

Making Resurrection Look Easy

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Focus texts: Deuteronomy 15: 7-11, Acts 4:32-35

It's dangerous to preach a sermon on these Biblical texts on a mission-oriented Sunday.

The danger is that I would be predictable; that I would stand before you, just as Moses stood before the Israelites in Deuteronomy, and tell you that you are supposed to help those who are in need. "Do" more mission. Love your neighbor in a more radical and meaningful way.

Nothing about that would surprise any of you.

So I'd try to get your attention by citing a bunch of heart-wrenching statistics, like the one I read in Friday's Post about the poverty levels in Haiti, where 80 percent of people live on less than \$2 a day, where mothers must choose between feeding breakfast to their kids or having enough money to send them to school.

Then, I'd point to the vitality and compassion of the first community of believers, as described in Acts. I'd emphasize that they were so unified in heart and soul and purpose, everyone sold all they had and gave everything (not just 10%, but everything) to the needy in their midst.

Playing the guilt card, I'd point out how we fell short of their standard, and call upon us to do more, give more, to be more like that first church in Acts.

If any of you resisted, arguing how unrealistic or *un-American* it would be to sell all our possessions and give 100% to the poor and live in spiritual and emotional harmony with everyone, I might call in the big guns and throw in a quote by a well-respected theologian. G.K. Chesterton would do. "It's not that Christianity was tried and found wanting, but that Christianity was found difficult, and left untried," he said.¹

That would quiet you down.

But where would all of that leave you? Feeling guilty, perhaps...defensive... dismissive. Perhaps even bored.

I don't think this is where God means for us to go.

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A few months ago, Terry Grindstaff sent me one of those chain emails that we often delete before even opening them. They're a waste of time, those emails, which is why I enjoy reading some of them. I opened this one. It read as follows:

One evening, an old Cherokee told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside all people. He said, "My son, the battle is between two wolves inside us all.

One is Evil:

It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.

The other is Good:

¹ http://thinkexist.com/quotation/christianity_has_not_been_tried_and_found_wanting/206595.html

It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith."

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf wins?"

The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."

I want, this morning, to feed the good wolf. Lord knows how well-fed the bad wolf can be. But if we are truly called to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and be a mission-oriented church, we need to feed the good wolf.

If we don't, this is what happens:

A rich man approaches Jesus and asks him what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus rattles off some of the "biggies" from the 10 commandments (don't murder, steal, commit adultery, etc.), and the man says, "Great. I've kept all those." But then Jesus says, "Ok, there's still one more thing: Go and sell all your possessions and give the proceeds to the poor, and come follow me." Full of sadness, because he had many possessions, the man walks away.²

Precisely at the time when his life could have been transformed, to the benefit of those around him, he dwelled on all the obstacles, all the shortcomings, all the limitations standing between him and the impossibly high standard that Jesus has set for him.

Well fed, the evil wolf won, and the man is not heard from again.

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As we hear about the first community of believers in Acts, we might be prone to follow him into oblivion.

That church was too good to be true.

- Everybody living as one, in heart and soul?
- A well-off band of believers selling all of their possessions so that NO one had need?
- This level of goodness makes resurrection look easy. It would be easier just to dismiss it and move on.

Nestled in that account, however, is a little side observation. It's almost a throw-away line, if not for the fact that everything hinges upon it.

Luke, the author of Acts, tells us how the believers testified with great power to the resurrection, and that "a great grace was upon them." A Great Grace, upon them...

Grace. It's not God, but it's the one thing about God that I celebrate more than anything else. I love grace. I love what it means.

Grace is that costly, but freely given gift from God, who walked among us as the Word made flesh, who bore death on the cross and overcame it, so that nothing would separate us from the love of a Triune God.

That's what a theologian says about grace. Here's how experience might define it:

- Grace is hearing the alarm clock go off, and then remembering it's your day off.
- Grace is the cool side of the pillow, or the warm socks fresh out of the drier.
- Grace is the pristine smoothness of a newly opened jar of peanut butter.
- Grace is the relief you feel when you realize it was just a bad dream.
- Grace is a freshly shaken etch-a-sketch, ready for another attempt at beauty.

² Matthew 19: 16-22

- Grace is the assurance of pardon that leads us to sing “Glory be to the Father.”
- Grace is the daffodil bursting with color in the middle of a weedy garden.
- Grace is the mulligan, the do-over that erases the sliced drive from your score.
- Grace is forgetting your purse in the changing room, and finding it’s still there 30 minutes.
- Grace is the sweetness of those last sips of tea, the aroma of freshly cut grass.
- Grace is the way your dog greets you after a long day at work.
- Grace is the MRI that comes back negative and gives you your life back.
- Grace is the courage to live when the test comes back positive.

Grace is amazing, because it moves us beyond ourselves. And that is what mission is: living and moving and having your being beyond yourself, beyond your imperfections, beyond your limitations.

It’s what led the earliest believers to give everything, so that there would be no one in need among them.

When it’s time to sing a hymn during worship, you have a choice:

You can keep quiet, because your voice isn’t as good as the choir’s or the person next to you. Or you can sing...you can join the chorus.

You’ll make a few wrong notes, sure. But you are still making sound. You are still changing the very world you occupy. That’s mission.

There’s a woman in my neighborhood named Mary.

I often pass her when I’m walking my dog, and she’s always doing something in her yard: picking up weeds, raking, planting new grass seed.

But here’s the thing. Her yard isn’t very pretty. It’s bordering on ugly. The best thing I can say about it is that it’s well-manicured mud.

But that doesn’t stop her. She doesn’t look out at it and see how far her yard is from the pristine greens at Augusta National. She just goes out and pulls weeds. There’s grace in that, I think.

And that’s what I’m hoping we remember as a church. There’s the ideal in our heads about what mission is. There’s the lofty, well-manicured standard that’s set by that early church and by our best intentions.

And there’s the reality that we are not going to live up to those standards. Who can?

Will we therefore feed the evil wolf, and get all upset and discouraged?

Or will we remember grace, and just go for it? Reach down and grab the weeds. Open our mouths and join the chorus. Walk with Jesus, even if his demands of us are beyond our ability to live up to them...

Truth be told, you’re never going to be the perfect parent, the best cook, the best rower on the boat. But you parent anyway. You cook anyway. You row, anyway.

Grace compels you to. And that can be mission, because your parenting, your cooking, your rowing, they make the world you inhabit just a little bit different.

It's appropriate that our adult education class is studying the book of James, best known for its statement that "faith without works, or good deeds, is dead."

Indeed.

But we do not get to those good works by hearing someone tells us to do more of them, or looking at someone else and thinking we should be more like them. We get there via grace.

In preaching this text, the danger is that I would be predictable. That I would say what you would expect to hear in a sermon about mission: Serve meals at the Carpenter's Shelter! Go on a mission trip! Be good, loving, charitable people!

Of course, we can and should do all of these things.

But who needs the Word of God to say that?

Who needs Jesus on a cross and raised from death into life, to tell us to be good people?

The reality of the text, and of this Christian faith that we have inherited -- whether we like it or not -- is that we are called to something much deeper than goodness. Something wilder, more unpredictable, radical.

It's a new kind of life where anything is possible -- because if death can't hold us back, then nothing can.

That's what the first church has shown us. Through grace, they were so united, not a heart or a soul stood alone, not a single person had any need.

If we ever want to get anywhere close to their benevolence, if we want to follow in their legacy rather than diminish it,

then we have to live in joy, not jealousy.

generosity, not inferiority.

grace, not guilt.

So let's feed the good wolf.

And give the food of heavenly life to so many more.

Amen?

Amen.