

Sermon for Sunday, July 30, 1972 by Andrew A. Jumper, D. D., Pastor
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"THOUGHTS ON RECYCLING PEOPLE"
Jeremiah 18:1-12

Text: "And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he worked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do."
Jeremiah 18:4

These days everyone is concerned about the environment and ecology. We hear a lot about "pollution levels" and "inversions" and "environmental systems." Even the television commercials have gotten in on the act and one of the best and funniest television commercials is one dealing with beer cans. In this particular commercial, the beer company offers to buy back its empty cans and the commercial shows a little old ladies group processing the cans for return. One lady puts a can under her rocker and smashes it as she rocks. Another uses a waffle iron to process her cans. But the gem of the commercial is the white-haired lady who looks like someone's sweet little old grandmother who is using a karate chop to smash her cans as she shouts, "Hah!" So, reprocessing and recycling has become an important part of our ecology today.

But as I have watched that particular commercial--and others dealing with the same subject--I have become aware that the greatest waste product of human society today is people--human personalities. The greatest junk-heap, the greatest garbage pile today and the one that most threatens society is the mass of broken personalities. And broken personalities are responsible for broken laws, broken morals, broken marriages, broken relationships, broken lives. And while we surely need to be concerned for the ecology of our environment, most of all we need to be concerned about the ecology of human beings.

With that thought in mind, I would like for us to think together this morning about recycling people. Most of us are guilty at one time or another of trying to recycle someone else. For example, the first five years I was married, I tried to recycle my wife. I wanted to remake her in the image of my mother who was a fantastic seamstress and a marvelous housekeeper--and my wife excelled at neither of these! At the end of five years, I awoke one day to the realization that I was the one who had been recycled! I became aware to my amazement that my wife made contributions to the home that my mother had never made. As a matter of fact, I came to the realization that if I had to choose between the two, the things my wife did in our family life were far more significant and important. My wife had brought her own gifts and talents and her own unique characteristics that were refreshing and wholesome. And although it took a while to realize this, I'm eternally grateful that Elizabeth resisted recycling on the basis of another model, which, while different from her, was also imperfect and inadequate.

When I marry young couples, I usually give them certain tests. Over the years, I have come to expect certain things and if I don't find them in the tests results, I begin to try to find out why. For example, I expect a girl to select a husband who has many of the characteristics of her father. If the testing, however, indicates that her fiance has few of her father's characteristics, I immediately know one of two things. First, either she has a poor relationship to her father and has deliberately chosen someone different from him, or second, while her fiance does not have her father's characteristics, she intends to recycle him as soon as they are married.

Now, anybody getting married who intends to recycle the partner is headed for heartache for both of them. In the first place, if a girl is trying to recycle her husband, he is going to resist recycling and resent her efforts. This in turn will

make her frustrated and unhappy. In the second place, no matter how perfect her father was in her eyes, he is still an imperfect model and even if she succeeds in recycling her husband in his image, she will not be very pleased with the results. A home-made husband created by an industrious wife is a glaring example of unskilled labor. And third, in trying to recycle him after some other model, she is so intent on making him into what he is not that she cannot appreciate him for what he really is. She fails to appreciate his uniqueness, his particular gifts and talents that he--in his own right--brings to the marriage. In the light of this, the first observation I want to make is that only God can recycle anyone. I can't recycle you and you can't recycle me. We can't even recycle ourselves. Only God can recycle a person.

The second observation I want to make is this: In recycling us, God is limited by what he has to work with. Had you ever stopped to think of that? God is limited in what he can do in your life. He can do in your life only what you will permit him to do, only as much as you are willing to let him do. He will never take your freedom away from you and therefore he imposes on himself a limitation. God can only work with the raw material you put at his disposal.

In our text for this morning we read, "And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he worked it into another vessel as it seemed good to the potter to do." Notice carefully the sequence of words. It was not the potter's hands that did the spoiling. It wasn't the ability of the potter that was in question here. It was not the artistry of the potter that failed. No, the text says that it was the clay that was spoiled. The fault lay with the clay itself.

The potter may have started out to make a beautiful, exquisite vessel that would take the breath away with its workmanship. But even as his hands began to shape and mold the clay, his sensitive, trained fingers tell him the quality of the clay is not right for the kind of beautiful object he had in mind. Now, he is limited by what he has to work with. So, his hands began to shape the clay into some other vessel of less value, less beauty, less usefulness. He is limited by the raw material at his disposal.

How much of you--how much of your life--are you really willing to put at God's disposal? That's the real question, isn't it? God is limited in your life and mine by how much of ourselves we are willing to give him to work with. The less we give him, the less he can do. The more we give him, the more he can shape us into who and what he always wanted us to be. Each of us must ask in our own hearts, "How much of myself am I giving God? How much of myself am I truly willing to put at God's disposal to let him shape and mold as He wills?"

So, our first observation is that only God can recycle a person. Our second observation is that God can recycle only what we put at his disposal. The third observation is that: There is one way in which you and I can help one another in the recycling process. We can help by providing the atmosphere in which recycling can occur. There are ways by which we can help one another become more pliable in God's hands. Let me share with you what some of these things are.

First, we can help one another by accepting one another as we are. Most of us want to accept one another provided we meet certain specifications or provided we measure up to certain standards. A husband says, "Well, if my wife would do such and such or act in a certain way, I would respond and we could have a good marriage." A wife says, "Well, if he would talk to me when he comes home, play with the children on Saturdays, and carry out the garbage every day I wouldn't nag him so." But let me ask you this question: do you want God's love for you to be conditional? Do you

want God's love for you to be determined by how you act, by who and what you are? Well, you know better than that! We know far too well that we can never deserve or earn God's love. If God is going to love us, he will have to love us just as we are. As a matter of fact, the last two Sundays I have been focusing in on this very fact--the fact that God loves us just as we are. Thank God for that! But, God expects us to love others in the same way. Do you remember how the Bible puts it? "This I command you that ye love one another even as I have loved you."

But second, not only must we love one another as we are, we must do so without expecting a response. Recently I was talking with a young lady about her marriage problems. She said, "I have done all the things he wants me to do, but he never changes. He never makes any response." Well, that sort of love just won't work. It is a conditional love. It is a love that is trying to manipulate. In effect, she was saying, "I will love him in certain ways provided, he makes some changes, provided my love has some impact on his life so that he becomes different." Is that a love that offers freedom to another? Is that an unconditioned love? Well, you know very well it is not. And that kind of love which is trying to manipulate someone else will always fail.

So, we can help one another in the recycling process by first accepting one another as we are and second by doing so without expectation of change in the other. Third, we must see one another as persons and not problems. When you start to pray for your husband or your wife or your child or a friend, how do you pray? Do you pray, "Lord, help my wife to stop nagging?" Do you pray, "Lord, make my husband talk to me when he comes home?" Do you pray, "Lord, make my child get better grades, have him get his hair cut, and while you are at it, Lord, improve his table manners?" Do you pray, "Lord, my best friend has this terrible habit that is driving me batty?" You see, when you pray that way, you are praying for people as problems, not persons. When we begin to thank God for the other person--for the good qualities, for the best things about them--we are seeing them as persons and not problems. When that happens, it may not change the other person but it certainly changes our inner attitudes toward them. When that inner attitude changes, we are helping to provide an atmosphere in which the other has the potential to change. You see, when we see others through the eyes of love as persons, they do begin to change. They respond in almost direct proportion to the amount of love we have for them as persons.

Bruce Larson, in his book Dare to Live Now, tells how this worked in his own family. He had a first grade child who still sucked his thumb. Bruce writes, "I was frantic and tried everything I knew to break him of that habit including scoldings, prayer with him, prayer for him, and the vile-tasting things that are concocted to put on children's thumbs to deter them from this persistent habit. But he was unable to stop." Mr. Larson goes on to add, "But one day I realized what my true motives were. I was really embarrassed to have my child advertising to the world the emotional needs of his own home and the inadequacy of his parents. I saw that my love for this child was conditioned by my need for him to stop this habit." He concludes by saying, "I stopped correcting, nagging, or even referring to the thumb sucking in any way. God had set me free and I secretly called my son by a new name, 'Mr. Wonderful'. I didn't care if he ever stopped sucking his thumb. The miracle is that in ten days he stopped cold and hasn't sucked his thumb since."

No, you and I can't recycle one another. Remaking a man is the business of God. God is the potter who can shape and remold as much of us as we will give to him. But we can serve one another by a love that accepts one another where we are, by doing so without demanding change, by seeing one another as persons and not problems. And in that context of love a miracle begins to happen. In that context we provide the atmosphere in which another is free to change, free to become a new person, free to let God loose in his life, free to let the clay of human personality be recycled by the other.