

Calvary United Methodist Church
September 28, 2008

MAKE ME
Rev. Dr. S. Ronald Parks

Children's Sermon

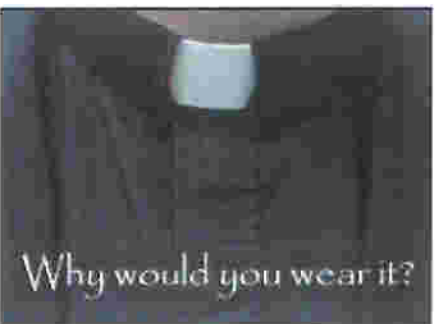
Galatians 3:26-29

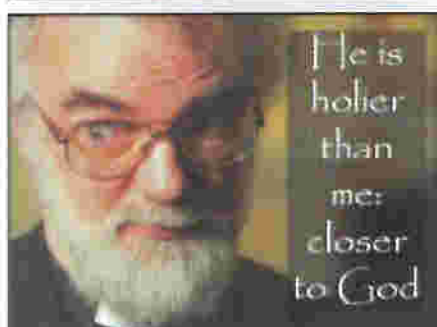
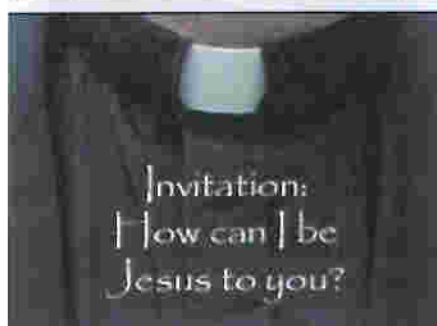
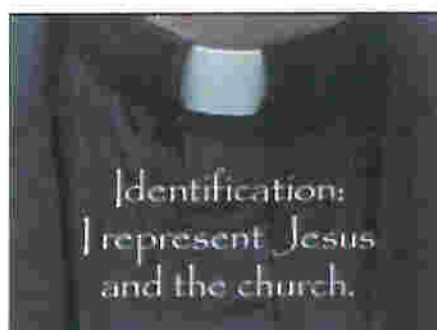
It is our purpose as we come together and worship to give thanks to the God who has made us, who has redeemed us and who sustains us in this glorious Sabbath Day. We welcome the children the front of this worship space to share God's good news and to celebrate the gift of this day.

You may notice I'm dressed a little bit differently this morning than I normally am. (Pastor has on a clerical collar and dark suit.) I know many of you have noticed. Actually what I'm doing is making a fashion statement. Is that what they call it when you dress differently, when you want to say something about who you are? Do you know what this is? Do you know what this is called? (One of the children answers: "It's a suit.") Yes, it is a suit and I don't often wear one. You are absolutely right. The old word for this is called a collarino and from about the 1700's forward it was used to mark a very special group of people. Do you know who they were? Some of them still wear them today.

Let me tell you what somebody said when they saw me come in this morning and saw me wearing this. They did this. Bowed and said "Good morning, Father." And therein lies the question: why would you wear something like this if everybody notices that you are wearing something different than everybody else? You see I not only had the good morning, Father, comment, I also had a number of people who have been here as long as I've been here and who have known me for the last nine years and a couple months who look at me differently this morning. Sometimes those looks even bordered on disgust. If I knew how to make a disgusting face I would make it. But there is no mistaking it. By the way one lady said I look devilishly handsome this morning - Mary Shook.

Why would you wear such a thing? When it started back in the 1700's the reason that certain people wore this was to identify themselves. You see it is a means of identification. In those days the practice of wearing a collar which was something that all men used to wear was kind of going out of vogue. But the people who were the heads of the church decided it would be a good idea for them to keep wearing them (notice how change always comes to the church last) so that people out in the marketplaces, in the school, on the streets, could identify the presence of a representative of the church. Depending on where you were in the structure of the church you either wore a black one or you had one that went all the way around your neck, or how high it was, the color of the shirt you wore it over, or the robe you wore it over. All of those things were all part





of this particular piece of fashion. It was to identify you as a representative of the church. Hopefully because it was a piece of identification it was also an invitation to people - if you had a need to be close to God, to talk to somebody about God; if there was a reason why you needed to see somebody from the church - it was like saying to people: here I am anybody who needs to be close to God or to talk about God, the question is how can I be Jesus to you? That's what this really meant to the people of that day.

Unfortunately times change and what do people think when they see them today? I'll tell you what they think nine times out of ten and there have been studies done about this. When someone sees an individual dressed like this, this is usually what they think: he is holier than me, he is closer to God. If you happen to be in a great relationship with God that's usually a reason for celebration. When I walk through a hospital, for example, or when I'm out and I'm wearing this (by the way I think I can count on one hand the amount of times since I'm here at Calvary that I've worn this) people, if they are Christians usually greet you with a sense of thanksgiving—"How are you doing?" But if you don't know who Jesus is and you are stuck in an elevator with a guy dressed like this, you get as far away as you can and you look at the floor really hard because this suggests to people that somehow I'm different than you are. Or that I have different responsibilities than you do. Or that somehow I got closer to God at some point in my life and my relationship to God is a whole lot different than yours is.

So what has happened is, as time has passed, people have come to see this particular type of fashion as a barrier of getting close to God. They don't like to see people dressed like this because they are uncomfortable either with the idea of being in a relationship with God or maybe they are not comfortable with their relationship with God.

Some people have suggested that the reason I wore this today is because they are going to take a picture and I wanted to stick out. No, that's exactly why I wouldn't wear a shirt like this. It is important that those of us who have gone to seminary and have been granted responsibilities in the church understand that we are no different than anybody else. That's a teaching from the scripture. That's an important lesson for us to learn. It comes from Galatians, one of Paul's letters to one of his churches. This is what he has to say.

By faith in Christ you are in direct relationship with God.

That means, you don't need me to get to God. In the Roman Catholic tradition that's not the way it is. You need me or a representative of the church to get to God. If there is no priest around, if there is not someone you can speak to or administer the last rites, or conduct the sacrament of baptism, then God doesn't act at least in the way that they understand the authority of the church. But you are in a direct relationship.

Your baptism in Christ was not just washing you up for a fresh start. It also involved dressing you in an adult faith wardrobe—Christ's life, the fulfillment of God's covenant promise.

Do you know that from the time you are baptized forward you are thought of as being a member of this church? We call you a Preparatory Member from the time that you are baptized until the time you are confirmed. But you are still thought of being a part of us in an official way because we think of you as a person who has been given the responsibility of bringing Jesus close to other people. So even though you are young you have an adult wardrobe and that wardrobe is your love of God.

In Christ's family, there is no division between Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female. All are equal. That is, we are all in a common relationship with Jesus Christ.

There is no difference between (this is my addition, by the way) collar wearers and non-collar wearers. Okay, we all have the same responsibilities. And that's really important.

This is a picture that was taken five years ago. Five years ago at the end of September we took a picture of all the ministers sitting in the old sanctuary and we are going to do it again today but I'm not appropriately dressed for that picture. Because if I'm going to be serious and say to you that you are no different than I am and that we all have the same responsibilities then I must be appropriately attired. (Pastor changes into a shirt.) One of the children says, "I've noticed that you wear Hawaiian shirts a lot." You've noticed that I wear Hawaiian shirts a lot. Do you know why that is, Alex? I'll tell you a secret that I haven't told anybody else around here. The reasons that I wear Hawaiian shirts is because in some parts of the world this is considered like a suit and there is no way to wear a tie with a Hawaiian shirt. I'm not a huge fan of wearing neckties. Talk about customs and fashion statements, I don't know who decided that putting a strip of fabric down the front of your shirt to catch all the soup that drips, or the salsa that drips, that was what it meant to be formal or dressed up. But they didn't ask me. So when you see me wearing a shirt with a tie just think to yourself, boy I bet he wishes he was in a Hawaiian shirt.

You know that picture we took. Here's what the church looks like when nobody is in it. It's time to take a new picture though so we are going to ask you to move. The way this picture was taken five years ago is we have camera set in one place. Everybody in the one service sat in one area and a picture was taken. Then everybody in the other service sat in the other side of the sanctuary and a picture was taken. We took it to a place where they took those two pictures and cut them together. So the dividing line of the picture was actually right down the middle of the center aisle. If you look up there you can see that no one is standing in the center of the center aisle. They are kind of off to one side in one part



There is no difference between collar-wearers and non-collar-wearers.





of the picture and off to the other side in the other side of the picture. That's exactly what we are going to do this morning. You may say to yourself, how in the world are we going to get all these people into one section of this sanctuary?

We are going to have some people standing up; we are going to have some of you guys sitting on the floor. What we would like to do is take a photograph of all the ministers of Calvary who are here this day so that we can put it in the cornerstone when we seal it in about a week. (All the people move to the one section of the sanctuary for the picture to be taken.)

I am very appreciative of your tolerance but I also want you to remember, if you have the opportunity, this moment in time and the person that you are sitting next to or that you got scrunched up against when we took that photograph. If you look closely at the photograph from five years ago there are people who were there then who are not here now for a number of reasons. And there were people who were not here then who are very much a part of who we are now. This is the reason to mark time. This is the reason to celebrate milestones and the evolution of God's grace as it is poured out upon us. Thanks be to God for the gift of our church fellowship.

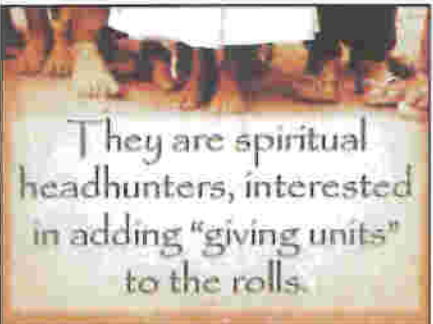
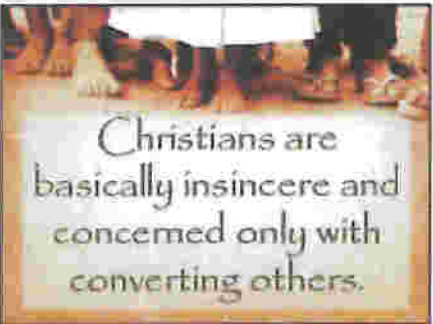
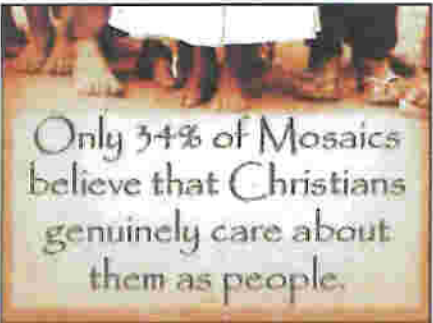
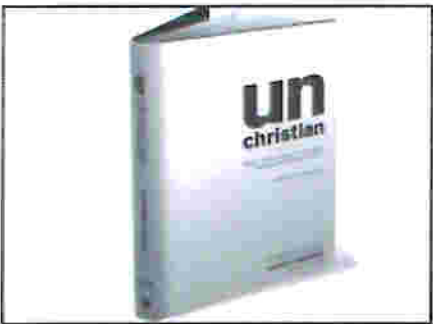
Message

Matthew 28:16-20



There was a knock on the door of the parsonage late Wednesday afternoon and I opened the door to find this. Well not these particular individuals but two people who looked just like them. They were young, nicely dressed, very polite Mormons. I love to get Mormons because I let them go on for about sixty seconds. They begin their conversation always the same way: good afternoon, I'm so and so, this is my friend such and such and we are here to share with you the good news of the other testament of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Then they begin to pull out the manuals and the books and the literature and the pamphlets and the brochures and the magazines. It's about that time after they are just getting geared up to really dive in that I say, "I'm a United Methodist Pastor." Always it brings the same response. It's the same look that I got this morning when you saw me dressed in a cleric. I always want to talk about that. I want to say, "I appreciate you guys and your commitment. I appreciate the courage that it takes to go door to door in the neighborhood. Frankly we don't do that in my church. I've never suggested that we do it. I have never been part of a campaign when we did it."

I've never been involved in a group of people who had the kind of commitment to take obviously a substantial amount of time. These guys do this for a long period of time. They've trained in it. They've tried it out. They know what they are doing and they commit to doing this for a whole day, for a series of days, for a substantial amount of time.

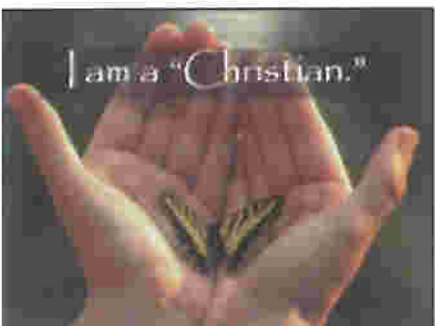
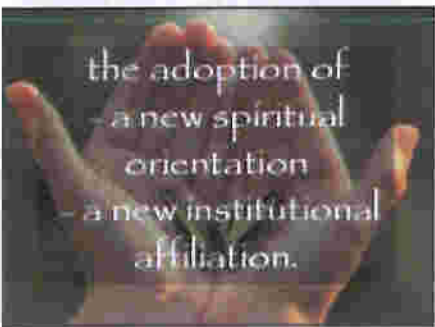
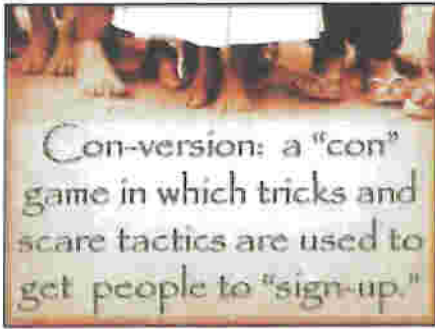


In all my conversations with Mormons and with Jehovah's Witnesses and with anybody else who comes to the door to share their faith story, the question that I forgot to ask these guys is the same one I forget to ask everybody I talk to who wants to share with me their faith. It's a simple question. It is the question: What is it that you want? What do you want from me? What is it that you are trying to accomplish here? Are you trying to get me to think about things differently? Are you trying to establish a rapport with me? Do you want something from me? Are you looking for a donation? Do you want me to just take your stuff? What is it that you want?

Most people think that the reason that people would go door to door is for the purpose of conversion. Conversion is a nasty word in our culture. It's a nasty piece of vocabulary and there is a good reason for it. As we are thinking about what it means to witness to one another, to be church family with each other, to sit this close to one another you have to understand this is how the world views people of faith: stay the heck away from me. It is not welcome. More than likely if you could put that sign on the foreheads or the lapels of people who would just as soon you kept your faith to yourself, more than likely the vast majority of people would be wearing that emblem.

Why? As we learn in our study of *unChristian* converting people has a bad rap in our culture for a variety of reasons not the least of which is how hypocritical we are. We want people to conform to a certain way of believing but yet we don't conform to that standard ourselves.

Kinnaman reminds us only 34 percent of moslems, people currently ages 16 to 29, believe that you and I genuinely care about them as people. Christians are basically, so they believe, insincere and concerned only with converting others. They are spiritual headhunters. You know what a headhunter is in the corporate world? Somebody who gets somebody from another firm and brings them over. We are spiritual headhunters interested in adding giving units to our rolls. You know there are times of the year and we are approaching one of those times of the year when around the office the question gets asked, "How many giving units do we have here at Calvary?" I hate that. What an impersonal way to talk about single-parent families, some one in a nursing home, a large, extended family, multi-generation. If you get an address and a mailing comes to you from Calvary sooner or later at some point in the year you are going to be numbered as a giving unit. That's unfortunate but it's the language that we trade in when we think about what it means to be a part of a congregation, at least in the institutional and business sense of the word. We don't deal on those topics and those terms often but every now and then it comes up and this is what people think we are all about. What we would like to do is bring more people in here to subsidize our budget so the people who are already here don't have to give faithfully—they can slack. They can do the two dollar a week thing for the rest of their natural born lives. If we keep bringing people in they will take care of stuff.



That's the perception that people have of this church. Not because it's Calvary but because it's Christian. That's what Christianity means to people on the outside. **Con-version**: a con game in which tricks and scare tactics are used to get people to sign up.

Now don't tell me this is not familiar to you or that you haven't seen this practiced. Don't tell me it isn't immediately what you think when you open the front door and there are a couple of Mormons standing there. These people aim to convert me. They are going to try to trick me into taking their stuff, becoming part of their fellowship, adding my giving unit to their numbers. That's what we think. That's how we process this idea of sharing faith—conversion.

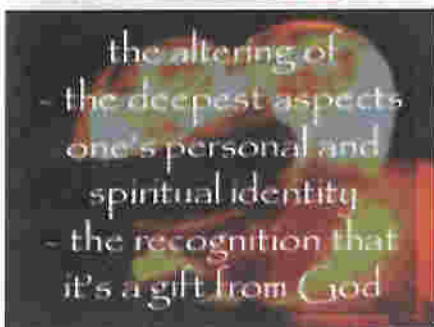
Do you know what a conversion really is? What happens in a conversion is that you make a choice, that you make a decision. And the decision is two-fold. You decide to adopt a new spiritual orientation. You hear somebody share their faith story and you think, you know what, that's kind of my story too. I think I could agree with that. I think I could wrap my head intellectually around that idea. I think I'm going to begin to pursue that particular spiritual orientation. And then, usually, at least in this culture, there is something to join. You are going to sign up. You are going to become a member of some kind of an institution. That institution is going to have requirements and demands. They are going to have obligations that you are going to be asked to fulfill.

So when we think of converting we think of not only thinking differently and perhaps making a conscious choice to bend ourselves or to conform our ideas to someone else's, but we are going to think about joining a family of some sort. We are going to be part of something bigger than ourselves.

I can tell you that if that is what we are about as a church then we are going to meet the exact same kind of resistance that I meet when I put on a cleric and go out the door of the church. They will look at you and think that there is something wrong with you. It is a minority of people who see a clerical collar and have any sense of warmth about it. Think about how you felt when you saw me standing here in it. Questions. What's that about? What's he trying to say? What's the message I'm suppose to hear.

You see, that exists in our culture and the idea that somehow you can put up a building and stick a cross on the top of it and people are going to be warmly drawn to it, forget it. It doesn't happen that way and the younger you are the less likely you are to think of this as a place of welcoming. You think of it as a place where you are going to get pressured into something. Where you are going to have something jammed into your head and where they are going to be asking for stuff from you. That's what conversion means to most people between the ages of 16 and 29.

But what we are about is not simply saying, "I am a Christian." Any-



body can say it. Anybody can go buy the shirt and wear the collar. Anybody can carry a Bible down the street. Anybody can erect a building and put a cross on the top of it. Saying "I am a Christian" is not what we are about. What we are about is something a lot deeper: transformation. What we are about is not adopting some new orientation of thinking. What we are about is not joining the fellowship. What we are about is something a little more substantial: the altering of the deepest aspects of our personal and spiritual identity. We are about being born again, to use the scriptural term. We are about transforming who we are into something that is totally inwardly focused, something in someone who is selfish to the core and becoming like Christ who pours himself out.

We are interested also in recognizing that all of this happens not because we make the choice but because God has chosen us.

I can agree to study Theology. I can go to school for it. I can pay the tuition bills. I can walk that walk but unless the Spirit of God is welcome in my heart there will be no transformation, there may not even be a conversion. You see, Wesley said when he felt his heart strangely warmed that he was made a new person. He was transformed. And that transformation is what we are about as a church. Not that we bring more people in here so we can't take a photograph on a Sunday morning but rather that we tell the world that this is a place where people who are in the midst of God's transformation are working that out. This is where you are welcome to be who you are in whatever way that that is significant to you and to join us as we recognize the gift of the spirit that moves us on to perfection and as we allow that same spirit to warm our heart and to make us a new person.

Transformation does not say I am a Christian. It is I am becoming like Jesus. Can you say that? Say it! Do you mean it? Is there anything behind that beside the fact that I threw it up there and asked you to say it? If there is nothing behind it, then we have to stop and think, is there anything going on in here? Is there any way in which the love of God is bringing us to a new understanding of the gift-like nature of our lives and the potential that God has placed within us to change and transform the lives of every person that we know and even people that we've never met.

I am becoming like Jesus. What does it mean? It means a bunch of things. We are going to go through them quick.

It means that we are going to be leaning. We are going to be leaning on Christ. This is not something that we are going to do on our own. I have no ability to transform my heart. I have no ability to guide my life in a way which is Christlike without Christ to lean on. Jesus said, "I am the vine. You are the branches. When you are joined to me the harvest is glorious but separated from me you can do nothing." A transformed person recognizes that anything good that I do, anything powerful that I say, any way in which the witness that I offer

has any impact whatsoever is a gift from God. It may have been channeled through me. I may have been privileged to be a part of it but I didn't do it. Therefore I have to lean on God day after day in each moment to help me to be that person, to help me to become more like Christ.



I'm leaning. I'm learning. I am amazed day after day how little I know. I am amazed by how many things I didn't just care to absorb or check out or research. I am amazed at how much other people know. But one of the things that continues to amaze me is how limited my understanding is of how God works. I think of God working in ways that God has worked in my life. But as I listen to you, as we grow together in the faith, as we move forward as a church, I am continuously impressed by your stories, the way God works in your life. I'm learning. And the reason that it is so important to keep learning—don't copy the behavior of this world but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think and respect the thoughts of others.

I'm leaning on Christ and I'm learning from you and I'm learning as God reveals God's self to me.



I'm loving. What does it mean to be transformed? It means to love in the same way God loves and in the same way Christ loved. That's a powerful statement. Love is not an affection, love is an action. It is a relationship and the only way love enters into it is if you do something. It's not how you feel. It's the nature, the orientation, the inclination of the heart in relationship to other people. Beloved let us love one another for love is of God. Everyone who loves is a child of God. They know God which means that if they know you and you love in the spirit of Christ, they know Christ because they know you. Isn't that a powerful and joyous privilege? I am becoming like Christ in order that I may bring Christ closer to everyone around me. What a great, great privilege and joy.



I'm listening. I'm leaning. I'm learning. I'm loving. I'm listening. I want to hear your needs. I want to understand God's call. I want to understand what God is saying to me this day so every now and then I have to remind myself to shut up, to be quiet, to be still, and to think what I know is not nearly as important as what God is going to tell me today. Listening. Let everyone be anxious to listen, hesitant to speak and reluctant to judge. It's so easy for us in a knee jerk moment to judge other people without ever hearing their story, without ever listening to them. I think that's why when the people come to the door and they ring their doorbell we shut them down so fast. I don't have the time to listen you. My story is all I want to hear. Whatever you've got to say, keep it to yourself. When we are transformed, when we are becoming like Christ, we stop talking and we start listening, because in the quiet, in the silence, in the still, small wilderness of our wandering there is a voice. It might be yours and it might be Christ's but I know if it is wise it's not mine. I'm listening and I'm leading.



I want the people in fifty years, or whenever they open that cornerstone and they pull out this photograph that we took today to have to set up a table in the vestibule with a piece of paper saying, "Where's the minister in this picture?" Because all of us, every single person whose face is in that picture is a minister. We are all leading others to Christ. It's not my responsibility; it's not Pastor Jeff's responsibility to do the leading. What we do is facilitate the leadership that already is here to do great things in the name of Christ. I don't want to lead you. I want to rejoice at where Christ leads us all. That's not an insignificant distinction. We are leading. Go and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Show them everything I have revealed to you. I can only show you what God has revealed to me and I will be made complete in sitting and listening and learning and having you lead me to understand what God has revealed to you.

And in the process transformation will occur. We will be all transformed as time passes, as we work our salvation out in fear and trembling, as God leads us in paths of righteousness not for our glory but for his name's sake. You are the light of the world. Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

If that's what we are about then transformation will become our purpose; not adding members to the roll, not (I love this phrase) taking people in. Oh, that's so bad -taking people in. That sounds like **con**-version to me. And if that's what we are about, no wonder this is the way people feel. Because if we are about converting, no one is transformed.