

MESSAGE: “Why Do People Need Jesus?”

Text: John 20:31 (also, Colossians 1:13-20)

Purpose: the purpose of this message is to offer a snapshot of what Jesus has done for me in order to entice others to imagine what Jesus may do for them.

Introduction

Last week, Don Malpass and many others from near and far participated in the Dempsey Challenge, an annual event designed to raise funds for the Patrick Dempsey Center for Cancer Hope and Healing. Born from personal experience and loss, the Center supports patients and families as they negotiate the challenges of living with cancer. I have seen quite a lot of Patrick Dempsey this past year as I have made my way through multiple seasons of Grey’s Anatomy, a TV series of medical drama in which he is part of an ensemble cast. One of the recurring challenges for interns in the series is the mission of communicating medically-necessary surgical procedures to patients for their physical health or survival. “Of course the patient will agree,” they think, but not every patient does, and sometimes that refusal results in loss of function, compromised health or even death itself. Stating facts, they learn, is rarely enough; it is their job to help the patient imagine how their life will be better or sustained as a result of the surgery.

In a sense, it is a lesson in sales. But the stakes are much higher than whether or not you leave the lot with the car of your dreams. Without health, you haven’t got much. Without life, you haven’t got anything. Yet when it comes to spiritual health or survival, I would suggest the stakes are even higher. Jesus said it with devastating effect in Matthew 5, “If your eye causes you to sin, throw it away; it is better to lose one of your members than your very soul.”

Isn’t it curious then that we are so casual or complacent when it comes to sharing our spiritual story? If our neighbor is buying an appliance, and we know they can get it for \$50 less at a different store, we tell them about it. If our sister is ill and we learn of a medicine that can restore health, we give it to her. But when it comes to life in the Spirit, we are often silent. Why is that? Maybe we fear offending someone. Or maybe we lack confidence in our own belief. Or maybe we haven’t come alive to the miracle of Christ’s presence in our own life.

When Jesus healed a man who had been blind from birth, and religious leaders later questioned him about it, the sighted man had nothing to offer about Jesus’ biography, credentials or theology. But he sure had a story to tell! “Whether this man is a sinner or not, I do not know,” he said, “but I do know this...I was blind, but now, I see!”

This brings us to our question for today's message. Why do people need Jesus? (pause) It is a fair question. "Jesus lived two thousand years ago," some might observe, "what can his life possibly do for me today?" The skepticism is understandable. E. Stanley Jones, a Christian missionary to India, once asked Mahatma Gandhi why, after studying the Christian faith, he didn't become a follower. Gandhi's reply is variously reported, but the gist of it is this: "I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." Ouch! That hurts, but if we are honest, we know that it is too often true.

Friday night I returned home from a two-day trip to New York. I was tired, and my wife and I had a disagreement. Angry words were spoken. I certainly didn't seem very Christ-like as my daughter, who heard the whole exchange, can tell you. But isn't that the point? If I was like Christ all the time, I wouldn't need a Savior. But I'm not, and therefore I do. But here's the thing. Jesus' influence on my life has changed me in significant and profound ways. Before I can tell you why people need Jesus, I need to tell you why I need Jesus.

I was raised in a family that went to church every Sunday. I learned the Bible stories, ten commandments, the Golden Rule of "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." I learned that 'doing the right thing' matters, that hard work matters, that having compassion on others matters. To be perfectly candid, "I was often pretty impressed with myself." Except when I wasn't, because sometimes I wasn't. Sometimes I caught glimpses of my real motives: my efforts to hide selfishness, my pride and judgmental attitudes, my elaborate attempts to make myself look good, my insecurities, fears and prejudices. In moments of honesty, I knew God wasn't fooled. But I tried not to think about it, and tried harder still.

When I was 18, my hypocrisy caved in on me. I could pretend no longer. I was not the person I wanted to be, and the weight of my sin was obvious and suffocating. I was depressed, even suicidal. Let me pause for just a moment. I know there are those who say, "There is no such thing as sin." That it is an old fashioned concept created to make people behave a certain way. I don't believe it for a moment. I knew I needed help, forgiveness--salvation in fact.

The need of my heart's cry wasn't all that different from what yours might be. I needed acceptance, purpose, absolution and hope. I longed for love, struggled to find meaning and searched for happiness. I didn't find it in a philosophy, an ethic for living, or a book, no matter how sacred. I didn't find it by looking inward, but upward. To a person, to Jesus. I let go of my pretense. Let go of my struggle, and began a journey of grace that continues to this day. In the years ahead, with the help of Jesus, I would learn how to be guided by a

moral compass, how to value and appreciate those quite different from myself, how to say, “I’m sorry” when I am wrong, how to accept the peculiarities of my own identity, how to be a better son, husband, father and pastor, how to honor boundaries given to protect, how to find joy in the simplest of things, how to see God’s magic in the world and people around me.

It is no exaggeration for me to acknowledge that Jesus saved me in every way a person can be saved, certainly from sin and consequence, but that is just the tip of the iceberg. There is a Chinese parable I use sometimes to describe this miracle in my life’s journey. There was a village by the sea nourished by rice-paddies. At the top of the highest hill lived a plantation owner. During a season of challenge a hurricane assaulted the village, causing much damage to the rice-paddies. When calm returned, the village workers blanketed the rice-paddies to salvage what they could. The plantation owner climbed a tower to view the work. He looked at the rice-paddies, the villagers and the sea beyond. He observed how much it had withdrawn from the shore and immediately realized that a big wave would soon follow. All of the paddies would be flooded, and his neighbors would surely drown.

In a moment, he decided what he must do. He set fire to his plantation house and rang the fire-bell as loud as he could. The villagers looked up from the rice-paddies and raced to help put out the flames. As soon as they reached the fire, they heard a roar behind them. Turning around they saw the tidal wave crashing over the paddies they hastily left behind. The plantation-owner had sacrificed his home to save their lives.

Jesus did that for me, too, but the home he sacrificed was his very life. I cannot live my life just for me anymore, I also live it for him, and that has made, and continues to make, all the difference.

Why do people need Jesus? Because sin is real, and lethal to the human soul. Because God’s love is wonderful, shining through Christ. And because the free gift of salvation through Jesus is the most powerful incentive for a changed, abundant life. What is it that the beloved disciple John gave as the reason for writing his gospel? “These are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” And in Jesus’ own words, “I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly.” That’s why I need him. That’s why you need him. That’s why people need him.