

“Changed Lives”

a sermon by

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Text: “For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it” (Romans 7:18).

Last week David Rosenbaum, a reporter for the *New York Times*, was killed in Washington, D.C., while he was walking one evening in his neighborhood. He was attacked by a street gang who beat him to death with a lead pipe. It took twenty-three minutes for an ambulance to reach this injured man and another twenty-five minutes to get him to the hospital. While he lay dying on the street, one of his attackers used his credit card to buy laundry detergent, tires, and gas. By the time he arrived at the hospital, he was dead.

David Rosenbaum was a reporter committed to the truth. He was so respected by both Democrats and Republicans that the hearings for Judge Samuel Alito were suspended on Friday so that Senators from both parties could attend the memorial service held for David Rosenbaum on Capitol Hill.

David Rosenbaum was an anomaly in Washington. He did not have a particular political affiliation. He viewed reporting as the art of uncovering facts, not advancing an agenda. One of his colleagues at the *Times*, Maureen Dowd, observed that we no longer have a society that has much respect for truth and honesty. Our culture produces an infinite amount of television shows and movies depicting the importance of honesty, but they are really talking only about the importance of being honest with our feelings. “Sharing feelings is not the same thing as telling the truth.” We have become a country of situationalists.

Several years ago, Allen Bloom, a professor of English for a number of years at the University of Chicago, published a book he entitled The Closing of the American Mind. In that book he asserted that every incoming freshman he had encountered over the past years arrived at college with two ironclad beliefs. One of these was the belief that all truth was relative to culture; i.e., there is no ultimate truth. The second was the belief that ethics is a matter of personal preference; i.e., there is no such thing as right and wrong. In such a culture it is not surprising that a person like David Rosenbaum emerges as a bright spot in a great sea of darkness.

I.

One of the most fundamental human problems that confronts each one of us is the struggle within ourselves to do the right thing. In Paul’s letter to the church at Rome he expresses this human dilemma. “The good which I would I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I practice....I delight in the law of God after the inward man: but I see a different law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity under the law of sin, which is in my members. Wretched man that I am.” It would be difficult to find a more vivid description of the human condition than that. So often when we want to do good, we do evil. So often we do the very things we do not want to do.

Nor was Paul the only one to discover this. Plato described the problem as trying to drive a chariot with two horses, one eager the other obstinate. Faust observed, “Two souls, alas, are lodged within my breast.”

That is why you cannot read Romans seven without reading Romans eight, and vice versa. If Paul stepped out of the seventh chapter of Romans into the triumph of his eighth—“There is now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus”—it is because his Christianity met this human need with a saving message. To be sure many of us do not like the way we are, but we don’t have to stay the way we are. Surely, if anything has the power to change lives, it is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

II.

Certainly, that was true of Jesus. He found Palestine, like the rest of the world, filled with unpromising people—a Samaritan woman with seven husbands, a “prodigal son,” dishonest public servants like Zaccheus, fishermen like Peter, James and John. These were people on the road to nowhere—except that when Jesus touched their lives, he left them so changed that one would hardly recognize them.

Most of us are just the opposite. We are quick to size people up. The ones that fit our standards, we keep. The ones that don't, we discard.

For example, if you and I had been living in London in the early years of the last century, we might have seen a young attorney from India, smartly dressed, playing the game with success and charm, taking dancing and violin lessons to improve his social standing with the young women of London. If we had been there, we would have probably concluded that this was just another young lawyer or professional person trying to climb the ladder of social success. But had we concluded that, we would have been wrong. That young man turned out to be Mahatma Gandhi. As a young attorney, he traveled to India and South Africa and saw the terrible injustices taking place in these countries. Something in him snapped and he became a changed person, so that this smartly dressed, up and coming young lawyer ended up as a toothless, half-naked ascetic living on goat's milk, holding in his frail hands the spiritual destiny of India and almost single handedly forcing the British Empire to abandon its colonial grasp on that great nation.

The story of Gandhi's life might have surprised us, but it would have never surprised Jesus. He expected those kinds of changes. He encouraged them. When he found a woman taken in the very act of adultery and about to be stoned by an angry mob, he dismissed the crowd and told the woman to "go and sin no more." When he encountered a dishonest tax collector named Zaccheus, perched in a sycamore tree so that he could get a glance of Jesus, Jesus commanded him down, and went to dinner with him. Jesus so touched Zaccheus that this tax collector gave half of his wealth to the poor and paid back four-fold all he had defrauded. When Jesus saw that he declared, "Today salvation has come to this house."

III.

There is, I am convinced, a part of the mission of the church that we have not emphasized and it is the power of the gospel to change peoples' lives. When Dr. Thomas Gillespie of Princeton Seminary was here a few years ago, he spoke of a trip he and his wife had taken several years ago to England and Italy. In Italy he observed that the churches seemed to function primarily as art museums. In England the churches seemed more like cemeteries. He remembered one occasion when the group of which he and his wife were members was visiting a beautiful church in England. As the guide was leading the group down the center aisle, he pointed out all of the places where famous people were buried there in the church. One of the members of the group, an outspoken retired school teacher, finally spoke out in a loud voice and asked, "When was the last time someone got saved in this church?"

As Presbyterians, we have always placed a great deal of emphasis on transforming the society around us. We have often forgotten that the transformation of society always begins with changed lives.

That is the point that Paul makes in Romans, Chapter seven. This is not an attack on Jewish law. Paul understands that the law is good, not evil. The problem with the law is that it does not have the power to change individual lives. Only the gospel has the power to do that.

That is why Reinhold Niebuhr understood that grace was not only forgiveness. It is power as well.

Some years ago Harry Emerson Fosdick visited the little church in England where William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, first encountered his faith in Christ. Fosdick saw the stairs in the back of the church where Booth often led destitute people to the little room where he prayed with them and worked with them to leave behind a life of destruction and to find a new life with Jesus Christ. The rector of the church told Fosdick of a time a man came into that Church to pray. He was a colonel in the Salvation Army and he had spent his life following in the steps of William Booth. As this Army Officer knelt down, the rector heard him pray, "Lord, do it again. Do it again!"

Now, all of us realize there are limits to what I am saying. The Apostle Paul on another occasion once said, "I can do all things through Jesus Christ." By that he did not mean he could jump over the moon or fly to Mars. There are limitations in life. Some are genetic. Some are environmental. There are some people, who by circumstance of birth or rearing, never have much of a chance in life. But the gospel of Jesus Christ stands or falls on its ability to produce transformation in the lives of real people.

IV.

Then, finally, I am convinced that the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the power that offers each one of us the opportunity to find a deeper fulfillment and purpose in our lives.

Some years ago I had the opportunity to visit Jerusalem and other parts of the Holy Land. One of the places that remains indelible in my mind was the visit to Masada, which was a summer palace built by King Herod near the Dead Sea. When the Romans attacked Jerusalem in 70 A.D., a group of a thousand soldiers fled the city and ensconced themselves at Masada. It was a fortress built on a high hill and it was impenetrable from below. So the Romans worked for ten years building a ramp to reach those Jewish soldiers in that fortress. When they finally reached the top, every single Jewish soldier was dead. Each had taken his own life before surrendering to the enemy. Today, every soldier inducted into the Israeli army is taken to Masada and reminded of the great resolve of those who died at that place.

Sometimes a few people can make a great difference. As we approach a new year, I wonder how many people in this congregation would be willing to commit themselves to strengthen their discipleship to Jesus Christ? How many of us would be willing to make the following resolutions for the year 2006:

- 1) To commit ourselves to what the *Book of Order* calls the "means of grace:" to worship with regularity and discipline; to pray every day not only for the things we want, but for God to use our lives in new ways; to study the Scripture in order to discern God's will in our lives.
- 2) To commit ourselves to be challenged by God in some way that we have never been challenged. For some this might be as simple as volunteering for Room in the Inn or

to be a tutor at Westerly Hills. For others it might mean a radical change in lifestyle. Perhaps there is someone this morning who feels he or she had made enough money now and is willing to consider full-time work in service to Christ and the Church.. Perhaps there are others who are willing to commit themselves to the betterment of our city as a member of the School Board, the County Commission, or some other form of public service.

Perhaps there are families who are willing to make a difference. Last year several families in this church spent part of their spring break doing mission work in Mexico. Maybe there are families who might forgo a skiing trip to Colorado one year in order to build a house for Habitat for Humanity.

Jesus told us that we are called to be the “light of the world.” What better way to begin a new year than to determine that by God’s grace we are determined to dispel the darkness that is around us so that men and women may see our light and give glory to God I heaven.

Amen!