Ziph. Saul sought him every day, *but God* did not deliver him into his hand.”

Psalms 73:26 David sings “My flesh and my heart may fail

But God

is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

1 Timothy 1: 15-16 Written in the voice of Paul... “This is the true saying, to be completely accepted and believed: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. I am the worst of them.

But God

was merciful to me.

Acts 10:40 In a speech given about Jesus Christ... “They put him to death by hanging him on a tree;

But God

raised him on the third day...”

Psalms 49:15 But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave, for he shall receive me

Romans 5:8 But God proves his love for us

Ephesians 2:4 But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love which he loved us made us alive with Christ.

To live in the immeasurable greatness of his power is to believe that whatever we have done or not done, whatever has clouded our vision, whatever difficulties we face today...God is already acting, already removing the obstacles, lifting us up that we might know a little bit of heaven today.

Yet, we ourselves stand in the way of heaven. I've already hinted that one of the greatest obstacles to understanding “the change,” to allowing God to make us alive with Christ, is our hope that our choosing God will make us more like what we want to be. What we usually want to be is more like the other person over there.

Reverend Fosdick, the famous preacher who spoke at Riverside Church in New York from 1930 to 1946, preached...

“Many of us fret so at our limitations because we keep comparing ourselves with others, wishing to be what they are or do what they do. We habitually measure ourselves by other people and assume a responsibility for being as fortunate, as useful, and as happy as they. It is a great day in a ... person's life when she makes up her mind that she has only one responsibility, not to be like anybody else but to handle her special situation as well as she can.

But see what we do. Born to be berry bushes and produce good berries, we lift anxious, envious eyes to apple trees with their larger-sized fruit, or, born to be apple trees and produce good aples, we look with worried jealousy at the maple trees with their more capacious shade, or, born to be maple trees, we are anxious because elm trees are taller and more graceful.

Stop it! You have been given a special field to till.

For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

We hear these words, we may even like these words, but can we live them? Can we let them sink into our soul before we answer back with a list of our faults; a list of those things we would have God change in us *and change in us now*.

One more quote for Rev. Fosdick's sermon...

“What did the poet/philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson's squirrel say to the mountain?

If I cannot carry forests on my back, neither can you crack a nut.

We are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

In a movie called “Unstrung Heroes” a 9 year old boy runs away from the painful thought of his mom dying from cancer to live with his mentally ill uncles. The Mom allows it, understanding that the uncles, though a little nutty, just might have something to offer her son.

Stephen begins his summer with an unforgettable dinner, begun with prayer, and marked by a game of hi bounce balls bounding from person to person across the table. In another scene, Stephen walks with an uncle collecting items from the garbage. Later, he wears a ridiculous disguise designed by his other uncle to as to avoid retribution from those they tricked.

Early in the movie, Stephen's mom gives him permission to not listen to anything his uncles say. Yet the uncles are given all the best lines. They give Stephen a new name...”You are the the one to watch.” In their illness they find words, actions, and love that transforms Stephen from a boy scared to speak on his own behalf to one willing to stand up for ones others dismiss.

Perhaps it is only Hollywood magic that can lift the insane into the realm of the holy, as it did when Chaplin helped us all believe in the endearing qualities of the tramp living on the street.

But this movie asks us for more than to find the crazed ones loveable, it asks us to believe these insane uncles can be heroes that save a boy.

And by extension it asks us, as does our scripture, to believe that we, despite our insane limitations, we can be the heroes that do what God would have us do.

When we understand this...when we truly believe that we have been given everything we need to please God...we will know the change, the grace, that makes us smile.