

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

Ain't It Good!

Exodus 34.29-35; 2 Corinthians 3.12-4.2

Russ Dean, February 18, 2007



Though our series has been interrupted several times, the sermons we have preached since the end of December have all been related to church growth, in that we have sought to give you a series of reasons to believe in the Church, universal, and Park Road Baptist Church in specific. We started by saying simply, “We ought to grow.” We believe, not arrogantly or with some kind of elitist mentality, but out of our own sincere enthusiasm for what we have found in this community – that we owe it to ourselves, and to Charlotte, North Carolina, to share our story and mission to this community.

Since that beginning we have preached three sermons, which we conceive as concentric circles. Growth begins with personal conviction. Baptism, or a personal commitment of some other intentional form, is the starting point. Without individuals willing to personally investment in their own faith, there is no hope that any church will grow. The next circle was a challenge of change. As the water is changed to wine, the wedding at Cana represents our church and our life. Are we open, individually, corporately, to the ever changing presence of God? What would change look like here? Individually? Corporately? My last sermon, the next concentric circle was my best effort at trying to convincing you that the Church (not just PRBC) is worth our every effort.¹ What would you be? Where would we be, without the Church? I can't imagine life without a body. Can you?

Individual growth. Corporate challenge. A body which gives life. Three reasons we owe it to our community, to give our best effort to grow. Today, we conclude this series by widening the circle to the broadest realm.²

I begin by asking: What is it that individuals most need in order to grow? (And since there is no life without growth, I could also ask: what is it that human beings most need, just to live?) How is it that we can have the courage to step out and accept the risks that the challenge of change presents? What is it that the Church has, most importantly, to offer the world?

¹ I try to be consistent in capitalizing “Church” when referring to the Church universal, and in using an initial lower case (“church”) when referring to a local congregation.

² The sermons, “Our Remembered History and our Anticipated Hope,” “On Being ‘Carded’ by Jesus,” “The Possibilities of New Life,” and “Living in a Body,” are available on our website: www.parkroadbaptist.org.

Aleksander Solzhenitsyn, the once-exiled Russian mathematician-turned-novelist, won the 1970 Nobel Prize for his numerous documentary critiques of a crushing Soviet system, which he believed nearly extinguished the life of his beloved homeland. In 1983 he wrote:

If I were asked today to formulate as concisely as possible the main cause of the ruinous revolution that swallowed up some 60 million of our people, I could not put it more accurately than to repeat: [We] have forgotten God.³

Of the same crisis the editor of “Christianity Today” wrote that the Soviet problem was not “economic or political... The failure of Marxism, we were told again and again,” said Philip Yancey, “is above all a theological failure.”⁴

What do humans most need to sustain life? What is our source of courage?
What must the Church never hesitate to offer to the world?

Another great Russian novelist, Leo Tolstoy, was on the verge of despair. One author writes, “His youthful rationalism had led him to the edge of the abyss of meaninglessness,” when he came to a “sudden awareness of the meaning of faith: Faith is the force of life.”⁵

³ Solzhenitsyn’s actual quotation, “Men have forgotten God,” is quoted in “The Living Pulpit,” April-June, 1992, p.39.

⁴ Also quoted in “The Living Pulpit,” April-June, 1992, p.39.

⁵ This quotation also comes from “The Living Pulpit,” April-June 1992, p.31. The article is attributed to “GG” – my assumption is that this refers to one of the editors, named Ginger Grab. The full quotation is as follows: “No matter what answers a given faith might provide for us, every answer of faith gives infinite meaning to the finite existence of [life], meaning that is not destroyed by suffering, deprivation and death. Therefore, the meaning of life and the possibility of living may be found in faith alone. I realized that the essential significance of faith lies not only in the ‘*manifestation of things unseen*’ and so on...faith is the knowledge of the meaning of human life... Faith is the force of life.”

What do humans most need to sustain life? What is our source of courage?

What must the Church never hesitate to offer to the world?

The answer: Faith.

When it seems there is no future – faith produces a trust that makes tomorrow possible. When that future seems hopeless – faith speaks its voice: “It is sin to despair,”⁶ and hope is born anew. When hope is cultivated by that spirit which gives it birth – faith yields life’s deepest joy.

Faith – Ain’t it good!⁷

In a paper entitled, “Feynman’s Unanswered Question,” a University of Maryland professor named Herman Daly makes a justification for faith in his skeptical world of academia.⁸ I won’t bother you with the details, but its thesis is relevant today. In 1963 Richard Feynman, a noted physicist, had inquired (curiously and cynically), through a series of lectures about the source of inspiration that religion held. Feynman was not a believer, and he was puzzled by the robust “strength and comfort” that religion continued

⁶ This is one of my favorite quotes of my predecessor, the late Charlie Milford. Though Charlie’s faith was not a cheerful one (he was much more given to serious discussion and to the rejection of antiquated and narrow ideas), his faith was, ultimately, an optimistic one.

⁷ Our young people performed the musical, “Children of Eden” last weekend, and they sang two of its musical pieces in today’s worship service, including an anthem by the same title as my sermon. The music, a high octane gospel shout, is sung by the family of Noah at the first sign of light, after forty days of storm aboard their ark-home. The following lyrics capture the spirit of the piece and the enthusiasm of faith that I had hoped to “sell” in this sermon: “Ain’t it sweet to smell the morning, in a world washed fresh and clean? Now the storm has left its warning, and we see a hint of green. Pale gray light, grow strong and golden, and release us from our pen, where we rocked for endless days, on a sea of endless grays. Now we sing a song of praise, amen... Ain’t it good to see the sun again!.. After all the nights we stood smelling rain and gopher wood... Ain’t it good to see the shining golden sun again!”

⁸ The article, from the “Philosophy and Public Policy Quarterly,” (Vol. 26, No. 1 / 2 [Winter/Spring 2006]), was sent to me by my friend, Ken Godwin, who is in the Public Policy Department at UNCC. The article (and a critique and subsequent response from the author) were the subject of an interested morning discussion just recently. I count it one of my great blessings to have folks Ken Godwin, and others like him, in my congregation. I am convinced that most pastors do not receive the regular challenge and education from their parishioners. Thanks be to God for such an opportunity!

to provide in a world which he believed faced an “aggressive assertion... that the very idea of God [was] an infantile superstition.” In other words, Feynman couldn’t account for the inspiration that faith gives to life because, he believed, God simply did not stand up to scientific scrutiny, for any reasonable, thinking human being.

Thirty years after Feynman asked his question, a group of scientists who were not skeptical of the impulse of religion, took up the physicist’s question in a meeting concerning the environment. In specific,

they noted that science has the techniques, but... is unable to ignite sufficient inspiration or moral fervor to induce the public to accept and finance policies... even [to] so basic a goal as conserving the capacity of the earth to support life. They thought that it would be worth a try to appeal to religion to supply the missing inspiration as a basis for policy.

These scientists realized that we have all the techniques that we need to clean up our environment, to make our earth a sustainable habitat for human survival – but we need more than techniques. Why did the scientists feel they had to turn to religion? Why do our politicians who, on the one hand really ought to stay out of religion, continue to court the religious vote so carefully? The answer is because they, like scientists who are in touch with the heartbeat of the people of the world, know that life does not exist in facts. Life does not exist in experiments and theories. Life does not exist in techniques. Life does not exist in policy and law.⁹

The force of life is faith. Ain’t it good!

⁹ It should be obvious that I am not speaking just of some fact of living (as simply breathing, or existing), but of life as “life.” I admit that this ideal, “life” in quotation marks, is somewhat subjective. What differs between life and “life” may well be a matter of individual judgment, but I am convinced that real “life” comes with the admission of the life of the spirit – the life of faith. As Tolstoy says, “Faith is the force of ‘life’” (quotations marks added).

Feynman believed that the idea of God did not stand scientific scrutiny. And he is absolutely right. God will never be sustained by the simple facts. But neither will your life. God will never be proven by an experiment. But neither can any laboratory give your life a sense of ultimate meaning. And when life hangs in the balance, human beings grasp not for facts, but in life's deepest moments, we reach for God.

This is the meaning of faith.

In the church year, today is “Transfiguration Sunday.” We’ve not read the story, but I trust you know it: Jesus goes to the mountain with Peter, James, and John, and there, they witness an almost indescribable event. Jesus is changed in front of them. Appearing with Moses and Elijah, the greatest prophets of their religious tradition, Jesus is transformed, *the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white* (Luke 9.29). But Jesus was not the only one who was changed.

So it is with faith. When one has seen God – transformation begets transformation. So Peter and James and John get transfigured, also.

Their lives are their testimony – not that they lived to verify a fact called “transfiguration.” Hardly. They lived their lives in witness to that Source which makes all meaningful transformation possible. And they so believed and so trusted this God that they, each, gave their lives for a faith which has the power to transform each of us, as Paul says, *from one degree of glory to the next.*¹⁰

¹⁰ I am a believer in the God who was revealed through Jesus Christ. As such, my conception of divinity is highly personal. However, my understanding of “faith” (as I try to make clear later, juxtaposing it with the concept of “religion”) is broad enough to allow that there are many in our world whose lives are instilled with “spirit” and “faith,” who do not share my understanding that this “Source” is “God,” as I understand

In fact(!), I believe faith is the only thing in life that has such transforming power, for individuals, for a families, for churches, even for nations as a whole.

Faith – Ain't it good!

Solzhenitsyn was right – and this is about as preachy as you'll ever hear me get – we have, in large measure, “forgotten God.” And our amnesia¹¹ has turned our world to the chaos that results when absolute certainty and security (which are not guaranteed by faith) become our gods. When this occurs, “religion” will always step to the forefront. “Religion,” which is an external structure always tied to rules and not relationships. Law and not grace. Purity and not justice. Judgment and not forgiveness. Division and not unity. Because we have forgotten God, “religion” has stepped in, and the effects of its fundamentalist tendency are being felt across the globe today. “Religion” is much more frightening, and much more a threat to “faith” than any political ideology or atheistic science ever could be.¹²

Our world needs a lot less religion. And a whole lot more faith.

God. I believe that all who are instilled with such faith, whether theirs is consonant with my religious definitions or not, have opened their lives to “life” (as I tried to explain in an earlier footnote).

¹¹ I chose this word deliberately – “amnesia” refers to a loss of memory, and we specifically think of it in regards to the person who cannot remember his/her own identity. But such is the result of forgetting God, I think – that in forgetting God, we lose touch we who (and whose) we are, individually, personally.

¹² The distinction I make here between “religion” and “faith” is a personal one, but one that I believe is important to maintain (whatever language you may choose to define these very different expressions). For further clarification I add these thoughts: There can be religion without true faith (I find militant fundamentalism, of any religious persuasion, devoid of the true faith of its principles.) There can also be faith without much/any religion. (The late Gene Owens, following the thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others, wrote a book entitled, “Confessions of a Religionless Christian” – though Gene was, by product of his vocation as professor and pastor, quite “religious”!) Conversely, religion can be the seedbed for true faith. (I trust that Park Road Baptist Church, amidst all of the institutional activity and culture-influenced programming is helping to plant true faith in its members.) Finally, true faith will always be greater than any given religion that sponsors it. (I believe that when adherents of any religion delve deep enough into the truest faith-tenets of that religion, they will find themselves in basic harmony with the adherents of other religious traditions – perhaps even more so than with fundamentalists within their own religious tradition.)

For when it seems there is no future – only faith produces a trust that makes tomorrow possible, come what may. When that future seems hopeless – only faith speaks its voice: “It is sin to despair,” and hope is born anew, if only a glimmer. When hope is cultivated by that spirit which gives it birth – only faith yields life’s deepest joy, even when that joy is sung in the midst of life’s deepest sorrows.

You are in church today, so your religion must be pretty well in tact. But how is your faith?

Do you trust?

Do you have hope?

Are you joyful?

May it be so!

Pastoral Prayer (sung by youth):

“...After all the nights we stood smelling rain and gopher wood,
Ain’t it good to see the shining golden sun again!”