

I CORINTHIANS 3:10-17
I THESSALONIANS 4:9-12

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ONE THING WE NEED
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I should begin by telling you that I've changed the title of this sermon. I've changed it from "The One Thing We Need" to "One Thing We Need" because it's abundantly clear that there are many things that we need--food, shelter, clothing, love, and so on. Items that even God declares we need.

Originally I was going to suggest that the one thing we truly need as human creatures is an authentic relationship with our creator. And I could have made a case that such a relationship is one of the things we need to live whole and complete lives. But I'm going to address something else all together. Something that colors all the rest of the needs that we perceive in our lives--after a fashion it could be called that foundation of Christ that Paul was writing about--but I'll call it the Divine Perspective--the ability to see ourselves and our world through God's eyes, with a vision that has a clear grasp of redemption and forgiveness and the human condition. Granted, it can be dangerous to presume too much here, but if we use our imagination just a little bit, if we open our hearts and minds just a little bit, the image of God within us might shed some new light on the image of the world that surrounds us.

I was watching the news the other night--pretending, as usual, that my investment of time would somehow fill my mind with knowledge of how our world works--and what I learned had very little to do with the news, but I did learn something about how we view ourselves and our world.

The last news story before the commercial break was about the changing European economy--important stuff, I admit. And the story that started the next segment was about the disposal of nuclear waste--again, important stuff. But what really got to me was what fell between those two stories. There were three commercials.

The first had to do with foot odor and "Odor Eaters", those things you stick in your shoes to keep you from offending your friends and family when you get casual around the house. And I thought, that appeals to our vanity, doesn't it? We don't have anything else more important to spend our money on than that, do we? In fact, what financial benefits we might gain from the changing European Economy--we could spend to keep our feet smelling fresh. Although, had I known that the next news article would be about disposing of nuclear waste, I might have seen some environmental benefits to Odor Eaters, after all.

The second was a commercial about denture cleaner.

Again, a product that appeals to our personal vanity. "Are your teeth white?" it asked, suggesting that we are better people if they are, implying that we are somehow worse people if they are not.

I thought, I have enough stress in my life, trying to do ministry and be an adequate husband, without being concerned with how my feet smell and how my smile looks (though I confess, I see more value in the denture cleaner than in the foot odor eaters.)

And the last commercial must have been reading my thoughts about stress, because it was for Tums. Too much acid in your stomach? Don't change your lifestyle, ease your workload, or eat more responsibly--heaven forbid! Just take a Tums and your problem will be solved.

It occurred to me then that what we need is not another product to appeal to our personal vanity or to treat a symptom of our harried lives, but rather, we need a renewed perspective on our lives that will bring us some peace. A Divine Perspective.

Divine Perspective allows us to BE OURSELVES. We can't come to peace with ourselves by looking outward--we won't become at peace with ourselves by exerting all sorts of efforts to make others happy. As idealistic as that sounds, it will only convince others of our own lack of peace. We find ourselves in our souls, not in the impact our lives have on others. (this is not to say that we should only be inward looking. No, we should look outwardly too. It's just that we should not expect to be at peace with ourselves based on what goes on outside if we are not at peace with ourselves inside) Nor will we find that inner peace by racking up a pile of achievements. What we do is not what we are. Rather, what we are determines what we will do.

Paul wrote about the respect of the outsiders. Real and valuable respect is that which is based upon who we are. I'd be lying if I said I didn't like compliments on my work. But I'm much more gratified or hurt, when people comment on me as a person. But those waters can get muddy fast too--I remember being afraid during my high school years that if and when my name came up in the conversations of the young ladies, that they were commenting on me as a person, saying, "he has a nice personality. . ." The respect we receive based on who we are is more meaningful and more profound than admiration we might receive based on our achievements.

Allow me to quote Thomas Merton from his wonderful book, No Man Is An Island: "Our Christian destiny is, in fact, a great one: but we cannot achieve greatness unless we lose all interest in being great. . . It is, therefore, a very great thing to be little, which is to say: to be ourselves."--children of God. With a Divine Perspective, to

see what our creator intended us to be, we lose that self-consciousness that keeps us "comparing ourselves with others in order to see how big we are."

Divine Perspective allows us to be ourselves--to be what we were created to be--not what others imagine us to be or what the world expects us to be. Divine Perspective allows us to be what God created us to be.

Divine Perspective also allows us to LIVE IN THE PRESENT. I have a Dennis the Menace cartoon in which Dennis is watching his father change the time on a clock. And Dennis asks, "Isn't it always now?"

Like most people, I spend a great deal of my energy worrying about the future. You who know me have heard me say, "Once Christmas is over, things will ease up"--or, "once Easter has come and gone, I'll be able to breathe again." Not a very good attitude, is it? And though there is value in foresight, we lend all too much credence to the idea that such forward looking concern will make our lives more fulfilling and worry free. We spend ourselves concentrating on destinations and missing the journey.

On my honeymoon, I wasted a good portion of a European trip because whenever we left one city, I focused all my energy on getting to the next city. Even today I dream about getting back to a little village in France where I drove past a lovely old and tiny church, saying, "I wonder what that looks like?" not thinking for a moment that I could stop and look--after all, I had a destination that I had to get to.

But I was wrong. The journey is the important part. God has given us a life to journey through that concludes, in this incarnation, at death. Why are we in such a hurry to get there? Why are we so intent on getting to destinations rather than enjoying our journey. Many Christians focus on Heaven. That, too, is inappropriate. The next life will take care of itself. A Divine Perspective tells us that God wants us to live in the present moment, a moment that is a gift we've been given. This moment, this "now" is a gift and we would do well to heed the words of Jesus who said, "do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day." (Mt. 6:34)

Paul and the early Church Fathers, not to mention some of the reformers, did us no favors in focusing on salvation as an escape from hell--for that approach focuses on the destination rather than on the journey--it lives in the future rather than in the present. Divine Perspective shows us that NOW is the only time there is--NOW is all that we've been given and we'd best not waste it.

The Divine Perspective allows us to REST. Again, the words of Thomas Merton: "The very act of resting is the hardest and most courageous act [we] can perform: and often it is quite beyond [our] power."

Merton goes on to point out that the wonder and enjoyment of music exists not only because of the notes, but because of the rests. Some sound and some silence gives rhythm. And he says, (and I agree), "If we strive to be happy by filling all the silences of life with sound, productive by turning all life's leisure into work, and real by turning all our being into doing, we will only succeed in producing a hell on earth."

There is a time to do what Jesus taught us by example, when, after having dismissed a crowd of followers, "he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone. . ." (Mt. 14:23).

Monica Furlong writes about the kind of people she wants to be with: "I want them to be people. . . who can sit still without feeling guilty, and from whom I can learn some kind of tranquility in a society that has almost lost the art."

There is a time to rest in the glorious quiet of God's presence. And if we don't, the music of our life will be a confused and chaotic mess. And what that confusion leads to is burnout and frustration and a despondent feeling when, having arrived at the destination of the end of our lives, we look back over the journey and wonder if it was worth it.

USE A DIVINE PERSPECTIVE.

BE YOURSELVES--try to see yourselves as God sees you, as a child, worthy of love because you are a child and be happy in that--you aren't what you do, you are what you are.

LIVE IN THE PRESENT--planning is okay, in it's proper place. Even Jesus looked ahead to his destination--his destiny-- in Jerusalem. But he continued to accept God's gift of the moment. Accept that and honor that--tomorrow will be anxious for itself.

And REST into God's presence--do your work, certainly, but have those moments when you rest quietly and honor both God and the temple that is you. And you strengthen the foundation upon which we all can build fulfilling lives.

The journey of our lives continues even today. May a Divine Perspective light your way. . . NOW. Amen.