

Jesus

“The Work of Jesus”

Matthew 20:20-28

Romans 5:6-11

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As we continue this morning in our preaching series during the weeks of Easter – the six Sundays from Easter to Pentecost (this year May 23) – we come this morning to the very important topic of *“the work of Jesus”* or, to put it in question form, *“Why did Jesus come to earth? What’s the big deal about Christmas? Why did the second person of the Triune God enter into human history? What was Jesus all about?”* These are critical questions at the very heart – the center – of what we as Christians believe. And there are several correct answers to these questions. Yes, Jesus came as a great teacher and lived an exemplary life of service to others – but there is one answer that must be clearly understood.

And that answer comes from Jesus himself. Following that interesting request from the mother of James and John, and the understandable reaction of the other disciples, Jesus said something very remarkable and critically important, *“the Son of Man – Jesus’ most common reference to himself – did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”* (Matthew 20:28).

Jesus came to give his life as a ransom. Biblical scholar John Stott, in his wonderful little book, Basic Christianity, writes, *“Christianity is a rescue religion. It declares that God has taken the initiative in Jesus Christ to deliver us from our sins. This is the main theme of the Bible.”* (p. 81). From Genesis to Revelation, God’s plan for humanity – for the redemption of all people – is laid out. And this is the issue that the Apostle Paul addresses in the passage from his letter to the Romans that we read – 5:6-11.

In this letter to the Romans Paul very carefully and completely presents the case for the Christian Gospel, like a prosecuting attorney he presents his argument, which comes to its center in these verses, *“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly . . . God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us”* (5:6-8).

This is one of the greatest and most important passages in all of scripture. It can be thought of as Paul’s commentary some of the most familiar of all Bible verses,

(which was sung so beautifully and powerfully by our choir last Sunday) John 3:16 - 17- *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."*

But there is a harsh word in this beautiful statement of God's love from Romans, did you catch it? *"At the right time Christ died for the . . . ungodly."* Actually there are four strong words that Paul uses to describe the object of God's love and those for whom Christ died: *"weak", "ungodly", "sinners", "enemies"*. These are not the kind of words that one would normally use to describe the object of one's love! What's up with that?

Well, here's what's up – we can never fully understand the GOOD NEWS, the Gospel of God's love, until we accept the BAD NEWS of our human condition. And so, all of humanity is described in these four words; *"Weak"* is a word commonly used in the language of the New Testament to describe someone who is sick, (i.e. "sickly"). What Paul intends us to understand is that we are totally incapable of helping ourselves, totally unable by any human effort, of earning God's grace – it is a gift. *"Ungodly"* simply means "without regard to God, without considering God, living without reference to God". We are called *"sinners"* - to sin simply means "to miss the mark" (a term from archery). And finally, in Romans 5:10 we are called *"enemies"*, in other words, those who actively live in opposition to God.

Wow, this is not good news, but it is not the last word! *"While we were weak . . . while we were still sinners . . . while we were enemies . . ."* (5:6, 8, 10) God did something! The "work" of Jesus – in his own words recorded in Matthew's Gospel – and in the Apostle Paul's theological treatise in Romans – was to die in our place, to take upon himself our sin, to pay the penalty for that sin, so that we could be reconciled to God, reunited with the Creator through the Savior and indwelt with the Spirit. And now we can understand what the authors of one of our most important catechisms of our tradition means in the question, *"What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever"* (Westminster Catechism).

There is something more for us to hear this morning in this wonderful passage of scripture – 5:10, *"For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life."* The order is essential – *"while we were enemies"* that is, before we could do anything at all to save ourselves by human effort; *"we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son"* in other words, it's entirely God's doing, i.e. the "work" of Jesus; *" . . . having been reconciled . . ."* we now are given what Paul describes

elsewhere (II Corinthians 5) as “a ministry of reconciliation”. The life of Jesus – his teaching, his example, his compassion – does provide a model of God’s desire for our lives. The death of Jesus provides salvation – the life of Jesus provides an example, “having been reconciled” to God through Jesus, we proclaim a message of reconciliation to the world.

This is a sermon about the work of Jesus, and a sermon about the love of God, which is a love that requires a response. Some of the greatest hymns of our Christian tradition have been written as a response to God’s amazing love. Here are the words of my favorite:

*When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I could but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride.*

*Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast, save in the death of Christ my God;
All the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to his blood.*

*See, from his head, his hands, his feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down;
Did ever such love and sorrow meet, or thorns compose so rich a crown?*

*Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.*