

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

Dr. Thomas P. Harp

March 22, 2009

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church
1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

Seated in Heavenly Places

Ephesians 2:1-10

There's been a lot of talk about bonuses in the news this past week. A lot of anger, too! Seems that everybody's upset about the bonuses that AIG gave out to its employees. Add to that the bonuses at Merrill Lynch neatly timed just before Bank of America bought them out and you get a sense of a financial world gone mad. What were they thinking? Are those people really so self-absorbed that they have no sense of the greater good? It's not just the size of the bonuses that has people upset. It's that the bonuses were connected to financial disaster. And nobody should get rewarded for failure, especially at taxpayer expense!

Truth is, even though we're angered by such behavior, we can understand it. Admit it or not, we understand both the giving of the bonuses and the taking of them, even in times such as these. We may think differently now, but each one of us who has been a part of a corporate culture knows how easily we get caught up in group-think. Come to think of it, people inside the church can get caught up in that as well. It's as if there were something in the air that dulls our senses to an alternative way of thinking. Though angered by the bonuses, we can understand how people inside the corporate culture can think the way they do. After all, we've thought that way ourselves at times.

Interesting, isn't it, once you're on the outside, how easily you can see wrong-headedness inside? Interesting how what you once may have considered acceptable now looks quite unacceptable. Why couldn't you see it that way before? People talk about inside the Beltway thinking. We all know what that means. It's as if something happens to your brain when you move to Washington, DC. No, I'm not sitting here taking potshots at Washington. But I think most people agree that people inside the Beltway think differently than those outside. People on Wall Street think differently than people on Main Street. Yet when you're there, when you are inside a particular culture you have no idea that something's amiss. It's only when you have a completely different perspective that you can see clearly.

Does that mean people in Washington aren't Christian? No! Does it mean that those people who accepted the bonuses are not Christian? No! It means that even Christians can be subject to wrong-headedness. Remember Paul's letter to the Galatians where he chastised them for being led astray? There Paul wrote: "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? ... Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?" Something had gone wrong in Galatia. People who started out believing the good news of God's grace began seeking legalistic assurance, and Paul chastised them severely.

Malcolm Gladwell in his recent book *Outliers*, describes something similar. He tells a number of stories about positive and negative influences on individuals and their success. It's quite a fascinating book. One story describes the problems Korean Airlines was having in the 1990's. Several of their planes crashed due to pilot error. The pilots were well trained and experienced, but something was causing problems in the cockpit. In 2000 they brought in a consultant who turned the company around. What did he do? He required the flight crews to speak English and only English in the cockpit. No, there is no magic to the English language. But requiring them to speak English broke the cultural legacy that had caused problems for them in emergency situations.¹

¹ Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008), 218-220.

Listen, we're all susceptible to garbled thinking. It's called sin! Which is one reason we continue to confess our sin in worship. Once we were dead in our sins, Paul claims. Once we were captivated by the world's way of thinking and living. And because we were captivated by it, because we were enslaved to it, we could not break out of it on our own. Once we were like everyone else. But no more. Once we were dead through sin, as Paul says. Once we followed the world's way of living. We thought like everybody else. We really didn't know any better.

Even those of us raised in the church have struggled with that. We may not draw such a contrast between life in faith and life outside faith. We may have difficulty recognizing how much our faith has changed us. Thus we may not readily see the contrast Paul was pointing to. But we still know what it's like. We are all acquainted with peer pressure. At one time or another in our lives we yielded to it. Maybe it was something as innocent as puffing on a cigarette a friend gave you. Maybe it was something a bit more substantial like drugs or sex or alcohol. Maybe it was even more troublesome like unethical business practices or even illegal behavior. You and I, all of us and each of us, have fallen under the influence of the prince of the power of the air. We have experienced the corroding influence of wrong thinking on our own decision-making.

So what kept us safe? Or if we got caught up in it, how did we get out of that way of life? What happened to bring us around to a different way of thinking? Did we just wake up and smell the roses? Or was something else at work? We used to be just like everyone else, under the power of sin. But we're not that way now. What happened to change us? How is it that we can see things differently now? Was it something we did? Did we suddenly decide to turn around and follow another path? I think you'll agree that once removed from a particular culture we are less influenced by that culture. But how did we get from there to here?

Paul makes it clear that we are here by the grace of God. We have been set free, brought to new life in Christ, raised up with him to the heavenly places. I take that to mean we are not bound to the world's way of thinking. We can see more clearly from our new vantage point. God intervened on our behalf and made us alive with Christ. God did that for us because God loves us. God also intends in the future to show us the full goodness of God. The surprise in this is that God did not wait for us to realize we were in trouble. Instead, God acted when we were dead in our sin to bring us to new life in Christ.

The danger in this is that we will think that we're superior to those on the outside. That is at the center of this passage. Paul's concerned that Christians will start thinking they are somehow special, somehow better than others. So he reminds us that there is no explanation for our situation other than God's grace. We did not free ourselves from the world's way of thinking. If we are free from that it is only because God has touched us and set us free. It's not that we are better than those who are still imprisoned in their sin. We are not. Nor is it because we chose a life of faith over a life of sinfulness. It is quite simply because God working through others opened our hearts and minds to a new way of life. We are not alone. We're surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Through many people God has touched our lives and brought us hope.

So what do we say about all those people who took the bonuses? Shall we simply ignore what they did? Not at all. We put their actions in proper perspective. And we call on them to begin living by a higher standard. We dare not form a lynch mob to go after them. That's the way the world thinks. We seek justice, to be sure. We model righteousness in our living, encouraging people to stop thinking only of themselves. We invite everybody to work for the good of all. We do that humbly knowing that once we thought like they did. And if it were not for God's grace at work in us, we would still think like they do. But God has raised us to a new life. Now we have a different vantage point. Seated with Christ in the heavenly places, it is up to us to invite others to join with us, transformed by the grace of God, anticipating the future blessings God has promised.