

The First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina
Roland P. Perdue, III, Interim Pastor
Sunday, January 29, 2012

10x10
Romans 12:1-8

The King and Queen of Hearts were seated on their throne when Alice arrived. A great crowd was assembled there – all sorts of little birds and animals, as well as a pack of cards. Another of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland was beginning. It was a trial - a criminal trial. As Alice made herself comfortable and settled down, the King shouted “Herald, read the accusation.”

On this the White Rabbit blew three blasts on the trumpet, and then unrolled the parchment scroll, and read as follows: -

‘The Queen of Hearts, she made some
tarts,
 All on a summer day:
The Knave of Hearts, he stole
Those tarts,
 And took them quite away!’

....

Just at this moment Alice felt a very curious sensation, which puzzled her a great deal until she made out what it was: she was beginning to grow larger again, and she thought at first she would get up and leave the court; but on second thoughts she decided to remain where she was as long as there was room for her.

‘I wish you wouldn’t squeeze so,’ said the Dormouse, who was sitting next to her. ‘I can hardly breathe.’

‘I can’t help it,” said Alice very meekly: ‘I’m growing.’

‘You’ve no right to grow **here**,’ said the Dormouse.

‘Don’t talk nonsense,’ said Alice more boldly: ‘You know you’re growing too.’

‘Yes, but I grow at a reasonable pace,’ said the Dormouse: ‘not in that ridiculous fashion.’ And he got up very sulkily and crossed over to the other side of the court.

- *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll

The squeeze was on, wasn’t it? The Dormouse was smart. When he felt himself being squeezed, the Dormouse got up and got out of the way. I was surprised to find the first author in the New Testament saying something very similar and suggesting taking the same kind of action. He writes, as we heard:

Don’t be confirmed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds,
So that you may discern what is the will of God.

In other words, don't let the world around you squeeze you into its mold; let your minds be remolded from within by God's grace in Jesus Christ.

The Squeeze is on. That's for certain. Most of us feel it and some of us can hardly breathe. There is an economic squeeze, job squeeze, a housing squeeze all added to a growing debt squeeze that seems to have no end in sight. Almost every family is touched in some fashion by the constricting squeeze. One of our sons has lost his business; another son has lost his job. Our daughter cannot get medical insurance. You can tell similar stories.

The biggest squeeze, however, affects our sense of confidence and security. We are in "dire straits," and many look for persons or institutions upon whom to place the blame. The messages from our televisions are mixed: hope and a future in which everyone has a fair shot at success contrasted with the failures of whoever is in charge of whatever. Politics is divisive, faces are tight with disgust, and cordiality is squeezed out.

One of my favorite actors currently does an ad on TV. He leans comfortably against a fence in what could be Central Texas and says confidently, "In American we believe in a future that is better than today." That strikes me as so much wishful thinking. And every time I see it, I feel myself saying, "Oh, no we don't. Not any longer!" At least not with our sons and daughters, some here this morning in the Confirmation Class, who cannot expect to have it as good as those of us who are their parents have had it. And college students graduate these days having been trained for jobs that no longer exist here or have not yet been invented. The squeeze is on.

"I wish you wouldn't squeeze so. I can hardly breathe." That is what the Dormouse said to Alice. And Paul seeing the ways the prevailing arrangements of his culture were pressuring, squeezing and numbing his faith community, said

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going to (school or) work, walking around life – and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for God. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out.... God brings the best out in you and develops a well-formed maturity in you.

- Paraphrase of Peterson, *The Message*

The squeeze is on, but don't let the world around you squeeze you into its mold! Let God mold you from within.

In other words, the squeeze is a spiritual problem. Attitude, confidence, money, debt – it is all a spiritual problem. Get out of the squeeze play by getting in alignment with God. Remember that none of the things squeezing us will give us ultimate satisfaction. They are all a way down the line from the satisfaction of living our lives for God. There is a very positive aspect of the growing and future possibility of scarcity: it has the benefit of allowing us time to consider and re-consider what is essential, what is really important in our lives. Scarcity may do for us what a serious surgery or near-death accident can do: cause us to reflect upon what is important, really important in life.

Paul knows about the squeeze, but he also knows that God's love is the only ultimate satisfaction in life. And the things we pile up which give us some degree of significance and meaning are of value only in terms of the use to which we put them. That is why John Wesley of Methodism could say, "Make all the money you can. Save all the money you can. Share all the money you can. And give away all the money you can." And John Calvin could say, "To those in need from those who have." And Paul advises us (Romans 12: 3-8) to use whatever gifts God has given us for the sake of one another and those with whom we have some influence in our homes, jobs, clubs, and leisure time.

Our culture promises so much it can't deliver on. As we say in Texas, "**He's all hat and no cattle.**" Our culture – political, corporate and religious institutions promise a lot but most of it is 'pie in the sky: 'Buy this, and you'll be happier. Get that, and you'll feel better.' Maybe for a bit until the new car smell wears off, or the Botox stretches your face out of shape a little too much. The kind of meaning and significance we want and need never comes from what our culture can give or promise us.

In Austin, TX, at my oldest son's church, I heard the preacher say that debt was driving us insane as a nation and as a people. He suggested that we go home and cut up our credit cards and keep the debit card because it was the same as cash – if you indeed had some cash in the bank. I went home on the very last day in our house before the next day's closing. I admit I was showing off a bit and trying to pass a message to one of our sons. I said to him, as I pulled the card out of my wallet, "Watch this, Philip. And I folded and folded the card until I could tear it into four pieces, and then I threw the pieces triumphantly into the air. He smiled and said, "Dad, why would you tear up the **debit card**?" I looked and I had indeed torn up the wrong card. Well, at least I was on the right track. The squeeze is on. Get out of the squeeze play by refusing to be "conformed to this world."

The joy we search for – the right to happiness we desire – will never materialize by conforming to the standards and values of this world. In the book *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*, the White Queen offers Alice "jam every other day" as an inducement to work for her:

"I'm sure I'll take you with pleasure!" the Queen said. Two pence a week, and jam every other day."
Alice couldn't help laughing, as she said, "I don't want you to hire Me – and I don't care for jam."
"It's very good jam," said the Queen.
"Well, I don't want any TO-DAY, at any rate."
"You couldn't have it if you DID want it," the Queen said. "**The rule is, jam to-morrow and jam yesterday – but never jam to-day.**"
"It MUST come sometimes to 'jam-to-day,' Alice objected.
"No, it can't," said the Queen. "It's jam every OTHER day: to-day isn't any OTHER day, you know."
"I don't understand you," said Alice. "It's dreadfully confusion."

Well, not really that confusing; there simply isn't ever jam – not ever! And it is never true joy, significance, or satisfaction without the salvation that comes from God's mercy and justice. The things we pile up, accumulate, save or hoard are not capable of giving us real worth. That comes only from God.

As Jane and I sorted through our "stuff" two weeks ago in preparation to closing on selling our house, we gave away hundreds of books, pictures, clothing, fishing equipment, camping stuff, dishes, pots and

pans, silverware – indeed all of our stuff – to our children, thrift shops, Goodwill, Senior Citizens Centers. We hired a trash collector and loaded them down with thousands of old sermons, articles, letters, photos, and other stuff we thought we could not live without.

Then we rented a 10x10 storage unit and put everything we wanted to keep in that space. That evening, we both realized we had reduced the stuff of 55 years of marriage to a 10x10 space that was twice – TWICE! - the size we really needed.

But the meaning and significance of our life together with our Lord Christ could not be contained in all the space in this world!

Nor can yours. And knowing that, you know the squeeze can never totally get you down.

Amen