



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
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Sermon: "Away Game"
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Acts 7:51-60
Acts 17:16-34

A man went to visit a monastery and after dinner
the abbot invited him to join the monks for an hour's social time
before concluding the day with the late night prayers.

The abbot said to the visitor,
"We often tell each other some jokes. Listen."

The visitor took a seat and listened.
One monk said "74" and the whole company chuckled and chortled.
Another monk said, "37," and again the rest giggled and smiled.

"What's happening?" said the visitor.
"We all know each other so well," the abbot replied,
"that we've heard all the jokes,
so we can just say the number and everyone recalls it.
Would you like to tell one?"

The visitor nervously thought he should try.
"165" he said.
All the monks fell off their chairs with laughter.

"What did I do?" the visitor wondered.
"Ah," said the abbot, radiant with happiness.
"We haven't heard that one before."¹

There is something delightful and wonderful about that.
There is also a caution there:
we do not "paint by numbers" in life or faith.
Faith takes constant, deliberate, and often risk-taking probing.
Maybe no more so—that right now.

Scholars are now able to use new technologies—similar to Google Earth and MapQuest—
--to answer probing historical questions, such as:

***What could Gen. Robert E. Lee actually SEE as he issued
a series of fateful orders at the Battle of Gettysburg
that turned the tide of the Civil War?***

Historians, literary theorists, and archaeologists are using software
that displays and analyzes information
related to a physical location —
like the Dust Bowl devastated during the Great Depression,
or sites such as Gettysburg.

Visitors at Gettysburg today, can climb up to where Lee
stationed himself on July 2, the second day of fighting;
or stand on Seminary Ridge,
where the next day Lee watched as thousands advanced
across open farmland to their deaths
in the notorious Pickett's Charge.

***But they won't see what the general saw because
the intervening years have altered the topography.***

Over the decades a quarry, a reservoir,
different plants and trees have been added,
and elevations have changed as a result of plowing and erosion.
Generals in the 19th century relied primarily on their own eyes,
and small differences in elevation were strategically important.

With these new digital "retro" maps,
it becomes clear that General Lee could NOT possibly have seen
the massive federal forces building up as they were.
He had to make decisions with inadequate information—
--but historians have not known that...until now.

***...Just as we can't tell jokes,
or live life "by the numbers"—
--we CAN'T assume we see the "same things as always"
when we confront the culture around us.***

Any church that begins its conversations-- ***"well, we have always..."***
OR, "I've never known a church to DO or BE this or that..."

...can find itself stranded by erosion...
or faced with being plowed under.

* * * * *

Surveying the cultural and spiritual landscape today,

Charles Taylor's book, *A Secular Age*, asks a pointed question:
*"Why was it virtually impossible NOT to believe in God in,
 say 1500, in our Western society,
 while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy
 but even inescapable?"*

That is, how did we move from the all-encompassing sacred cosmos,
 to our current world in which faith is a choice,
 in which some people believe,
 others don't and a lot are in the middle?
 Taylor's argument doesn't wallow in spiritual malaise--
*"The yearning for eternity is NOT the trivial and childish thing
 it is painted to be in our culture."*
 We DON'T want to live in a world closed off
 from the transcendent,
 reliant exclusively on the material world.
*We are, instead, moving toward what he calls
 a galloping spiritual pluralism.²*

But in that pluralism of NO NEAT categories—
 "secular over here" ... "sacred this way"—what now?

We are spending five weeks in the Book of Acts this fall.
 Looking for what the experience of the early church
 can guide us in the 21st century.

One truth seems to emerge clearly:
 after centuries where the church was a "protected category"
 in our culture—**protected time**
 (there were no soccer tournaments
 on Sundays in the 1st century),
 --and **protected space:**
 church was accommodated with favored space
 in property,
 in commerce,
 and in media—*that protection
 no longer exists.*

The church existed for a long, long time
 in a bubble that largely separated it
 from more "secular pursuits."
Those days have ended.
 (Thank God...many of us would say!)

The “secular/sacred split” largely no longer exists
 and to be the church—we must exist integrated, yet distinct from
 every other part of culture
 in a very holistic landscape.

Another way to put it: ***there is no such thing as “home field advantage”***
for those following Jesus in 2014,
 just as there was NOT such an advantage in the first century.

But when you take that cultural “home field advantage” away—
 --not everyone is in a position to receive that as a gift.

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This spring, Kristy and I made a presentation—
 --along with lots of people—
 --at a conference considering what is NEXT for the church.

Afterwards, a minister who I just met,
 who was about my age said this about his ministry:
*“It’s like I’m in a marriage where the love has gone
 and no one has the courage to separate
 or the initiative to reignite the fire.
 We’re going through the motions.
 I’m experiencing slow asphyxiation.”*

The next person to come up to me was an elder on a Session in Iowa.
 She said:

*“All our talk about ministry sounds very pious and sentimental.
 I spend my life competing in a marketplace
 where people want products—
 a good educational experience for their child,
 a good price for a building renovation.
 That’s what church means now—it’s a commodity.”*

A third conversation added to the despair:

*“I went into ministry because I wanted to help people in
 their deepest moments of joy or loss.*

*But the church is giving in to the culture of counting,
 target-setting, and circumscribing,
 and I have to fight to maintain the space
 truly do ministry.”³*

Though NOT the words of a 1st century church leader,
 the thoughts behind these expressions—
How are we to BE the church in such a world as this?

How are we to follow Jesus when the wind is against us?—
 --seems to be shared experience, THEN...as NOW.

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The story of Stephen, as recorded in Acts,
 is a story of one of the first leaders of the new church
 facing a culture where the church was NOT given a red carpet.

At the Last Supper, Jesus said:

***“The one who believes in me
 will also do the works that I do
 and, in fact, will do greater works than these.”***

Stay with those words a moment.

There’s believing in Jesus,
 there’s doing what Jesus does,
 and then there’s this astonishing third element –
 doing greater things than Jesus.

What could that possibly mean?

Stephen embodies the teaching of Jesus on the last night of his life.

Stephen feeds the hungry
 Nothing fancy, nothing complicated—
 --no long words like systemic injustice or cycles of poverty.
 Stephen just feeds the hungry, just like Jesus did.

To follow Jesus means we help those who are most vulnerable.

In truth, the church that follows Jesus often is called
 to help those in vulnerability,
 even at the expense of what
 WE had in mind for our life together.

The story of Stephen begins with the conviction
 that being in ministry means turning faith into concrete acts of love.
 He lives out his belief in faith and practice.
 People are drawn to his witness
 both by what he SAYS and by what he DOES.

Stephen’s ministry—and those of his cohort make a REAL difference in their region...
 ...because they believe in Jesus
 ...and because they do what Jesus did.

And, Stephen faces opposition.

A lot of the powers-that-be don't like what he's doing
and what he's saying
and what's happening around him.

Anyone can be in a church when we're going with the flow
and culture rolls out a red carpet
to our own private, protected realm...

...But WHEN the church believes what Jesus believed,
does what Jesus does—
--and there is OPPOSITION and the culture rolls up
the red carpet—**then who is the church to be?**

Look at Stephen in this moment:

The story says, *"All who sat in the council looked intently at him,
and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel."*

There was NOT a division between
"what is secular" and "what is sacred"—
--there was just Stephen,
believing as God's beloved child,
acting as God's beloved child,
showing the love and grace of Jesus.

When Paul arrived in Athens—in the marketplace of ideas,
into 1st century pluralism,
into those who scoffed and doubted his claims—
--Paul CHANGED EVERYTHING about his presentation...
...EXCEPT ONE THING.

Even there—with everything up for cultural negotiation—
--he spoke of what he believed,
--he acted like Jesus acted,
--and he did GREATER things...
...by holding fast to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

But, he DIDN'T care if the liturgy was different,
the music was unfamiliar,
the political dynamics were shifting,
the cultural critics were carping,
the trappings of faith were changing,
or the media of communication was brand new.

He kept the core HOPE of Jesus' Easter truth—

**--and Paul let everything else go
in service of the pluralistic culture
where God had called him to go.**

He did it ALL in service of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

What an amazing, courageous, GREAT thing!

What a wild, confusing world we live in!!

His own prose style may have been economical,

but Ernest Hemingway hoarded everything else—

--books, notes, letters, receipts, telegrams—everything.

A trove of some 2,500 documents collected and preserved at

Hemingway's Cuban farm outside Havana has recently been cataloged--

—ALL of it:

*diaries, letters, lists, telegrams,
insurance policies, bank statements, passports,
tickets to bullfights in Spain and racetracks in Paris,
a brochure from a swimming pool filter company,
a page of his son Patrick's homework
and seemingly every Christmas card he ever received.*

Unable to find any rhyme or reason in how Hemingway filed things,

the curators simply decided to catalog it all in the order

Hemingway had placed it—

So here is the very randomness of this material —

a telegram from Archibald MacLeish congratulating Hemingway
on "For Whom the Bell Tolls"

right next to Mary Hemingway's carefully typed hamburger recipes,
next to a telegram from Ingrid Bergman

after he won the 1954 Nobel Prize that reads:

"THE SWEDES AREN'T SO DUMB AFTER ALL."

What is remarkable is not just the historical and literary significance,

but the nature of the collection itself.

It is a reminder that THIS is how lives are lived--haphazardly.⁴

We live our life and enact our faith in a decidedly non-linear,

often random life and world—

***--where there is NO neat division between "high culture" and "low culture"
or between "sacred" and "secular."***

...FAITH that does NOT understand that...won't bear fruit for long.
 Not in the 1st century.
 Certainly not in the 21st century.

* * * * *

Among the gifts Stephen and Paul give to Grace Covenant today...

...is to remind us that believing in Jesus,
 doing what Jesus did,
 being led by the Spirit to do GREATER
 things than Jesus did—

--is our absolute calling...ESPECIALLY in a world
 where culture rolls out NO
 red carpet for faith...
 ..and where ALL our work is likely
 to be messy and dangerous.

Just like Stephen in Jerusalem.
 Especially like Paul in Athens.

Growth is messy and dangerous.

Life is messy and dangerous.

Faith is messy and dangerous.

And it leads to greater things – the “greater things” that Jesus taught.

The resurrection – is messy and dangerous.

And it's ALL Stephen had.
 It's ALL Paul had in Athens.

It's all we have – facing a spiritually hungry,
 institutionally suspicious world.

It's ALL of it—all together:

Life, fear,
secular, sacred,
church, world,
home or away,
welcomed or opposed—
 with the death and resurrection of Jesus
 as our only place to stand...

The Gospel embodied in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus
 is messy and dangerous,
 and feeding and hope providing.

We can face our striving, yearning, hungry world this morning
 and say with conviction: ***Jesus Christ is Risen Today...***

...we need to feed Asheville based on that hope;
 ...we need to live as Jesus lived—in gentleness and grace—based on that hope;
 ...Jesus wants us --right here, US—
 --to do GREATER things...**based on this HOPE.**

I think of the Habitat Houses that have been built in the last 40 years.
--Certainly MORE than Jesus the carpenter ever built.

I think of the generations and generations of church school teachers
 and youth advisors
 who have modeled faith in these hallways for 60 years.
--Certainly MORE than Jesus ever gathered to teach.

I think of the covered dishes and the care packages
 that church members have offered at the front door
 of houses of bereavement and pain.
--Certainly MORE than Jesus' loaves and fishes.

I think of every time one of YOU has offered
 that crucial word of conviction based on your faith;
 that wondrous act of service, trying to act like Jesus acted;
 that HOPE you have lived—in hard, risky ways—
 --because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

GREAT things.
GREATER things.

All of this is messy,
 All of this is dangerous,
 and ALL of this context for ministry will continue to change constantly
 for as far as we can see into God's future.

...And THIS is the calling for Grace Covenant:
 to live a messy and dangerous faith,
 and do GREATER things, because Christ is Risen!

This HOPE is all we have—
--and it's MORE than we need.

Amen.

¹ From a sermon by Samuel Wells, "The Good Treasure" preached at Duke Chapel on October 3, 2010

² David Brooks, "The Secular Society," *The New York Times*, July 8, 2013

³ Samuel Wells, "Ministry without God," *Christian Century*, November 13, 2013

⁴ Charles McGrath, "A Mutable Feast," *The New York Times*, February 10, 2014