

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
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Sermon for September 13, 2009  
Lessons: Ezekiel 18:25-32 and Matthew 21:23-27; 22:34-40

## HOW WE FRAME OUR MESSAGE

How often do you punch your wife: (a) once or twice a year, (b) about once a month, (c) every week, or (d) every day? We all perceive immediately the wrongness of that question, but how is it wrong? First, it assumes you have a wife, thereby eliminating well over half the population. Then it frames its question to ignore the possibility that anyone with a wife does not punch her, and the choices prevent you from saying you do not.

Framing matters. I began with a ridiculous example to show how a question can be framed to distort or even exclude the truth. Most questions framed to mislead us are more subtle. This week, a cable news show posed the question of which other news source the viewers considered most deceitful, then listed four or five choices. The framing of the question implied that all those other news sources were untrustworthy, asking only which the viewer considered the worst of a bad lot. So, the outcome was assured by the frame, and it seemed most likely the “winner” would be that network’s rival. A note on screen warned, “Not a scientific poll.” No kidding.

The person who frames the question often predetermines the outcome, just as the framing for a new house determines its size, shape, and style. The house framed for two stories will not become a rancher. For centuries, the Christian churches have proclaimed that Jesus not only brought us God’s message of salvation but embodied that message in his very person and fulfilled it in his life, death, and resurrection.

You might assume that because most Christian churches share that core belief, we must all proclaim the same message to our own congregations and the world, but you would be wrong in that assumption. Framing matters so much that Jesus’ life and teachings can be presented in radically different ways that not only vary the message but actually create different kinds of the Christ he is proclaimed to be. For the Christ we proclaim to be valid, meaning faithful and true to Jesus, we must frame our message his way. It’s not enough to speak his name, praise him, and quote the New Testament. It’s not enough to call him Savior and Lord. Framing can change the meaning of those words.

Jesus presents God’s truth as love, but I need to be more specific because to us love can mean almost anything. For Jesus, God’s truth is *redemptive love*, meaning love that

restores the one who has been damaged, broken, or lost. Redemptive love acknowledges that something is wrong, that healing is needed, and that forgiveness has to be worked out in some real and life-changing way. There is a second chance in redemption, but on terms which do not take away our freedom. The prodigal son is restored to his rightful place in the family, not taken back as a slave on probation. Redemption is not imposed upon us. We are invited, not forced. We are encouraged, not intimidated. Listen to the words: “encouraged,” infused with courage; not “intimidated,” forced into timidity, infused with fear.

Authoritarian Christians frame the alternative to their way as *permissive*, which is false. Churches such as ours will go nowhere if we accept permissiveness as our frame. First of all, the word itself implies that the authoritarian frame is the real one for Christians. Permissive comes from permit, which is something only authority can do. If I can permit you to do something, then, by implication, I can choose instead to restrain you from doing it. So, we’re still in the authoritarian framework, and we need to get out of it. The gospel is not permissive but redemptive, and there is all the difference in the world.

What kind of message, what gospel, could possibly come from permissiveness? “Let it be”? “Whatever floats your boat”? “Just do your thing”? “Do what comes naturally”? “It’s all relative”? What kind of gospel is that? The only message there is smiley indifference. Who cares? It doesn’t matter, as long as you play nicely. Jesus did not give himself to humiliation, suffering, and death so we could dismiss the cruelties and distresses of the human condition with smiley indifference. Permissiveness doesn’t solve anything, fix anything, cure anything, or even care to treat anything because it denies there’s a serious problem. So, as long as churches such as ours accept the authoritarian framework which says we are permissive, we will have no real message, no gospel, no good news to proclaim and represent in our communities. We will stand for nothing but niceness, which offers no real alternative to the authoritarian preaching of fear and guilt.

Ezekiel the prophet labors to explain to authoritarian people that God delights in redemption, not retribution, but he never quite escapes the framework of judgment and punishment. Jesus does escape it. When he says that all of God’s Torah and Prophets hang from the two pegs of love – wholehearted love for God and love for neighbor as for self – he creates a new frame, a radically new frame, for understanding everything in the Bible and in life. All God wants for us or cares about in the life of this world is now framed for us by those twin commandments. We now understand the Ten Commandments as expositions of the two, answering how we love God, with examples, and how we love neighbor as self, with examples. Everything in the Bible we now understand within the framework of those two commandments. Everything.

What does redemptive love do? It operates outside the authoritarian framework of judgment and retribution. Its goal is to heal and restore, to reopen possibility that has been closed. Permissiveness does not forgive but merely overlooks the offense, as though it never happened. Redemption treats the offense and releases us from its power to shape and direct our lives. Nothing can change the events of the past, but redemption transforms them. For example, a past failure that has haunted me with shame can be transformed when I am enabled to confront it for what it was, understand and accept my own failure, and discover within God's grace the opportunity to do life differently but, also, to take with me the understanding I have gained so I can be more understanding with others who have failed. Now I no longer carry the shame permissiveness only ignores but never heals; neither do I carry the guilt authoritarian Christianity would add to my shame. I'm free and actually made better and stronger by redemptive love than I would have been if I had never failed.

The authoritarian person will immediately object by asking sarcastically, "Oh, so you're saying then that your failure (your sin) was a good thing?" Don't be ridiculous. If it were a good thing, I would need no redemption from it. Such sarcasm seeks only to degrade the power of God's redemptive love and to imprison Jesus Christ within its own authoritarian framework of rules and regulations, of approval and disapproval, of fear and guilt.

Simon Peter would forever be the disciple who chickened out on Jesus, denying him three times when the chips were down, but even so great a failure was redeemed into a strength that enabled Peter to lead in the early church. His shame was transformed, not only into thankfulness at being forgiven, but also into understanding of human weakness and compassion for others who failed. That's redemption.

We are not called to be a church of convenience with a permissive gospel. Our calling to follow Jesus in ministry is more purposeful and positive than permissiveness can ever be. We need his re-framing of life, of the Bible, and of Christian faith. Our message is redemptive love. So, we need the redemptive form of Christianity to set the framework for our life and ministry as a congregation. Therefore, we need to give a lot of thought to what it means to be redemptive in our words and in our actions. If as a church we are to have a future that matters, this is our question. *What does it mean to be redemptive rather than either authoritarian or permissive, and how can we deliberately open ourselves to being re-framed that way?* For truly, the way we frame our message frames us and our lives. Let the framework for our life as a church, our message, and our personal lives be redemptive love. The implications of framing our message Jesus' way will play out in every part of life, every understanding of people and society, and every way we seek to fulfill our calling. It will transform us, if only we will do it. Amen.