

What is Your / Our Reputation?

1 Thessalonians 1:1-8 1 Kings 8:41-43 Job 29:7-16 Proverbs 22:1
Rev. Todd B. Freeman
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa September 6, 2009

A "reputation" is defined as the general estimation or esteem in which someone or something is held; it's the character or image in public opinion; it's the social evaluation attributed to a person, place, thing, or action.

I'm going to list off a few names, and I'd like for you to think about the first impressions that come into your mind concerning these person's reputation: George Washington, Albert Einstein, Adolf Hitler, Mahatma Gandhi, O.J. Simpson, Billy Graham, Bernie Madoff, Senator Ted Kennedy, Oklahoma State Representative Sally Kern, Michael Jackson, Tulsa mayor Kathy Taylor, your next door neighbor.

What about the reputation of business organizations, like: Apple Computers, A.I.G., Toyota, Wal-Mart, Quik Trip, Southwest Airlines?

Even certain animals have particular reputations: Pit bulls and Rottweilers; Cocker Spaniels and Poodles, wolverines, dolphins, and sharks.

And something we heard a lot about over the past year: What is the reputation of the United States of America around the world?

There's not a person, place, or thing that doesn't have some sort of reputation – sometimes good, sometimes bad, sometimes both.

I'm sure you noticed the title of today's sermon. It poses quite clear questions.

What kind of reputation do you have? And, what is our church's reputation?

Let's look at the second question first. What image do you think pops into people's minds when they hear the name, *College Hill Presbyterian Church*? I suppose that depends upon whom you ask, of course. It's a rather interesting fact that most churches do have a reputation. Some are known for their magnificent structure or how high their steeple reaches into the sky, some for their pipe organ, some for their music department, some for their youth ministry program, some for their outreach to the community, some for their conservative or evangelical perspective, some for their progressive stance on pressing social issues, some for their pastor, and even some for the predominate kinds of cars that can be found in their parking lot.

So again I ask, what is our congregation's reputation? What is it within Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery? What is it within the Kendall-Whittier neighborhood, within the city of Tulsa, and beyond? As you ponder these questions let's look at the difference a reputation can make.

From a broad perspective, we read in 1 Kings the story of when King Solomon, David's son, built the Temple in Jerusalem. Chapter 8 focuses on the dedication of the Temple once it was completed. And this morning's Old Testament passage comes under the heading, "Solomon's Prayer of Dedication." Solomon reflects that travelers will come from distant lands to the Temple because they have heard of the God of Israel's great reputation – a reputation for a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and one who hears the prayers of the people.

It almost sounds strange to ask, but **what do you think God's reputation is among the general public here in this country, and in this city? A God of love and grace? A God of judgment and condemnation?**

You may remember after 9-11 (almost 8 years ago now) when certain religious leaders claimed that it was an angry God who allowed the tragedy to happen because of the negative influences of the liberal-leaning ACLU, feminists, and of course their favorite scapegoat, the increasing acceptance of gay and lesbian persons. A lot of people bought into that, and still do. Perhaps without even realizing it, these folks were proclaiming that God deserved the reputation as a 'divine terrorist' in order to get this country to change its ways.

I heard the same after the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. During a nationally televised memorial service, one pastor actually stated, "Look what God had to do to get our attention." Is that the kind of reputation that God deserves?

Much of the same was heard after Hurricane Katrina, claiming God had had enough of those loose-living New Orleans folks. When you think about it, however, God has always had a bit of a reputation as the bringer of natural disasters in order to make a point. Funny, as a geologist, I was taught that natural disasters were just a part of...nature.

Needless to say, while God may not have to protect God's own reputation as one of love and grace and forgiveness, perhaps we do.

In our New Testament reading from **1 Thessalonians** we read about the impact of a congregation that had a great reputation. Perhaps we can see how well we are incorporating some of its characteristics here at College Hill.

The church I'm referring to doesn't have a name. It didn't need one, because it was the only Christian church in town. That town was Thessalonica, located in northern Greece. The church was founded two thousand years ago by a traveling evangelist named Paul. In perhaps the earliest of all of his letters to the churches he founded, Paul writes the following about that congregation's reputation (I'm paraphrasing):

Every time we think of you, we thank God for you. Day and night you are in our prayers as we call to mind your works of faith, your labor of love, your endurance and steadfastness of hope in following Christ's teachings. When the Message we preached came to you, it wasn't just words. Something happened in you. The Holy Spirit put power and resolve in your convictions.

Do you know that all over the provinces of both Macedonia and Achaia believers look up to you? The word has gotten around. Your lives are echoing Christ's message. The news of your faith in God is out. We don't even have to say anything anymore - you're the message!

For word to travel that broadly in the ancient world, it was a testament to the great reputation of that particular community of faith. And it was obvious, just as it would be today, that along with a great reputation came a great amount of positive influence.

The Thessalonian Christians were a people who made a difference, a people known for their faith in the living God; for their steadfastness and ministry that was approached as a labor of love; a congregation filled with people known for the power

and resolve of their convictions, and how through the living of their own lives, the message of Christ was proclaimed.

Can the same be said of our reputation? Do we make a positive difference, a difference in your life and in the lives of people outside these sanctuary walls? What example are we setting as a congregation? Is it an example others are drawn to? What example are we setting by our outreach and mission efforts, our Christian Education opportunities, our fellowship, and our services of worship? What example is being set by our stewardship, our evangelism efforts, and our care of and for one another?

Perhaps you've noticed by now that I have no intention of answering any of these questions directly in this sermon. That's something we, as individuals and as a congregation, must reflect upon. And we must do so intentionally, and often, and in all seriousness.

Let me shift, now, and ask perhaps a tougher question. **What kind of reputation do you have? What kind of example are you setting? At home? At work? At school? When you go out to socialize?**

There is a great deal of benefit in asking these tough questions of ourselves. For the answers may lead to other questions, like: Is there anything you or I can do to more fully reflect the image of God within each one of us? Is there anything that may improve, or at least not harm your reputation?

Several references are made in the Bible that one of the greatest virtues in life is a good reputation. **Proverbs 22:1**, which I printed on the cover of today's worship bulletin, states that **a good reputation is greater than being rich.**

In another Old Testament reading this morning from **Job 29**, we hear about Job's reputation, even how his good name went ahead of him. How did he get a good reputation? He was known for helping people in trouble, for standing up for those who were down on their luck, for comforting the bereaved, and for being fair to everyone. Job states, quite poetically, "I was eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy, and championed the cause of the stranger." **Not a bad model for us to follow in our own lives, in the development of our own reputation.**

Conversely, the Bible often reveals that one of the very worst things that could ever happen to someone was to lose their good reputation. In fact, it was a grave and punishable offense to wrongly damage the good reputation of another person (something politicians would do well to remember in this day and age of character assassinations). It was especially tragic to damage one's own reputation. That, too, is just as true today.

So one last time I will ask: What kind of reputation do you have? What is College Hill's reputation? Do you, do we, reflect our understanding of the gospel message - a message of faith, hope and love?

I'll leave you with this quote from 17th century American poet, James Russell Lowell, "Reputation is only a candle, of wavering and uncertain flame, and easily blown out, but it is the light by which the world looks for and finds merit." Let us all work to protect our reputation.

Amen.