

SERMON: Present Yourself to God

TEXT: 2 Timothy 2:8-15

Many of you know that my son got married last weekend, and I'm happy to report that everything went well, with lots of smiles and laughter. My son and his bride are overjoyed.

Many of you also know that planning a wedding can come with a great deal of stress, not only for the bride and groom, but also for the families and other participants. One thing I was particularly stressed about was what I would wear.

Happily, I was *not* given the traditional message for a mother of the groom: to wear beige and keep my mouth shut. I can keep my mouth shut (over most things), but beige is not my color. In fact, the bride gave me no restrictions at all on what to wear, except that white was not an option. This was rather liberating, and I was grateful, until I realized that neither did she give me any guidelines. Was it going to be a formal, semi-formal, or casual event? Were the groomsmen renting tuxes or wearing suits, button-down shirts, polo shirts? Were the bridesmaids wearing full-length gowns or sundresses? All I knew was that the colors were orange and purple. What shade of orange? What shade of purple?

My son told my daughter to think “Clemson colors.” Purple and orange are the school colors for the University of Clemson in South Carolina.

So, I shopped. Online. At the mall. In high-end boutiques and consignment stores. I tried to find something that was middle-of-the-road. Not too fancy, not too casual. And orange. Or purple. I even sent some pictures to the bride and groom. “That looks fine,” was the answer. “Get whichever one is cheaper.”

Over the past few months I have purchased several items. But I also worried a lot. Would I stand out too much? Would the color clash terribly with the wedding party? I didn’t want to look like I tried too hard, or didn’t try hard enough. I wanted to be comfortable. And I wanted to look really nice.

I typically don’t worry that much about what I wear. But I spent a good bit of time and money and stress over *how I would present myself* at this major event in my son’s life. I wanted the bride and groom to be happy. I wanted my son’s new in-laws to find me acceptable. And I wouldn’t have minded if my ex-husband felt a twinge of regret upon seeing me!

And then I came home and read this passage from Paul's Second letter to Timothy.

There are several important points in this passage upon which I could expound. That "the word of God is not chained." That "if we have died with Christ we will also live with him." What does it mean to deny him or to be faithful to him? How can we "avoid wrangling over words"? But I kept being drawn back to that last verse: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth."

And I began to wonder why I'm not more concerned about how I present myself to God.

My theology is that God loves us all unconditionally and accepts us no matter who we are. Rich or poor, black or white, male or female..., fancy or shabby. While I believe this wholeheartedly, it occurs to me that we could try harder. We could do better as we "present ourselves to God."

I think we all know that we could do better about not judging others. There's a beautiful story I heard long ago about a young man who walked into

church one morning. He had long, stringy, dirty hair. He wore a faded t-shirt and jeans with holes in them (but not the kind you pay hundreds of dollars for). He had nothing on his feet.

The worship service had already started, but he walked down the center aisle, all the way up to the front, and sat down cross-legged on the floor. As you might imagine, the people in the pews were aghast. They whispered to each other and looked around to see who was going to be brave enough to escort this man out. Finally, one of the ushers in a suit and tie started down the aisle, walking with poise and determination. People began nodding approvingly, but holding their breath in anticipation of a disruptive scene. Instead, every mouth dropped open when the usher also lowered himself to the floor and sat next to the young man, where they worshipped together.

Today's lesson from the Gospel of Luke reminds us that we all could do better about presenting ourselves to God with gratitude. Most of us are familiar with the story of the ten lepers whom Jesus healed, and that only one – a Samaritan man – returned to say, “thank you.”

But this is not just a simple lesson about manners. One theologian commented, “Jesus is teaching us about the nature of faith. In short, to ‘have faith’ is to live it, and to live it is to give thanks. It is living a life of gratitude that constitutes living a life of faith – *this* is the grateful sort of faith that has made this man from Samaria truly and deeply well.” (Kimberly Bracken Long, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4, p. 166)

Practicing gratitude is a trendy topic these days, with people of all religions or no religion. Books are being written and studies are being done about how those who practice gratitude regularly are happier people.

From one article, I learned, “The benefits of practicing gratitude are nearly endless. People who regularly practice gratitude by taking time to notice and reflect upon the things they're thankful for experience more positive emotions, feel more alive, sleep better, express more compassion and kindness, and even have stronger immune systems. And gratitude doesn't need to be reserved only for momentous occasions: Sure, you might express gratitude after receiving a promotion at work, but you can also be thankful for something as simple as a

delicious piece of pie.” (Derrick Carpenter, MAPP, The Science Behind Gratitude (and How It Can Change Your Life), happify.com)

The idea of presenting yourself to God can also be informed by the Old Testament lesson from the prophet Jeremiah. The people of Jerusalem had been taken from their homeland, into exile in Babylon. But the word of the Lord from Jeremiah was not about taking revenge or fighting back or trying to escape. Instead it was this: “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

I imagine we’ve all had moments at least – if not extended periods of time – when we found ourselves in a place or situation that we did not choose, where we

did not want to be. Maybe it was in the emergency room on Christmas Day, in New York City on 9-11, in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, as a soldier on the front lines in the Middle East, or broken down by the side of the road in a bad neighborhood. Maybe it's with your congregation during a time of decreasing attendance and difficult budget cuts. Our tendency is to become very self-centered at these times, even to begin feeling sorry for ourselves. All we want to do is get out of that place or that situation as soon as possible. We wish for things to be the way they were before all this happened.

But speaking through Jeremiah, God calls us to trust, to embrace life on good days and bad days, and to “seek the welfare of the city where [God] has sent us... and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare [we] will find [our] welfare.”

“Do your best to PRESENT YOURSELF TO GOD as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.”

May we present ourselves with a non-judgmental attitude toward others, with gratitude and praise to God in good times and bad, with trust in God and commitment to the welfare of all people. May we present ourselves always... to the glory of God!

AMEN.