

“Interior Design”

If you read the Bible, you will discover that it can basically be reduced to one simple story line:

1. God creates human beings.
2. God sets up life with two paths –
a path of love and obedience that leads to abundant life,
and a path of self-centeredness and disobedience that leads to misery & death.
3. God gives human beings free choice
and probably at least half of the time they choose the wrong path and end up in trouble.
4. While God does not protect people from the consequences of their choices.
whenever possible,
God does go after them, saves them, and brings them back to the right path.
5. And then...probably at least half of the time, they choose the bad path once again.

It's what Israel and Judah did time and time again.

God said, “Love me with all your heart and soul mind and strength
and your neighbor as yourself, and they didn't.

When things didn't look like their world was headed in the right direction,

Israel's and Judah's first response was to ignore the problem.

Then when they couldn't ignore it anymore, they didn't look inwards for the solution; they looked outwards.

The rulers looked to political alliances with Egypt or Babylon or Assyria or Syria,

expecting that changing the outward circumstances would solve the problem.

The people looked to their rulers to make things right, expecting someone else to solve the problem.

In other words, first they did nothing, expecting the problem to resolve itself. Strike 1.

Then they worked on changing the outward circumstances. Strike 2.

Then they expected someone else to change. Strike 3.

And those are the three mistakes we humans continually make. . .

First, we expect that things will get better all by themselves.

How many times in our lives have we done the same thing over & over and kept expecting different results?

The second is that we try to change the outer things – the circumstances of our life situation,

without changing the inner things – who we are, and how we think and speak and act.

We make technical changes thinking they will solve adaptive problems.

And the third is that we expect other people to change.

I met Lucy and Luke over 30 years ago.

They had been married two years and their marriage was in trouble.

It had started out fine, but just three months into the marriage,

emotional and sometimes physical abuse had occurred – on the part of both people.

For the first two years they just kept hoping things would get better, but they didn't.

So finally they came for counseling.

Luke attributed their short tempers to the financial stress they were under

and how they were living in cramped quarters in his parents' basement.

Lucy agreed those were issues.

So over the next 2 years Lucy got a part-time job,

Luke got a job that paid twice what he had been making before,

and they were able to move into a spacious apartment.

But guess what? Things had not changed between them.

And now, although they paid lip service to their own failures, it was clear that basically they blamed each other.

Since neither could change the other they ended up divorcing,

First, they had expected the problem to resolve itself. Strike 1.
Second, they had worked on changing the outward circumstances. Strike 2.
And third, they had tried to change each other. Strike 3.

Luke got married again, and that marriage, too, followed the same path.
Recently I heard he was on wife #3 and that that marriage was also in trouble.

Because we get too focused on the outward part of our lives, the outward circumstances, our life situations,
we think that the answer lies in changing the things and the people around us.

We get caught up in thinking,
If I only had more money...,
If I only had a bigger house...,
If I only had a more reliable car...,
If I only had a better job...,
If only my wife was more affectionate...,
If only my husband was more emotionally available...,
If only my kids wouldn't push my buttons...,
If only my neighbors would take better care of their property...,
If only my school was better run...,
And so on and so forth.

Our lives are filled with bane and blessing, pain and joy, despair and hope.
We all have (or at least have had) those dark corners of our lives into which we sweep
our loneliness & loss, our fears & failures, our anguish & anxiety, our depression & despair.
We can leave them there and hope that they will magically be resolved.
But if we're honest with ourselves, we know that's not going to happen.
We can change our outward circumstances and hope that that we can forget those negative things,
but without inner changes, those negative things will continue to plague us.
We can try and change the people in our lives so that those dark things will go away, but we can't change another person.
And even if we walk away from one relationship and replace it with another, those dark things will remain.

Jeremiah spent most of his ministry preaching doom and gloom,
pointing out that society was heading down the wrong path,
and that there would be heavy consequences to pay.

But as he lay in prison in a city under siege,
God spoke into the midst of the desolation and despair a word of hope:
"Behold the days are coming when I will fulfill my promise", said God,
"my promise to go out into the desolate places, find my children, and bring them home".

God fulfilled that promise when years later
God brought those who had been exiled back to their home, their city, Jerusalem.
God fulfilled that promise over and over again in the Old Testament story.
God fulfilled that promise again in the New Testament, in a new way – in Jesus.
And Jesus fulfilled that promise in an even greater way in sending us his Spirit.

Just a few chapters before today's reading God says to Jeremiah,
"This is the covenant I will make with them – I will put my law of love inside of them –
inside their minds and hearts...which is what happened on Pentecost.

As children of a fallen humanity we will continue to often choose the wrong path.
We will continue to think we can do the same things over and over while expecting things around us to change.
We will continue to think if we just change the outer things that our problems will be solved.
We will continue to think that it's the other people in our lives who need to change.

But at the same time that our minds are resisting change, the Spirit is at work within us,
opening our hearts so that we can love God more,
love each other more,
and love everyone we encounter more. **Amen**