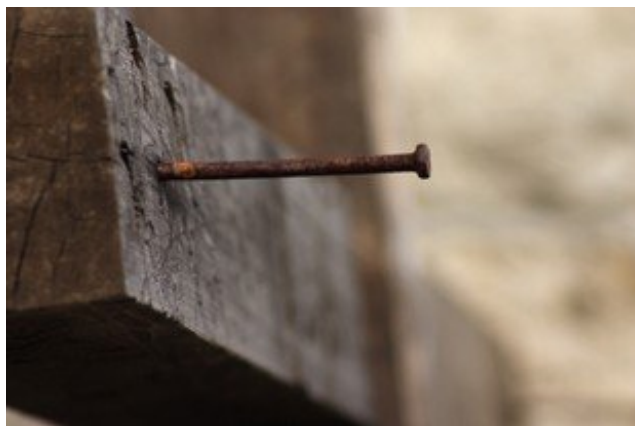


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August 22, 2011



3 Week Series

Week 1: When Death Is Yesterday's News

John 11:1-4, 14-44; John 20:19

Today's sermon begins a three-part series addressing three vital lessons that are a legacy of the early church. The themes of death and resurrection, the cost of faith, and the necessity of love are among the most important messages that Jesus shared with those who had ears to hear.

Each of these themes may be historical to our faith, but there is nonetheless a mystery to this history. These ideas of faith have been so preached, published, and indoctrinated into the Christian tradition that we gloss over how radical they must have seemed to those who first heard. We are not unlike the person who takes electricity for granted and cannot understand why a primitive tribe would be fearful or fascinated by such a discovery. Still today, when our Volunteer in Mission teams visit remote areas of third-world countries, someone takes along a Polaroid camera. Such technology always captivates the people with whom they work and serves as a great "icebreaker" to establish rapport with the hosts.

This series will allow us to revisit these texts and the lessons they convey. We do so looking deeper into the experience of early believers and examining our own, lest we become so accustomed to doctrine that we ignore the truth and experience of God in which our faith is rooted.

Today we consider two texts about resurrection. The Gospel of John gives us both an account of Jesus' raising of Lazarus, as well as Jesus' postresurrection appearance to the disciples in the house where they were gathered. Historically, there have been stories and theories that have attempted to discredit both of these resurrection accounts. John's accounts help dispel these arguments. John gives us such detail, names the many witnesses, and even reminds us in John 12:9-11 that there was a plot to kill Lazarus. Why would such a plot be considered? The religious leaders were attempting to stop the hemorrhage of Jews converting to the teachings of Jesus as a result of Lazarus' resurrection. There is no question that many people believed that God had done something singularly different than they had ever experienced before.

They believed because they either had witnessed the resurrection of Jesus or Lazarus, heard firsthand from those who were there, had personally experienced spiritual resurrection in their own life, or had heard the witness of another whose life was resurrected from sin and despair by the saving love of Christ. The same can be said for us today. Death, the truth of our own mortality, is the one unstoppable force that no human endeavor alone can totally overcome. We may slow the aging process, but that does not stop death. We may use cryogenics to preserve a loved one and hope for a means of reviving them one day, but we really have no power to stop death altogether.

The early followers of Jesus shared that same powerless feeling in their own life. John 20:19 paints a portrait of fear and hiding. The betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion of Jesus was the most devastating blow they could ever have imagined. Behind locked doors and barred windows they huddled in fear of the religious authorities. They had seen what had happened to Jesus. Could that same fate await

them? The first century was not a very hospitable place for diverse views, especially those that differed from established local religious practice or Roman decree.

Just when we think there is no hope, God appears. Just when the disciples felt that their faith had been in vain, they discovered that hope never dies when God is involved. A bit later in the scriptures, the Acts of the Apostles will record how these same sequestered and trembling people turned defeat into a demonstration of faith. At the day of Pentecost, their witness would convert thousands and those thousands would reach thousands more.

Resurrection is not simply about saving our body for eternal life, but is about saving our soul for eternal relationship. The gift of life, which Christ brings, is a gift for here and now as well as the hereafter. We need not focus on resurrection as a sign of only that which lies ahead. Resurrection faith is also a sign of what life can be when we claim the power that God gives to all who believe. We can share in Paul's own conversion and in his great proclamation, "I can do all things through [Christ] who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

For it is true, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God" (Romans 8:28a).

When death becomes yesterday's news instead of today's headlines, that is something worth sharing, celebrating, and believing.

Week 2: Faith Costs Something

Acts 7:51-60

Faith costs something. Depending upon your perspective, that is either such an obvious statement that it may seem trite, or a powerful reminder that discipleship is not without a price. Last Sunday we addressed the resurrection of Christ as a defining event in the Christian faith. Both the raising of Lazarus and the resurrection of Jesus served as witness to God's acting in human history. Such events cause some to stumble, for the idea of the miraculous carries different meaning for different people. A miracle is a sign or wonder that points to God, yet many of the miracles that we encounter each day may seem only miraculous to the believer and not the observer. Jesus' resurrection, a miracle that transcends our understanding of death, medical science, and physics, is certainly an idea that requires faith to grasp and to accept. Either you believe or you do not. Whenever you believe, faith costs something.

The first four hundred years of the Christian church were some of the most difficult, dangerous, and demanding times for believers. In the days of Christ and on through the time of Paul and the destruction of the Herodian temple in 70 C.E., religious persecution by Jewish leaders was a primary concern. Also very real was the derision Christians received from Greco-Roman culture, pagan cults, and other groups, which made discipleship perilous. Beyond this time, many Roman emperors fueled the increase of Christian persecution, such that it was more or less routine until the fifth century under the influence of Constantine. Some, like Nero, found Christians to be easy scapegoats or merely cheap entertainment for the Colosseum.

Today's text is the account from Acts of the stoning of Stephen, who is considered the first Christian martyr. Many of us may enjoy being first in line, first in a race, or first to be promoted, but few of us wish to place first in martyrdom. That seems too costly a price to pay for faith.

Acts tells the story in the style of great legends, and although we may not know how the writer embellished it before being recorded for our reading, it is clear that Stephen was a person of bold faith. It was his bold faith and unwavering conviction that led to the confrontation that ended with his death. This account has all of the elements of a Hollywood classic where a hero-figure is the object of injustice and evil. Waiting in the wings stands another protagonist who, unknowingly or even reluctantly, is about to bring redemption to the story. Saul is such a figure. Saul witnesses the price that Stephen paid for his conviction, yet the next chapter begins with these chilling words, "And Saul

approved of their killing him” (Acts 8:1).

Depending on where you live, such persecution is still very real today. In 1999, Hindu extremists attacked an Australian Christian missionary and his eight- and ten-year-old sons, burning them alive in their car where they had been sleeping. In China, Bibles have had to be smuggled into some regions and many outspoken Christians have been censured or imprisoned.

No matter where you live, faith costs something. Faith in Christ involves commitment, service, humility, and sacrifice. It is not a dour faith, for there is joy and grace to fill a lifetime with blessings. Yet, when we respond to any great love, commitment demands our time and energy, as well as our money and resources. Just as any significant relationship can stretch us and challenge us to grow as a person, so does our faith relationship stretch us as disciples of Christ.

What do you expect to happen when you come to worship? Do you expect to be comforted but not challenged? Commended but not called to serve? Encouraged but not exhorted? Inspired but not stretched? At the same service I had a person moved to make a large gift to support a mission of the church, another volunteered to serve as a Sunday school teacher, whereas another person criticized the sermon and the music and challenged me to reconsider how our church worships. What do you think each of these persons expected out of worship? Who was listening, and to whom?

Christian discipleship that is rooted in love and grows through faith compels us to move out of the shallow waters of daily living and into the depths of true life in Christ. The abundance of life that Jesus offers is of a character and quality that no storm can overwhelm and no war can disquiet. There is a peace that squelches the raging turmoil of anxiety that robs us of joy. Life is not made easier by being a Christian disciple; it is made more fulfilling and given a foundation that is unshakable.

Week 3: Sharing Love and Joy Is Better than Acting Religious

John 3:16; Acts 2:43-47

The concept of a powerful divine presence that could easily destroy or alter the course of creation, and yet chooses, instead, to offer unconditional love is a story of truly amazing grace. It is such extravagant grace that liberates the soul and brings hope to the most desperate of lives. Of course, we human beings, the wayward, fickle, self-centered, ignorant, judgmental, closeminded, and skeptical lot that we are, take what is wondrous and amazing—the grace of God—and mess it up.

If I were to make parallels to our mishandling of God’s incredible gift using mundane analogies, I might offer a few suggestions. God gives us indoor plumbing, and we build an outhouse. God gives us electricity, and we rip out the wires to replace them with wicks and flame. God offers us glimpses into other galaxies, and we watch movies where zombies come back to life and eat the flesh of the living. God gives us one another with a capacity to love, and we focus on ourselves and look at others with jealousy, envy, or disdain.

Sharing love and joy is better than being religious, not because religion is of itself bad. Religion is an expression of faith and the diverse human perspectives of God and the spiritual realm. Religion, like money, is not inherently evil or bad. It is what we do with religion that gives religion its character and value. We build religions that may focus more on ritual and doctrine than on service and love. We allow judgmental attitudes to give rise to mean-spirited actions. We debate hierarchy while ignoring the hungry, and preach piety while passing by the impoverished. The church is, at times, not unlike the dysfunctional family that has been living with destructive behavior for so long that their behavior becomes both normal and acceptable to them. At our best, we remember who we really are and who we are called to be. At our worst, we have lost sight of the vision of community that Christ shows us. We repeatedly miss the mark in being a community of love, justice, and service.

This is not a sermon about bashing the church or throwing out religion, but rather a plea to point us

to the true message of the Christ. God is love. God loves us despite our sin and brokenness. God loves life so much that it is shared with us as a gift. God desires us to share in the celebration of life and to offer love and joy to others. Making disciples is to be in the seed-planting, good-news-sharing business. We offer the potential of a better way, a better life, a more satisfying journey. We invite people to consider our experience of God and to join us in the experience of grace. Being faithful is our calling. Religion is merely the framework of carrying out that faith in community, because we really do need one another.

Today's text from Acts is a snapshot of the early church sharing community together. It is an instructive lesson in how community in the Christian tradition is meant to be. They take meals in common, for there is little else more satisfying than breaking the bread of life with those you love. They share their possessions and resources. There is no need. There is no want. There is no one left out. There is no one alone. There is no one not welcome at the table. There is always room for one more. This is the kingdom of God!

The kingdom of heaven is not some abstract place up above. The kingdom of heaven is God's kingdom whenever and wherever two or more of the faithful are there. In foxholes and fancy sanctuaries, the kingdom of heaven can be in our midst. If we say that heaven means so much to us, then let us live today as we say we will live then. If the community of faith is so important, then let us make it a central part of our lives and band together with people who share the vision of love, justice, and service. When we do, amazing things begin to happen!

A young man was knocking on the glass doors of the church early one Tuesday morning. A senior adult happened to be inside setting up for a women's meeting, but she went to the door to talk to the man. Being alone, she did not wish to let him in, so she asked what he needed and discerned that he was in spiritual and emotional pain and in need of the pastor. She summoned me to the church and I learned that I needed a translator to speak to him. I found one, and we sat with the young man as he poured out the pain of his story.

Being from another country, he did not know anyone here except some immoral coworkers who had been a very bad influence upon him. His mother had told him that whenever he needed help he should go to a church, so he stopped when he saw the cross on our building. Problems are not resolved overnight, but as the weeks unfolded we connected the man to a Spanish-speaking church near his home. He was baptized, and soon after answered a call to ordained ministry. He is now enrolled in seminary and is excited about what God has done and is doing in his life.

So many things could have stood in the way of this young man's salvation. A senior adult could have chosen not to be bothered by a persistent visitor knocking on a locked door before office hours. I could have told him to come back another time. The translator could have said he was too busy at work. The pastor to whom we referred him could have chosen not to devote the time required at this critical point of his spiritual journey. Because people chose to respond in kind—to respond with the same grace and faith that God gave each one of us—a life was touched and changed.

The heart of the church of Jesus Christ is not rules but relationships. We all are a part of the body of Christ and each of us has a role that is so very important. Sharing love and joy is so much more important than acting religious. After all, it is the Christlike thing to do.

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