

**Sermon: A Middle School Test**

**Zephaniah 3:17** ~ The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.

**Psalms 17: 6-8** ~ I call on you, O God, for you will answer me; give ear to me and hear my prayer. Show the wonder of your great love, you who save by your right hand those who take refuge in you from their foes. Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings.

**Sermon:**

Tomorrow, I will need your prayers. One of my kids begins middle school. I'm not sure how he got this old, but it happened. And so it begins. I want to share a theory with you this morning. Now it's untested. I haven't read about it anywhere and other than my own observations I don't have any scientific evidence to prove it. But this morning I would like to run it by you to see what you think.

Do you remember what it felt like to be in Junior High? That'll be easy for some of you because you are there now. Others have Jr. Hi kids or you teach them in school, so it's not a big stretch for you either. Some of us, though, are a lot of years away from that time in our lives. You do well to remember what it felt like to be 30! So let me see if I can help you remember.

When you are in Jr. Hi, every day you wake up to the same test. By "test" I don't mean an instrument designed to measure the knowledge you have mastered or the facts you have memorized. This test isn't the kind for which you get a letter grade. But believe me, you are graded.

It's a social test. Not a Social Studies test, I said a social test. And it has only four questions. The questions are true or false. But they are cruelly difficult. They are coldly objective and brutally direct. And no matter how well you did on Monday, you have to take the same test on Tuesday. And the answers are always changing. Are you ready for question number one?

**Question 1) Am I noticed?**

This is a crucial question. Because if I am not noticed, if I have to answer false to this one, then I am invisible. I may be taking in oxygen and taking up space, but if no one notices me I am a nobody and; I may as well not exist.

If you remember Junior High, or if you have a Junior High child you know that Junior High students will do all kinds of crazy things to be noticed. They'll dress in weird ways and say goofy things and behave obnoxiously, all so they can circle true to question number one. Go stand outside the middle school of your choice and you will see 100 different ways that kids are trying to be noticed.

When I was in school I read about a psychiatrist who was working with an eighth grader. The boy had badly burned his upper lip. The doctor's first question was, "So, how did you burn your lip?" To which the kid replied, "I licked a light bulb." The doctor asked his second question, "Why did you lick a light bulb?" The kid said,

"Because I'd never done that before."

The doctor accepted the boy's answer. But honestly, I don't. I'll tell you the rest of the answer. "I licked the light bulb because all my buddies were standing around and I'd tried everything else to get them to notice me, so I thought, 'Hey, I know, I'll lick the light bulb and they'll notice me.'"

And that's just what he did. He got second degree burns, a trip to the hospital and plastic surgery, but so what. He got to answer "true" to number one.

The number one question kids ask is "Do you see me?" They'll act tough or tender, they'll weep like it's a funeral or cavort like clowns at the circus, they'll pretend to be stud athletes or strut like movie starlets, they'll dress like the latest musical sensation, all for the purpose of getting to answer yes to the first question. I am noticed. But it isn't enough to be noticed. Because even if you can circle true on number one, question number 2 pops up on the screen.

### **Question 2) Am I accepted?**

When I was in High School there was a kid in my School and who showed up at our church for a while named Jimmy. We noticed Jimmy, all right, so he passed question number one. But we noticed him because he looked funny and had a nasally voice and wore strange clothes which hung loosely on his oddly shaped frame.

We noticed Jimmy but we never accepted him. He was never welcome in the group unless it was to make fun of him. Then, when the fun was over, we'd send him back to his place. You see even back in the dark ages when I was in school, we had a pecking order. Popularity meant acceptance, and you guarded what popularity you could find with everything you had.

Now there were a lot of different groups that you could get involved with in order to find your acceptance. We had jocks, and punks. We had skaters and geeks. We have folks in the band, in choir, in theater, in French club, in the chess club, and in the drama club. We had fraternities and sororities that were service based and party based. And everyone used those groups to find the same thing, acceptance.

Jimmy had to put false by number 2. To be honest he didn't last long at our church. I don't know how he fared in his new church, but he failed at ours. Or better said we failed him. But even if Jimmy was able to mark true to question number 2 on the test, he wouldn't have been finished. Because it isn't enough to be accepted. Question number three demands an answer.

### **Question 3) Am I valued?**

Acceptance is one rung up from tolerance. And who wants to settle for just being tolerated? It isn't enough for the circle to open up and let you in. There are kinds of bogus ways to answer true to number 2.

Maybe you are just part of a package because a friend of yours is accepted and you ride in on her coat tails. Maybe you have rich or powerful parents or a really cool older sibling or maybe they are just afraid of you or feel sorry for you.

So question number three is really personal: it demands to know, Am I valued? Do I make a contribution? Am I accepted because of who I am? Do they really want me? Or is my acceptance in the circle an accident of fate? Is it real or just a favor?

You see the value question is so important, because it basically asks, how much worth do I have? This question goes deeper than asking what is my net worth. There are 7 billion folks on earth and we all need food, clothes, air. The value question is more than am I worth my share of all of these natural resources. We are wondering do I have worth; is the world, my community, my family better off because I exist.

But there's one question more. Even if you answer true to numbers 1 - 3 every morning, question number four always appears at the end of the test. It's the most important question and in this test if you get this question wrong then you fail the test.

#### **Question 4) Am I loved.**

It matters very little how noticed, accepted or valued you are. Because you can always make a mistake. You can blow it. And if you are only noticed for some striking feature of your life, if you are only accepted because of who you know or how you are connected, if you are valued only for what you can contribute, your membership inside the circle is still temporary. It's only when they love you that you are safe. Because if they love you, you can stop worrying about being noticed.

You don't have to fight for acceptance. You don't have to hit a home run or sing the perfect solo or play your part like a Broadway star. Because if you are loved, you've got lots of room for mistakes. In fact, if all you do is exchange oxygen and take up space, you are still safe, because you are loved.

Okay, that's what it's like to be in Jr. Hi. Every day, the same test. Now, here's my theory. Ready?

#### **We never graduate from Junior High**

You know I am proud of our teenagers because they are a lot more honest about this test than we adults are. The older you get, the longer you've played this game, the less likely you are to realize that's what you're doing. Teenagers act strange and you know it. Adults act strange and we call it normal.

Here's what I mean. Right now some of us grown ups are going, "Speak for yourself, buddy, I'm way past Junior High" Maybe you are. They say preaching is just working out your own stuff in front of a crowd. So maybe it's just me.

But look at it this way. You left Jr. High school and then graduated. Maybe you went on to college or maybe you entered the real world. You got a job and you make real money, you have real bills. Grown ups have circles they want to be accepted in. Did you know that adults have cool, trendy clothes as well? We worry about being noticed. We worry about being accepted. We worry about being valued. Most of our activities revolve around these base desires. Adults pay attention to the clothes we wear and the cars we drive and the neighborhoods we live in. If we can't have money we at least want to have the appearance of it. We fret about our weight, we go to great lengths to give the appearance of having hair, we get our tummies tucked, our wrinkles stretched, our muscles toned, our bodies tanned and our physiological inadequacies ... enhanced. So it shouldn't surprise you that we also struggle with these same questions.

And just like our Teenagers, none of that matters if we aren't loved, that's question 4. We'll do all kinds of things to feel loved. Sometimes we'll even hurt the people closest to us if they don't make us feel loved. We'll put extraordinary expectations on them, make unreasonable demands and sometimes violate the very eternal laws of God so that we can feel loved. Why do you think people have affairs? You can ask them now, we know their names, thanks Ashley Madison.

Now you need to understand, I'm not criticizing or condemning you for wanting to be noticed, accepted, valued and loved. I don't think those are bad things. I think those are human things, whether you're two or twelve or twenty or a hundred years old. But what I need you to understand today is that for a member of the family here at Oregon City UMC there should be no need to take this test. There is no need for a child of God to agonize over this because Jesus has already given us the answer we are looking for.

We can answer **True to question one because** if you were to ask God, "Did you see me?" He'd say, "Yes. I always see you." And that's not a threat. It's a promise, that our God lovingly looks after us.

**We can answer true to Question two** because God not only sees us, but accepts us. There is a great scripture in Zephaniah 3:17 that says "*The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.*"

I love that word picture there. God's acceptance leads Him to rejoice over us with singing. It's the picture of a mom or dad holding their child, and even with the dirty diapers, croup that keeps the whole house up all night long and their inability to do anything for them self, there we find the parent singing with joy over that child.

And we can say true to **question three because** God has shown that we are deeply valued. As the Psalmist would write in Psalms 17 that God keeps us as the apple of His eye. That's another way of saying that God keeps us as the center of His attention.

And finally we see the answer to **question four am I loved**. The entirety of scripture points to the fact that we are loved, deeply by our God who loved us first.

We can take solace this morning that our test has already been taken and you passed. In fact, you didn't even have to take it. And because the test was taken some pretty amazing things can happen. The test was It was taken for you a long time ago, in a far away country, on a hill shaped like a skull, by a man you've never met. But he noticed you. He accepted you. He valued you. He loved you. You personally. You specifically. Jesus died on a cross to take your test.

If you ever feel invisible, look at the cross. You'll see Him noticing you. If you ever feel rejected, look at the cross. You'll see Him accepting you. If you ever feel worthless, look at the cross. You'll see the value He placed on your life. If you ever feel unloved, look at the cross. Even then, even there He was loving you. He loves you still. You are the apple of His eye. He will always love you.