

GRACE FOR THE JOURNEY--COMMUNITY
John 3:16-17

Grace For The Journey Series
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It is definitely not politically correct in many churches today to talk about people being lost spiritually or having wandered away from God's will and purposes.

It is not politically correct in some churches to talk about the seekers who are lost; about people not knowing the assurance of heaven; about the truth that there is a hell where people are somehow separated from God eternally. A more common response today is, "We're all headed to the same place."

Increasing numbers of people have rather seemed to conveniently put together their own human made criteria of exactly who is deserving of heaven. They say if you are simply a loving person you will certainly go to heaven; if you simply loved flowers, animals or nature you are guaranteed a place in eternity.

Even in the church it is often emphasized that God's grace means that everyone is going to be saved. No matter how deep we are in sin; even if we don't feel bad or want to be forgiven; even if we don't believe in Jesus, God's grace would never condemn anyone. Yet using grace this way makes it as Dieterich Bonhoeffer said, "cheap grace." We can cheapen grace to the point it means nothing at all.

One of the most beloved and memorized Bible passages says, "*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*" (John 3:16-17)

The key for receiving salvation and the gift of heaven is not simply being a loving person; simply doing good works or loving nature; simply watering down God's gift of grace to say what we like. The key rather is centered in believing in Jesus; in surrendering our lives to him by faith; in repentance and forgiveness for our past sins; in living a new life by faith now in Jesus.

The purpose and mission of the church therefore is always to reach out and bring the life-transforming message of Jesus to the lost and seeking. It is to help people know the truth that salvation is found through knowing and trusting Jesus by faith; it is in guiding people to repent and turn from their sins so they can find new life and joy in living by faith.

The illustration Jesus gives is of a shepherd leaving the 99 sheep and searching diligently for the lost sheep until he finds it. The mission of the church is to search for the lost and seeking; to never ever be satisfied until every person knows Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

Sometimes people have asked me whether there is a way for us to know for sure if certain people are going to be saved eternally or not? My response is always that it is not for us as sinful humans to know or decide. We need to always remember that only God knows a person's heart; only God knows who will be saved. It is not our job to judge; our mission is to witness to all people and help them know the amazing love and grace of Jesus.

In fact Jesus points out in his parables that even those of us who are religious may be totally surprised on the Judgment Day. It is clear that not everyone who says to him, "*Lord, Lord,*" shall enter the kingdom of heaven. In the case of the woman accused of adultery and the thief on the cross, those given forgiveness and offered the gift of heaven may totally surprise us.

The truth then is that it not for us to judge who is going to heaven and who is not. You will not hear sermons here at Messiah where we condemn certain people or groups to hell. The Bible tells us that we are all sinners; no one is righteous, no not one. The only way for any of us to have eternal life is to believe and trust in Jesus Christ; no one is beyond hope.

It is my firm belief that the mission of the church is never to assume everyone is saved. It is rather to reach out to the lost and seeking; to those who don't know the amazing love of Jesus; to those who think they can do it themselves.

There are people who are members of a church and worship most every Sunday (who actually know lots of things about Jesus) who are lost/seeking. There are people right here this morning who may have never committed their lives by faith to Jesus Christ.

There are also countless numbers of people in our community and area who are lost and seeking. Many of them of course are great people with great families, yet they may have lost their way with God. Increasing numbers of people have allowed their priorities to get all out of balance so God has no place in their existence. Some are enslaved by the sin of bitterness/resentment which they just can't let go of; some have been lured into popular beliefs yet do not know the real God.

The mission of the church is to reach the lost and seeking for Jesus Christ. As 2 Peter 3:9 states, "*He (the Lord) is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*" The only way of course that everyone will know Jesus is if you and me, the church, reach out and tell them. God is counting on us at Messiah.

One of the observations I have made through the years as I have visited some of the most dynamic churches in the country is that it is the churches who care the most about reaching the lost and seeking who are also the most alive and growing today. They are the churches where their worship is the most alive; where members are growing through education, small groups and being involved in doing ministry; these are the places where mission and outreach is the greatest.

It is true that a church congregation who has a heart/passion for those who don't know Jesus is then motivated to do whatever they can to reach out in love. It's kind of like if you lost one or two of your children. You would do whatever you could to search for them; you would spare no expense. Finding the lost and seeking truly does matter.

Yet many churches and church people today have the attitude that everyone's saved. Their mission then is to simply do worship for the insider; to cling to the same ancient traditions even when the numbers of worshippers keep dwindling. Their mission is to simply run some activities for children; provide a social club for those already connected. They sometimes worship their church building; are in love with their architecture; their organ and hymnbooks; their liturgy and rituals; their stained glass windows and relics from the past; their right and pure theology.

Yet the truth is that a church building; the architecture; the beautiful pipe organ; the fancy art, communion ware and robes will not keep people coming back to a church. In fact, there are amazingly beautiful church buildings filled with fantastic organs, art and paraments all over the country that are nearly empty each week. None of these outward things can keep people coming to a church for the right reasons.

What keeps people coming back to a church is changed and renewed lives. When people's lives are transformed and made new through the love of Jesus they come to church reflecting and shining forth this new life they have found. When the lost are coming to faith and are becoming part of the church people can sense the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit in their midst.

Where lives are being changed by the Holy Spirit the worship, outreach and love in these places is out of this world. It radiates a joy to people and to a community. As lives are changed and renewed families are helped; people are given hope in crisis; the troubled find healing. A church like this is truly contagious.

At Messiah our purpose and mission is "Seek-Connect-Impact...A Spiritual Journey Through A Jesus Filled Life." We are a church that is centered on reaching the lost and helping all people to know Jesus. In order to strengthen this mission, of course, we will need to dedicate ourselves even more to outreach, community, care and love. We can never be satisfied until all our neighbors, our friends, our loved ones—till all people know Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

Perhaps there is someone here this morning who is lost and searching for answers. Perhaps there is someone here who has put their faith in their good works, in some weak philosophy, yet who does not know Jesus by faith. Perhaps there is someone here who is hiding behind their busyness, their intellect, their mask of trying to look like they have it all together rather than surrendering their hearts to the love of Jesus.

If you today do not know Jesus in a personal way be assured that he knows everything about you. He knows your past; he knows all your thoughts and sins; he knows all your failures and attempts to run from him; he knows each one of us better than we know ourselves.

My friend, the good news is that he loves you; he died for you; he wants you more than anything to know his forgiveness and love; he does not want you ever to be lost again.

Let us receive him today by faith. May our prayer be, *“Lord Jesus, I am a sinner. Lord Jesus, I can’t do it on my own anymore. Lord Jesus, I need your love. Lord Jesus, I give my life to you. Lord Jesus, help me to live each day by faith in you.”*

Then as Jesus transforms, changes and renews us with his amazing love, may we in turn bring new life and energy to our congregation and mission together. May our purpose together be to do whatever we can to reach out to the lost and seeking for Jesus. May our mission be that new people are always welcome to connect in this community of love and care.