



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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April 10, 2016

A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

"Get a Life!"

Romans 12: 1-8

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

“Get a life!” It is an expression that has come into vogue during the last decade. Its basic meaning is “stop poking your nose in the juicy problems of others and make your own life interesting.” “Get a life!” Although the expression is not offered in charity and kindness, there is some wisdom to it and that is what I wish to explore today. 3 points. 1. Why do I need to get a life? 2. How do I get a life? 3. What is the life I should get?

I

Why do I need to get a life? The primary response is that it is spiritually and psychologically healthy. Jesus told his followers: “Don’t worry about the speck in another person’s eye when you have a log in yours!” Jesus was describing a very common form of behavior. Psychologists call it projection and most of us do it, usually when we want to avoid dealing with a deep issue or conflict in our own soul.

Let me offer a relatively harmless example of this. When things are chaotic in my life and I am struggling with a very difficult issue or problem, one of the things that I will do is begin to order and clean my environment. I might straighten out my desk, put books back on the shelf, sort my files, rearrange my music... Why do I do this.. because it is easier to bring order to the external things than my own inner self. This is projection. I am projecting my own inner chaos upon something external. It is easier to fix what is going on outside of me than to face what is going on inside me. In short, I am avoiding my own issues in favor of something else.

This is relatively harmless, especially when I recognize what is going on. But this behavior can also be quite destructive, and is the source of a great deal of human misery. This was Jesus’ concern.

Let me give a few less healthy examples of projection. The parent who projects all of his or her hopes on the child.... Why do we parents do this? Because it keeps us from confronting and learning from our own experiences, our own failures, and those times when we have not measured up. So we push the child to succeed in athletics, academics, and a social life. We live vicariously through them, and never attend to our own lives, our own selves, our spirit.

Another example is to project on to an institution: be it a school, a church, an organization, even a sports team. Instead of confronting our own personal challenges and sins, we focus our attention and time on the problems of the institution.

- The problem is the school. “Not me... not my son.”
- The problem is the church.
- The problem is the United Way, my spouse, the coach, the teacher...
- and always convenient one... the government.

Remember the book: *I'm OK, You're OK?* The motto of projection is: “I'm OK... You're the problem.”

This type of behavior requires an enemy. It needs something wrong to fix. It needs people to accuse and to find fault with. Then it doesn't have to deal with the real challenges... the inner life. As long as the problem is something or someone else, you don't have to change or mature. You don't need your own life. This is why we need to “get a life.” It is for our own spiritual maturity, our own psychological balance, our own happiness and joy in life.

II

How do I get a life? The Apostle Paul, writing to the church at Rome, articulated the path to self-discovery of one's own life. “*I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think.*” This is the goal... to have realistic self-knowledge about who you are, in both strength and weakness.

- Self-knowledge of your own sinfulness and need for forgiveness.
- Self-knowledge of your gifts and abilities.
- Self-knowledge of your relationship with God, others, and creation.

But how do we acquire this? Can I do it once and get it over with? Is it easy? Is it hard? Paul says this: Sacrifice.... (That is the church's S word) We like to acquire, not sacrifice. Here we bump into the paradoxical logic of the gospel.

Jesus said: “The one who wishes to find life, must first lose life.” Spiritual health and maturity is not acquired, rather it is discovered in the process of sacrifice. This is different than all the self help books that are on the shelves of Barnes and Noble. It means that we let go of the egotism that shields us and begin to recognize the world of others around us. The best way to do this is to love.. and love by its very nature involves giving and sacrifice. This is so radically different than what we are taught to do... but it changes us. It makes us whole. It offers a sense of peace that the world cannot give and that is why Paul wrote: “*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.*”

When I read the story of Jesus in the gospels, I continually hear this teaching. He meets the rich young man who wants to know how to have eternal life.... And Jesus tells him that the way to “get a life” is to give away what you have.... get out of your shell, your own little world and contribute to the lives of others.

In 40 years of ministry, one of the things I have discovered is the happiest, most joy-filled committee in the church is usually the Mission Committee. They are often the target of budget cuts. They are criticized by some as “do gooders.” But there is usually a mood that permeates their meetings and activities, and it is joy. Why? Because it is the committee that tries to approximate in its common life the wisdom of Christ... they discover Jesus in helping the “Least of these.”

III

What does this life look like? Who are the role models? Of course the best model is Jesus... He lived for others, he gave to others.. he did not carry the burden of the grudge, but freely forgave. But he also knew that he had to confront his own challenges and temptations. He struggled in the wilderness with the temptor.... This was his struggle and he did not project on another person. Often he would go off and pray... and then we have the glimpse at the end of his life, and there too he struggled in prayer with God..."that this cup could pass from me.." and yet he fulfilled his calling: "Not my will but thine." This is a tough model, but there are others who approximated Jesus' life.

My hero from boyhood is Albert Schweitzer. He had the world by the tail... a brilliant biblical scholar; his work is still consulted today. He was a philosopher who articulated an ethic of "reverence for life." He was one of the premier Bach organists in Europe... his transcriptions of Bach are still consulted. Then in middle age.. he gave up the comfortable life, went to medical school and gave his life for others... "Do not be conformed to this world.. but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." He could have dropped the "blame bombs" from a comfortable chair in the faculty lounge, blaming the world's troubles on this or that... but he chose to make a difference... and by mentioning him today.. his life is still making a difference.

Recently, I have been intrigued by Warren Buffet and Bill Gates. These are secular individuals who have distinguished themselves as pretty cut-throat in the world of business. They are not saints, but they are both in the process of giving away their wealth through foundations. Why, pray tell, are they doing what they are doing. Why give away their fortune.... It is theirs. They earned it. Buffet is an atheist, and Gates is an agnostic... and yet they have both discovered some of the wisdom of Christ's teachings... and whatever they are looking for in life, they are learning that giving is the way to discover it. An atheist and an agnostic... They have set the bar high for those of us who follow Christ.

One of my favorite bumper-stickers is "End Global Whining"... It is so much easier to whine, to worry about the sins of others.. to criticize the speck in the eye of our neighbor... Christ challenges us to "get a life.." and that life is eternal....We don't find that life by complaining, criticizing, and whining about the problems of others... we find that life by giving of ourselves for others, overcoming our own egotism and sinfulness.. and allowing our minds to be transformed by the awesome grace of God in Jesus Christ. This is the good news.
Amen.