

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

June 28, 2009

Texts: Lamentations 3:22-33; 2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43

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In my family, as in many others, there is a family bible. These have a long history among Christians who have recorded in them marriages, births, baptisms, and death. Because their comprehensive record them have come to be important sources of family genealogy information going back in some cases many generations.

Family bibles are descriptions of family life, but they are what we might call, thin descriptions. They lack significant detail about the lives of the people named in them. For example, in my own family, the bible records the birth and baptism of a certain James in the 1700's but does not mention that he was the first in his family to be "read out" of the Quaker church and had to become a Presbyterian. You can read that my great grandmother was born in 1851, but not learn that by the 1935 she had taken to chasing great-grandpa around the house with a steak knife so regularly that the family had to hide all the sharp knives. And then there's great-grandpa on the other side who disappeared from the census one decade, and it's said that he may have been on the wrong side of the bars in the Wyoming State Penitentiary. These are the details you won't find in your family bible list with its thin descriptions.

In contrast, the bible itself provides thick description. So much so, that even after reading it for a lifetime it's hard to know in any great degree much more than its major themes and characters. The people portrayed in scripture are real, with complex personal and spiritual dimensions - thick. As we hear their stories we gain insight into them, God, and ourselves. Look at the stories for today, one commentator remarked, these are crucial stories. And I agree.

If you immediately think of a crucial story as one which is especially weighted with important insights, that's a good beginning, and let me frame the word a little further for you. The word "crucial" invokes the cross. So a crucial story is one in which the cross is evident in some particular way with meaning for how we live. Crucial stories are not limited to the New Testament but occur throughout the whole bible, just as Christ our Savior is understood to have had pre-incarnate being and presence.

Lamentations was told by an eyewitness to the Babylonian Conquest of Israel in the 6th century BC. He proclaimed on behalf of all Israel that the nation's problems were self-inflicted and well-deserved and wrote that despite the agonies of life God was still unbreakably devoted to the people. His point was that it is in the nature of God to grant freedom, and it is in the nature of humans to test boundaries. These two purposes are juxtaposed and result in a point where human and divine purposes cross. The soul deepens in such circumstances, and this is good, but with the deepening comes pain. The wisdom of Lamentations came to be so highly regarded that it was part of the liturgy of the Jerusalem synagogue. For us, the same teaching is clothed in the vision of Christ in the desert temptations where every decision is hard and God is unseen, though present and loving.

In Psalm 30 we are reminded that God always goes through, not around hard things. And that pleasure is more completely known on the far side of pain. There are two crucial points here.

First, as the Psalm famously says, “*Weeping spends the night but joy comes in the morning*” Is this not the narrative of the cross which bore Christ into the tomb and the night’s weeping, only to yield to resurrection in the dawn light? And second, the Psalm reminds us that God’s salvation exactly mirrors human failure. So that, in direct relation to our determination to test and to deny and oppose God, the divine response is equally determined to deliver us from whatever sort of separation we have contrived.

In Second Corinthians the crucial point is about money. Always a painful subject for us, it was equally so for the wealthy Corinthian Christians whom Paul had induced to send support to the poor Christians of Jerusalem. The Corinthians lived in a Greco-Roman economic system that encouraged spending for self, saving for self, and giving away as little as possible. Into that economic atmosphere, which was remarkably like our own, Paul’s emphasis was upon the theology of the cross expressed in economic terms as he reminded the Corinthians that in the death of Christ God gave all so they could have all.

In other words, said Paul, God saves without regard to cost so you can give without regard to cost. The ones who practice giving as God gives lose nothing and gain everything. Giving generously is an enterprise of the soul. Paul made his case in multiple ways because the Corinthians, and we like them, can think of a multitude of sensible reasons not to give.

For Paul a key aspect of faith is a joyful lack of reservation in generous giving to needs beyond self and family. One modern commentator thoughtfully observed that in life everything is a gift and at life’s end we are all 100% donors. So under the circumstances, why not enjoy the benefits of being a generous benefactor now and later? Beyond our regular giving, how many of us have given any thought to leaving even a tiny percentage of 1-3% of our estate to the future work of the church at that time when we will have become a 100% donor? The Corinthians did respond generously not just one time, but repeatedly, and their generosity comes as a challenge to us to us both individually and communally across the centuries.

In Mark, two stories of healing show that the point of death is a crucial opportunity to claim life. All healing begins with confession – the whole truth, as the woman who touched Jesus offered up, unbidden. Her confession was, “*I am unwell.*” Jairus the synagogue leader’s confession was of another sort. He confessed to Jesus, “*You can heal.*” Our confession to God breaks open great powers for healing from any kind of death-dealing sickness of the soul, body, or mind.

When crucial points are made through the lives of people, the results leave a mark upon all who witness them. The crowd that saw Jesus heal the little girl were, “*...overcome with amazement.*” This was not just jaw-dropping astonishment. The word, which in Greek is *ekstasei* (ecstasy) actually means that what they saw bent their minds. Well, that’s the power of the cross for you.

The gospel question that remains for us is this: what is the character of your life’s narrative? In times that are agonizing, with your resources, when you are in need of healing, is your narrative thin, or thick? If you will permit it, Christ can make a crucial point within you, and, through your life for the sake of others too. *Amen.*