

One More

June 29, 2014

READ 1 John 1:1-4

Our boys, and a lot of our friends, have been giving Gail a hard time for years about her picture-taking habits. Whenever we get together, she has a camera, even if it is just in her phone these days. Everybody poses, then when she takes the picture, she says “one more”, just trying to make sure she gets one with my eyes open. It is now a running joke, so one of the boys is as likely to say “one more” as she is, just to get it out of the way.

This morning, I get one more. One more opportunity to come closer to making our joy – my joy – complete through the sharing of the Word of God. That is what John was talking about. He had experienced the Word made flesh, God Incarnate, and nothing gave him greater joy than to share that Word. He knew what I know and what we all should know... that there is no greater joy than to experience the presence of God.

I have been privileged to bring that Word to this place, to this congregation, for 12 years. That's somewhere close to 600 sermons. I realized when I was offered the opportunity to serve here that I was going to have a long time to deliver the message of the Gospel. When you are doing fill-in preaching, like I had been doing for about 10 years at that point, you don't know if you are ever coming back, so you feel like you have to tell them everything you think is important in that 20 minutes or so. That's tough. But knowing I was coming back next week gave me the freedom to go deeper on some things, and to know that I would get to repeat some things that I thought were important. I've also had the great privilege of leading the Sunday morning Bible study for much of that time, and we have really dug into some great truths there. My strongest regret about my time here will always be that more of you did not take advantage of that time. There has been some good stuff going on in the fellowship hall.

So in this “one more” opportunity, I want to leave you with 4 thoughts. You might even write these down.

1. **The Bible, the Word of God, contained in the Old and New Testaments is the sufficient rule both of faith and of practice.** That sentence is not original... it comes straight out of the Korean creed, number 884 in the back of the hymnal. Being asked to bring that Word to you on a weekly basis is an extraordinary gift, and it is a fantastic thing that we preachers do not have to come up with any of its great truths on our own. We just have to find them, connect them to daily living, and talk about them. Radio Shack used to have an ad campaign that said “You've got questions; we've got answers.” You have questions; the Bible has answers. I have come in recent years to really appreciate Isaiah 55:11, which says that when the Word of God goes out, it never comes back empty. The obligation of the preacher, which the same obligation held by every Christian, is to deliver the Gospel, in thought, word, and action and let that Gospel do its work in the world. We are all responsible for the delivery, and God will handle the results. Our obligation – again the obligation of every Christian – is to faithfully deliver the Word.

2. **The righteous prosper and the unrighteous suffer.** That is the essential message of the Book of Job, which is one of the most challenging books to study in the Bible. It is too easy to read that story fatalistically. For us to understand what it means to say “the righteous prosper and the unrighteous suffer”, we have to properly understand what is meant by the key words. Righteous means one thing: living in right relationship with God. It is not at all about what we do – it is all about who we are. It is about our understanding of who we are and who God is, and how much and how desperately God loves us in that relationship. If we understand “righteous” in that way, the rest of the teaching follows naturally. People living in right relationship with God prosper for no other reason than that they are living in that relationship; prosper has absolutely nothing to do with material possessions or any other worldly measure of prosperity, just as suffering has nothing to do with illness or poverty or any other worldly measure of suffering. People living outside of right relationship with God are suffering, even if they

appear to be prospering in worldly terms. The focus for us has to be on that relationship with God, on grasping the magnitude of his love and mercy and grace and forgiveness in every breath we take.

Let me borrow something from Wil right here. One of the things he has enjoyed both in seminary and in ministry at Hickory, North Carolina, has been the opportunity to work with elementary age children. One of those third-graders asked Wil when they first met and Wil introduced himself as a pastor, “What does a pastor do?” Wil had considered that question at a higher level in preparation for ministry, but had not been challenged to put it on a third-grade level. He took a deep breath and allowed the Holy Spirit to speak. “My job,” he said, “is to help people be friends with God.” Whew. We are not talking about a friendship between equals to be sure, but it is the very deepest friendship imaginable – a friendship of devotion and intimacy and grace and sacrificial, unconditional love. Jesus, friend of sinners, longs for that relationship with us, and longs for us to bring others to that relationship.

3. **The root of all sin is self-centeredness.** You can test that statement against any sin, whether it is sin against God or against each other. You can test the original sin of Adam and Eve against it. You can test every modern sin against it, and every sin in between. We sin when we put anything, including ourselves, ahead of God. When our priority is ourselves, what makes us feel good or look good, sin is the natural result. God means for our relationship with Him to be our highest priority – for us to be dedicated and purposeful and intentional about living a life pleasing to Him. That is not a complicated charge, but it requires the support of the love and grace of God to live it out. Living God-centered and not self-centered is an act of faith. How could we, or why would we, center ourselves on God if we did not believe in Him? Or if we did not believe Him?

When we did the deep study of the book “The Shack” - which by the way I still recommend as the best expression of the Trinity I’ve ever seen – we read a

conversation in which God says to Mack something like this: “You are afraid because you see yourself going into the future on your own. You are afraid because in the depths of your soul, you still do not believe that I love you.” This is where we got the third part of the saying on our bulletin: “Imagine God in your future.” Maybe the most common phrase in all the Bible is “Do not be afraid”. It is spoken by God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, angels, and all manner of messengers of God. There is nothing of this earth that we can rely on to face tomorrow, or today for that matter, without fear. Not each other, not military might, not the government, not our own talents and resources, not our good works – nothing. Only the faith that God goes before us, that God has already gone before us, into the next minute or day or week or year is capable of sustaining us and allowing us to live without fear. Only that faith, and our trust in God and His mercy and forgiveness, allows us to contemplate approaching the throne of God without fear. God calls us there, cleans us up so we can come, and lifts us up to stand before Him. That's where we find ourselves when we are God-centered.

4. **Our relationship with God is not about what God has done or what God is doing or what God will do – it is about who God is.** All too often, when we are asked to talk about God, or to tell our story, we go to what God has done for us. There are great stories in this room of healing and restoration and recovery, but there are also stories in this room and elsewhere in which those things did not happen. If our faith is based on what God has done for us lately, it has no depth and will fail when times get hard. But if our faith is based on who God is, we will see Him in our past and feel Him in our present and imagine Him in our future, and we will know His love and mercy and forgiveness and grace no matter what our circumstances. I know God loves me. And I know God is good – all the time.

Our story is not about what God has done, it is about our realization of who God is. This is your story, which God means for you to tell. I looked back to the sermon I preached here on my first Sunday twelve years ago. The Scripture lesson was from 1

Peter 3:15: Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. Does that surprise you? If we are allowing God's Word to have meaning to us – to transform us – if we are connecting with God through prayer and experiencing His revelation, and if we are living with the joy of the redeemed, people are going to notice and they are going to want to know the secret. Here's what I told you the secret was twelve years ago:

It is all about a relationship – a personal, individual, unique relationship between God and me – all His promises, all the promises of the Bible are for me, because He loves me – He saves me from the world and from myself for Himself – held in the palm of His hand, all the time – I know that whatever, He loves me – and He loves you, too in exactly the same way, just as you are.

It gives me great joy to claim these past twelve years, to have experienced your love and care and grace, not just for me but for Gail and James and Wil and Jessica and Lea, to have been so privileged to stand before you and present the Word of God to you, to see that Word taking root and growing in you, to have benefitted so incredibly from your patience as I learned my way into ministry, sometimes at your expense, to have been so very blessed. I take all that with me, but I also leave it all with you. I remain the most blessed person I know.

See God in your past – Feel God in your present – Imagine God in your future, because He loves you so. God loves you, and so do I.

Amen.