



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker -
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The Difference a Person Makes

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 63:7-9; Hebrews 4:14-16

New members—it's good to have you here today, good to have you as part of Westminster.

And it was good to have you at our Session meeting this past Tuesday night. Those session meetings—meetings in which the session as the governing body of Westminster “receives” new members (we have them two or three times a year)—those session meetings are always meaningful to me, deeply moving, in fact. At those meetings, we ask new members to tell their faith stories, and give them this prompt:

Tell us about a person, a relationship, an experience, a piece of Scripture, a song, a book, that has helped you to grow in your faith in Jesus Christ.

And yet always, inevitably, it comes back to a person. Even if the new member begins with an experience, a piece of Scripture, a song, or a book—it always, inevitably comes back to a person, and the difference a person has made in their lives. It happened again last Tuesday night: a youth pastor, a kindergarten Sunday School teacher, a scout leader, a mom or a dad, a friend, a husband or a wife—these were the persons who made the difference in your faith, in your lives.

That may not be a surprise, since I bet all of us could and would name similar persons—people we remember with love, admiration, and gratitude—who shaped our faith and our lives. But if you think about it, it *is* surprising, because it's not always the way we think about our lives; often we think of our lives being shaped by what we call “impersonal forces.”

One author puts it this way:

“Nowadays, we tend to think the conditions in which we live as the ever-changing, product of interacting, impersonal forces,”—the ups and downs of the economy and technological advances, political, social, and religious movements, the alignment of military powers, wars and the threat of wars, historical changes and perhaps history itself, not to mention more local and individual factors such as weather and geography, accidents and available medical care, good and bad luck, and even, or maybe especially, your genes and the genetic pool from which they arose—all these things *do* shape our lives. Just think, for example, of the life that awaits an American born on a farm in Oklahoma in say the year, 1921. The dust bowl, the stock market crash and the Great Depression, the rise of communism and

fascism, World War II and the Cold War, suburbanization and the interstate highway system, the ubiquity of television and the automobile, vaccinations or the lack thereof . . . I could go on . . . All these interacting, impersonal, historical “forces,” and many more, no doubt shaped that life.

And yet for all that, it always, inevitably comes back to a person: persons make the difference in our lives, I would say make all the difference in the world and then some.

Now if you want to wander into the philosophical weeds with me, we can talk about what makes a person a person, characteristics such as consciousness, self-awareness and rational thought; language, communication and empathy; self-motivated and self-initiated action; memory and an awareness of change, recognition of the passage of time, and even of one’s own mortality.

And we can even debate whether robots or androids—Data (if you want to go “Star Trek: The Next Generation”) or Nexus 6 replicants (if you want to go “Blade Runner”)—we can debate whether they meet all the criteria for being persons, but really, I’m not sure *I* meet all of the criteria for being a person: I certainly don’t for about a third of my life (when I’m sleeping) and maybe not for the first couple of hours after I wake up in the morning . . . just ask my friends and colleagues. Coffee, however, helps my personhood.

I’m kidding . . . but, really, I’m not. Oh I guess I’m always a person if you reduce it to a biological sense, that is, belonging to the species *homo sapiens*, but the fact that we can imagine—and maybe somebody make—non-human androids that nonetheless have the characteristics of persons, and also the fact that, right now, dolphins and higher primates exhibit many of them while we *homo sapiens* often fail to do so (how often do I fail at self-awareness, empathy, and self-initiated action!)—all that should warn us off that kind of reductionism.

Because the truth is (and I’m really not kidding here) that I’m not always a person and maybe not ever fully a person, at least in this life. In fact, I would argue that my or anyone else’s being a person depends on our treating others as persons which depends in turn on having our own personhood recognized and honored by another.

To treat someone as a person, means to recognize that, in some basic, defining way, *you are like me*: having—or at least having the potential to have—consciousness, self-awareness and rational thought; language, communication and empathy; self-motivated activity, and all the rest of it. And what that means is that I can and do enter into your experience as you can and do enter into mine, that we can share experience, that we can share a world.

Civility, like coffee, is a great aid to personhood. I may not know very much about the woman behind the register, scanning my groceries at the supermarket. But to say “hello, how are you,” to remark upon the weather, to answer her question about whether I really like pre-cooked, microwaveable bacon (“Not bad . . . no, really I mean it”)—is to acknowledge her as a person. Of course, I may not be—I’m probably not—fully conscious of what I’m saying as I’m putting the groceries on the conveyor belt (she may not be either), but that’s the whole point: civility is a way of recognizing the other person—the personhood of the other person—so that it doesn’t always have to be fully conscious or completely intentional. Think what it would feel like, what it would be like, if I didn’t speak to her, didn’t even acknowledge her existence, spent the whole

time, say, looking down at my smartphone. Not only would I fail to recognize her as a person, I would fail to be a person myself.

And it's not the fault of smartphones. For as long as we human beings have fallen short of the glory of God, that is, for as long as sin has had its hold on us, we've failed to acknowledge the personhood of others, and thereby failed to realize our own. There's always been the temptation to categorize, name-call, distance, and thereby dehumanize (you're just one of those . . . fill in the blank). There's always been the temptation to say to another person, whether in words or deeds or both, that in some basic way you are **not** like me, you are inferior to me, you don't count, or at least you don't count nearly as much as I do, you're not really a person at all, and therefore I don't need to pay you any mind, I can treat you however I like, I can use you to get what I want. In other words, as long as we have been under the power of sin, there's have always been the temptation to treat other persons as non-persons, that is, with contempt. And there's only been one who did not succumb to that temptation.

But when **we** do succumb to that temptation, God's punishment is not to strike me down with lightning or to give me a flat tire in the supermarket parking lot. Oh no, God is far more subtle, far more economical, than that. God's punishment is to allow me to go right on doing it, because, by doing it, I don't really deny the other person's personhood, as much as I deny my own, because by doing it I fail to be a person, and thereby become less a person myself. In comparison, a flat tire would be a blessing—it can be easily fixed, you can get a new one. Not so for one's self. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Yet even if those temptations have always been with us, they nonetheless take on some peculiarly toxic forms in our modern world: it's easier to treat someone with contempt online than in the grocery line; easier to curse someone while I'm driving my car than when I'm standing next to her; easier to call someone a name on Twitter than to actually say it to a person's face. For the simple reason that, in all these cases, I don't have to see the other person, and perhaps even more, no one sees me doing it.

Of course, here again God's punishment is both subtle and economical. If I do it enough, I stop seeing other persons as persons altogether, even when I **am** standing next to them or am face-to-face; I see them only as enemies or allies, those who adore me or idiots, obstacles or a means to an end, those who will give me or get me what I want or those who will only get in my way. And so the possibility of entering into another's experience and having that person enter into mine, the possibility of our sharing experience and sharing a world recedes farther and farther into the distance. Our modern world, especially our modern digital world, becomes peculiarly toxic, peculiarly uncivil, a mean and lonely place. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

The **living** God, but also the **loving** God. God loves us and the world so much that God will not leave us to our sin, even in this digital age. Or as God says through the prophet Hosea: "I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath." God as a person comes to us in person, in a person, in the person of Jesus Christ. In Jesus, God says to us:

In some basic, defining way, you **are** like me, or at least you once had the potential to be. And so I will enter into your experience as you will enter into mine, so that we can share experience, so that we can share a world.

This is what the Letter to the Hebrews is getting at, when it says:

We have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God . . . For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet is without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

However much he may have been tempted, Jesus never treated anyone with contempt. Yes, he repeatedly reprimands the Pharisees, but always in hopes of their amendment. He looks on those who betrayed him, even those who crucified him, only with sorrow and compassion: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” Even in the one instance that pulls everyone up short, when he first refuses the plea of the Syrophenician woman because she is a Gentile and therefore not among the children of Israel—even there he turns, sees her faith, and relents: “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” In all his actions, as well as in all his teaching (“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you; for this is the law and the prophets”), Jesus shows us what it looks like, tells us what it means, to treat others as persons and to be a person ourselves.

And Jesus also—and this may be the harder thing to see—he also makes it possible. Jesus is the great high priest, who has passed through the heavens and sits on the throne of grace. All that is good in the world—all the good we do and receive—flows from that throne of grace. That grace breaks the power that sin has over us, and thus he enables us to treat others as persons and to become persons ourselves.

And if all that sounds far away and hard to imagine, I assure you, it’s not. You know what goodness flowing from the throne of grace looks like, we all do: it looks like a youth pastor, a kindergarten Sunday School teacher, a scout leader, a mom or a dad, a friend, a husband or a wife—it looks like all the persons who made the difference in our faith, in our lives.

It always, inevitably comes back to a person. No matter what conditions we find ourselves in, no matter how dire, no matter what impersonal forces might have interacted to create those conditions, we always have a person who helps us in our time of need: Jesus Christ our great high priest. Our personhood has been recognized, honored, and restored by him.

It always, inevitably comes back to a person: persons make the difference in our lives, and one person, I would say, makes all the difference in the world and then some.

From his throne of grace flows all the goodness we are, and all the goodness we know.

Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.