

Calvary United Methodist Church
May 5, 2019

THE BEST FOR THE WORST!

Rev. Dr. A. Robert Cook

Children's Message:

John 5:39-40

You may be seated and I'll ask our kids to come forward. Big kids, little kids, any kids. Well, there's one, there's two, there's three. How are you? You look great today! So do you. Is your sister coming up?

So, I have a little project with Popsicle sticks here and I was wondering...I know it would be nice if it were popsicles, right? What would be the best way to glue these things together? Do you know? How should we...let's just take two of them, right? What's the best way to glue two of these together? Should I do it this way, or this way, that way, that way or that way? Do you think that would be the best way to do it? They will stick together? Okay, let's try it. Have you ever used Crazy Glue? You have to be really careful with this stuff because you will glue your fingers together instantly. And I have done it. When it first came out I had no idea so I put the crazy glue on, the next thing you know it was sticking to me, so you have to be really careful with this crazy stuff. Alright. You just need a little bit, you don't need much. I think that's a whole lot. Alright. And we'll put that back and we won't stick it on our fingers cause that is a mess. Alright, I'll spread it out. Okay. That's success so far. We'll leave it sit there for a minute, alright?

So, there was a jingle for Band-Aids, did you used to like putting Band-Aids on just for the heck of it, especially if they are like princess Band-Aids or you know whatever. Did you used to like doing that? You have one now. What did you do? Well, that happens sometimes. The jingle was: I'm stuck on Band-Aids cause Band-Aid is stuck on me. But we would sing: I'm stuck on Jesus cause Jesus is stuck on me. And he is so close to you that he is with you. Now, when you were baptized, he was right there. In fact, the moment you began to be, he was there. And when you were born and the doctor put you into your mommy and daddy's arms, he was there and he said: I love her and I'm going to be with her always. And there is nothing you can ever do to make him go away. He never goes away because he is stuck to you.

Let's see, is that stuff stuck together pretty good? It's still a little sticky, but it's stuck together pretty good. So, I wanted you to know that Jesus is stuck...don't put your fingers on that stuff or you will be wearing these things all day...that he is so close to you and he is just wild about you. And what he wants you to do is to grow up and to enjoy this life, to love the beauty of creation, to be a really good person, to let his love shine through you because he is with you.

So, can you feel your heartbeat? He is closer. Can you feel the breath in your lungs? He's closer. Closer than you can stick two sticks together. He's the glue that holds us together.

So, let's pray: Thanks, Lord, for our kids and that we have learned about you, how we teach our kids that you will stick with us and stick by us always and forever and help us to stick with our kids too and do everything we can for them. Amen.

Ok, we'll put this away because that stuff is dangerous. Don't mess with it. Let your daddy stick his fingers together. There you go. Thank you.

Message:

Would you join with me in a word of prayer? Gracious Lord, help us to hear from you today. Speak to our hearts. All these scriptures this morning from the Psalter and the Old Testament and the New Testament lesson and this Gospel speak deeply to us to trust in you, so guide us to learn how to give our hearts to you and trust you in all things. May the words of my mouth and the mediation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Well, the movement that Jesus started was really about freedom. Society was so stratified, you could not go from down in the bottom to the top. It was just not possible. No one would let you do that. But this is a new way to be human and it was revolutionary because Jesus broke down all the walls that separated people, all those caste systems, those class systems and they meant nothing anymore, that all people, regardless of wealth, status, station in life are now accepted as children of God, not lesser, but fully equal as brothers and sisters to each other. And this is radical too because it rejects not only this whole class system and caste system, it rejects violence as a means to solve problems. It still boggles my mind that people believed that by killing someone else the world will be a better place, but we're doing it every day and it's not better. The Gospel embraces forgiveness and reconciliation as God's way to heal relationships.

Now, the early church may not have developed all the fancy theological terms and doctrines that would come later, but they understood this: that believing in Jesus made them equals; that in God's kingdom, well, that status and station really didn't mean a thing. What mattered was Jesus uniting their hearts together in common purpose to change and redeem this world. He is the glue that holds us together as I shared with the kids. Because God was in Christ on the cross, he was the best that God had to give. Giving himself to the worst of us, and this is grace.

Now, what do we mean by grace? Well, grace is God's gift. It is the mercy and favor and love given to us by God who desires to give it not because we deserve it, not because we've done anything to merit or earn it, grace is free, the underserved help that God gives to respond to the call to be His children, adoptive children, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life. Grace is a gift from God to people, free, generous, totally unexpected, totally underserved, which is what made this whole movement so radical.

So, you can do nothing to earn or merit God's grace. You cannot store it up. You'll never be

deserving of it. It's not a commodity. It is a gift and it is a gift of God's self to us in Jesus so the best that God had to give He poured out for the worst of us. And he did it all for you.

How quickly the Jesus movement, with its amazing equality, this radical sense of grace, morphed into a system that valued performance and purity. These are the complete opposites of God's unconditional grace and they are dangerous at heart because believing that by maintaining purity on your own or by striving for performance so that God would accept you on the basis of your own attempt, your own holiness all that sort of thing, that doesn't work. And in fact it just goes back to all the pre-Christian days of people having caste where one is better than the other or one is worse than the other. There is a lot of finger-pointing around that, a lot of condemnation. You and I both know the church has done an awful lot of that.

Back in the mid-nineties a guy named Josh Harris released a book called *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. Anyone remember that book? Well, back in those days I had a daughter who was 13 and she read it and the whole youth group did the true love waits thing and they all got little rings and put them on in a ceremony, but it set an impossibly high standard for moral purity, kicked off a brand new expression of the purity movement, especially among evangelicals and you know what? It was a disaster because it set an unrealistic ideal that dating would be unnecessary and that God would reveal your chosen mate at the right time. So I told my daughter: you just need to date a lot of people and she did. She's not here. She dated a lot of idiots, finally brought one home that was good. But the book gave the impression that the authors approach to relationships by not dating, not finding out what kind of person you are, what kind of person you would like to be with for the rest of your life, that if you would just follow his approach you would have a happy ever after ending, great marriage, great sex life, even though none of that is promised by scripture. And the worst part of it was it set girls up on this place to fall and took no responsibility for the men in their lives and it created a culture of shame. That's what performance and purity standards do and it is a present, particularly to women.

Now, what was interesting in late 2018, Josh Harris is now in his 40s, made a public statement saying that book was really a bad idea and he asked the publisher to take it out of print and that took some courage.

You see, God does not look at anybody as damaged goods to be discounted or tossed aside, that each person you see, each individual in this world, regardless of what you think, is beloved of God, by the God who suffered on the cross in Christ to redeem. So whatever color, whatever sex, whatever sexual preference, whatever politics, whatever anything, they are all beloved of God. That is a core teaching of Jesus.

Now, of course, Christians do hold the high moral and ethical standards, that Christians strive to live in the light of Jesus' teachings and his example, but we sooner or later will discover, pastors know this may be better than anybody, we fail. We fall short of the mark. We make mistakes. Sometimes we have big blowout failures, wheels up in the air, car on its roof kind

of blowouts. We have those kinds of things and we discover that striving for our own purity, our own perfection is not what Jesus asks of us.

This is what Paul was doing. This is what he was writing to Timothy in that passage, that sooner or later we have to realize we are not saved by our performance. We are saved by faith and the awesome and radical grace of God through Jesus Christ. That faith working in us is not designed to make us perfect; it's designed to help us to love God, to love our neighbors and to love that most difficult person, ourselves.

Now, Paul did not set impossible standards for us to follow in the New Testament. He did not set us up to fail when we cannot meet expectations for purity or the performance ideals which we really can't meet very well anyway. What Paul did was just expose his own soul to the full light of day, to share how Jesus met him and how by grace Jesus began the work of transformation. So he shares this slice of his life with all of us that when he was known as Saul, the fire breathing religion purist, he was determined to even kill people for God's sake...root out, crush, eliminate any challenges to what he believed and what he represented and think he was doing good. He actually moved out of the light and into the dark side. That's what Jesus was talking about. He says: You search the scriptures, but you don't believe. You are not hearing. You don't get it.

So, all opposition to him he saw as opposition to God. And we don't know the full extent of the hurt and the harm that he caused, the suffering that he created, but he at least shared that much with us that it was a bad idea. And it was on his way with a commission to crush the Jesus movement from Jerusalem up into Syria that he wrestled with what he was doing to the people he persecuted. He was nasty. They were kind to him. He didn't get that. He breathed threats and punishment. They offered prayers and blessings to him. Why are they doing this? He would have been much happier if they were angry and cursed him out. He sentenced some to death and no doubt the condemned offered forgiveness to him just as you might read in Acts 7 of Stephen saying as they are stoning him for being a Christian: O, Lord, do not lay this charge to them.

And that was when it was so completely unsettling to Saul that Jesus came and knocked him off his high horse there on the road to Damascus and he spoke to Saul in words of grace and of mercy and redirection. And the rest of the story, as you know, is Saul being transitioned, transformed to Paul the Apostle, the Evangelizer, who actually entered into a great deal of suffering and all he would do is humble himself before Jesus in awe, when he knew that he should have been condemned for all the evil he perpetrated, but instead Jesus forgave him, birthed new spirit into him, gave him not only a second chance, but used all of his many gifts for good, brought him out of the darkness into the light.

So, Paul is telling us that if Jesus can do this through him, he can do this through anybody. Well, that includes you because it is not just academic. This is real life stuff, because everybody here has struggled with their worthiness; everyone here has struggled with their ideals

around purity or they've tried really hard to get God's attention and say if I do this, God will do that. And none of that really works.

I remember being in a very dimly lit room in a hospital in Pittsburgh and I sat at the bedside of a guy named Fred. And his days were coming to a close and then what I thought was just a routine visit, get back in the car and go back home, actually turned into a lengthy time of confession as Fred poured his heart out to me. He was actually a pretty well off guy, owned a bus company, school buses. He was a good businessman, had a wonderful wife and family. And he shared distorted details of his life, which I had heard a little bit so I was somewhat prepared for that, the failures, the mistakes, the sins that he was responsible for and he said: God will never forgive me. I said: God will forgive you. He said: But I cannot expect Alma to forgive all the hurt that I caused. But Alma had forgiven him long ago and stayed by his side and when God took him home two weeks later, Alma was there because she understood the gift of mercy, of love and forgiveness in Jesus.

Now, our belief in Jesus is not meant to make us arrogant, prideful, to be exclusive, as though we are better than anyone else. Look at us, right? Any religion that produces a quest for purity functions as a performance oriented system seeking brownie points from God and this is not of God, it is not the Gospel. God is not looking for some kind of super saints, which is really good as far as I'm concerned because I'm not one. God in Christ is seeking bums just like us. And bums just like us are invited to turn around, enter God's Kingdom, find all the grace and mercy that we never thought was ours and then to walk so closely to Jesus, to be stuck to him like glue so that we convey his love, his acceptance, his forgiveness, his reconciliation through all our lives.

Our encounter with Jesus should humble us because he cares that much for us and he does. It should put us in awe of the grace that God has given to us through Christ, but it should also create in us a transformation of such compassion that we get to be the hands and the heart of Jesus, to share this message of mercy and grace. Amen.