

The Good News of Mowing the Weeds?

A Sermon for March 12, 2017

John 3:1-17; Romans 4

Lansdowne UMC

Several summers ago, I remember that Katie and I were going through a particularly busy season of life. With Katie working nearly 80 hours a week in residency and me pursuing my Master's in Computer Science, sometimes it felt like it was all we could do to get some food cooked, the dishes and the laundry done, and the lawn mowed-- at least every once in awhile. Lots of other things that really *needed* attention ended up getting neglected.

Our house had a flower bed in the back yard with these beautiful old rose bushes. But we just couldn't keep up with the weeding. I would mow the lawn and look at the weeds getting bigger and bigger and I'd wonder, "when will I have time to deal with those?" By the second or third time mowing past the weeds, I decided that doing something was better than nothing, so I ran the lawnmower over the weeds in the flower bed. Needless to say that was a temporary fix. I actually think I just made the weeds angry, because they seemed to get back to their full height in just a few short days.

I wasn't a pastor back then. Back then I wanted to do *anything* but become a pastor. But God did make me in a certain way, and so even at the time the image struck me as a powerful parable of how our faith is often conveyed. I think it's represented most concisely by a slogan that's just about the right size for a bumper sticker: "Christian's aren't perfect, just forgiven." The longer version of this is that "we're all sinners, but if we believe in Jesus, God will forgive our sins, and we can go to heaven when we die."

Now, on the one hand, we are absolutely in need of forgiveness. And Jesus teaches his disciples to pray “forgive us our trespasses.” But the problem is that framing the gospel in this way seems to make it sound like when someone comes to faith in Christ, we should not expect or even particularly hope to see any visible change in their life. It makes it sound like the best life that God has planned for us is one in which we mow our spiritual weeds-- we continue living with unwelcome, invasive behaviors that harm ourselves, others, and our relationship with God-- but we do these things knowing that it’s not the end of the world, because at the end of the day we’ll be forgiven.

If that’s the story we tell, then all we have to offer the world is some good advice on how we manage our sins. And tragically the world reads our bumper stickers (“Christians aren’t perfect, just forgiven”) and it laughs. Then it utters that most painful of phrases, “but the church is no different from anyone else.”

Is that really the most we have to hope for? Is the abundant life that Jesus talked about just a gospel of *Sin Management*? That doesn’t sound very abundant to me. And frankly I don’t think that the world needs help managing their sins. If they needed a sin management system, they’d go get an MBA and track things on a spreadsheet. They’d download an App on their iPhone called MySinPal, so that they could log their sins better. The world doesn’t need good advice. The world needs good news.

It’s not just that our sins need to be forgiven. Sin traps us. It holds out the hope of abundant life but after a momentary high, it ultimately fails to deliver. The actor Jim Carrey apparently made this remark: “I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it’s not the answer.”

Listen again to the way the good news is put in that famous verse, John 3:16. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so

that everyone who believes in him may not **perish** but may have eternal **life**.” The good news is first and foremost about life. Life that we desperately need, because without it, we perish. The good news is not merely that our sins are forgiven and may now be managed, it’s that we have death coming our way and we need new life. We need a deep, miraculous healing. We need resurrection.

Those in the beginning stages of recovery from addictions know this well. Yes, of course such individuals need forgiveness for the times that their addiction caused them to harm themselves and others. But what they really need is to stop acting on their addiction. They need to stop turning to drugs or alcohol or gambling or pornography, or whatever it is-- because it’s killing them. It’s killing their relationships. “The wages of sin is death,” Paul says in Romans 6. And again in Ephesians 2, “you were *dead* in the trespasses and sins in which you once lived.”

Of course forgiveness is needed. But what is really needed is transformation, recovery, healing. Those of us battling addictions need to be set free from our bondage to the addiction.

“But Pastor David, I’m not addicted to any of those things.” Well, this sermon might still be for you. That’s because the Bible doesn’t think humanity has a *little* problem with sin that can be poorly managed or well managed. The Bible thinks that humanity is addicted to sin. Rather humanity is in slavery to sin. Apart from Christ, sin beats us up and makes us do what it wants. We don’t need God to fudge the numbers on heaven’s sin ledger. We need God to save us. We need God to rescue us from our addiction to sin so that we can have *life*.

But praise God, this is exactly what scripture proclaims that Christ is able to do. It is also my experience, and the experience of countless others. John 8 says, if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

Romans 6 says by Christ we may be set *free* from sin. In Colossians, Paul says that “[God] has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son.”

Jesus is one that the communion liturgy says “delivered us from slavery to sin.” He is the one of whom Charles Wesley sings “He breaks the *power* of canceled sin, he sets the prisoner free; his blood can make the foulest clean; his blood availed for me.” God so *loved* the world, that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. So how does this eternal life come about?

This Pharisee named Nicodemus comes to Jesus. He doesn’t seem to be much of an insider at this point, but he’s certainly faring better than the average Pharisee in the gospels. He tells Jesus that he knows that Jesus has come from God, because the things Jesus does are impossible otherwise. Jesus pivots the conversation and basically says, “You think that’s impossible. I’ll tell you what’s impossible. It’s impossible for someone to see God’s kingdom unless they’re born anew, born again, born from above”-- the Greek word means all of these things together at the same time.

Jesus is talking about a spiritual reality, but Nicodemus thinks he’s talking about normal birth. “And uh, Jesus, wouldn’t it be impossible to crawl back in my mother’s womb again?” And so Jesus rephrases his response. To paraphrase, “we’re not talking about entering your mother’s womb, we’re talking about entering the kingdom of God. And to do that you must be born of water and spirit.”

Water and Spirit. Both come from above. Water comes from rain. The Spirit comes from heaven. You must be born from above. Both water and spirit mean life. The Gospel writer has talked about this already in John 1:12-13: “to all who received him, who believed in his

name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.” God must become our Heavenly Father, and the Holy Spirit must birth us.

I am very aware of the fact that the phrase “born again” comes with a lot of baggage. In fact, it seems to be most frequently used disparagingly to describe a particular, generally conservative, voting bloc. But I hope you won’t mind if I don’t give up on the image just yet. John Wesley, the father of Methodism, said that if there were any truly fundamental teachings of Christianity, they were that of justification and the new birth. He goes on to say that justification is “that great work which God does *for* us, in forgiving our sins.” The new birth, which Jesus talks about here in John 3, according to Wesley is “the great work which God does *in* us, in renewing our fallen nature.” God doesn’t leave us after forgiving us. God renews us and restores us. God “takes away our bent to sinning.”

God’s answer to our death is to give us new life-- eternal life. It’s life that lasts forever, but it’s a life that begins now. “God so loved the world, that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him would not perish, but have eternal life”-- the life that comes from above, that comes into us, renews us, and restores us.

We get more of this in the passages from Genesis and Romans. God told Abraham that he would be made into a great nation-- such a great nation that “in him, all the nations of the earth would be blessed.” But there was just one problem, Abraham was nearly 100 years old and he did not have any children. God was going to need to work a miracle.

And so Romans makes the point that Abraham is not only the father of the Jews by human descent, but he is our ancestor when it comes to faith. Specifically, he believed in the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that don’t exist into existence. It goes on to say,

past the end of our reading at verse 17, that Abraham's body was "as good as dead" when it came to the hope of bearing children, but that "he was fully convinced that God was able to do what he promised." God's promise of new life comes to Abraham and his wife and they are able to conceive Isaac, the father Jacob, who will be called Israel. And so Paul makes the point that everyone who has this same faith that Abraham had will be given the blessing that Abraham was given-- new life. We need to recognize how desperate our situation is because of sin. We are not in control. We are *dead* in our sins apart from God's grace. And so despite our desperate situation we look to God for life.

In an odd story in the book of Numbers, Moses lifted up a bronze snake in the wilderness so that anyone who got a snake bite could look to it and live. The Gospel of John says "just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the son of man be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." It takes an Abraham-like faith to look to the cross and see life. Perhaps there was never a more desperate situation. But if God can raise Jesus from that horror, then believing in Jesus is to believe that God can raise me from my death in sin as well. It's to recognize that God is not simply a God to take people to heaven when they die, but that the Holy Spirit breaks into our present reality, taking away our death in sin and breathing in a new breath of life.

This is the healing that we need. And so, my brothers and sisters, the church is not a museum for the perfect, but a hospital for the sick. Do you know when the world will stand up and take notice? When it is faced with the undeniable reality of healing. When it is faced with the reality Christians are not "just forgiven," but that they're transformed.

Perhaps today God has given you a glimpse into your desperation. That's not because anyone here is trying to make you feel guilty. It's simply because you have been given the eyes to see that you're sick. There is good news for you. No matter what you're trapped in, God loves you perfectly and completely. In John's Gospel, "the world" means "the world that is against God." Even if that's you, God still loves you. God so loved the world, that he gave his only son, so that *everyone* who believes in him may have eternal life. Even now. Your sins can be forgiven. Yes, even yours. But the good news continues. You can be given new life in Christ-- a healed, transformed, and raised-from-the-dead existence that you can experience now.

God's love is deeper and wider and more powerful than any of us can possibly imagine. And that love is life for us who have been dead in our sins.

Gracious God, I need you. Please forgive me of my sins. But don't just mow my weeds. Uproot them. Create in me a clean heart. Give me new life, eternal life. Thank you for the gift of your son. Just as you brought life out of his death, I look for you to bring life out of my death. In Jesus name, Amen.