

Sermon: That's Not the Way the World Works

Year B, the Second Sunday of Easter

[Acts 4:32-35](#); [John 12:23-32](#) (from *The Message* translation of the Bible)

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I hear the reading from Acts today and there's a part of me that wants to roll my eyes. "The whole group of believers was of one mind." I don't know of any group of believers of anything who are of one mind. "No one claimed private ownership". Put people on an airplane and watch them claim private ownership of the armrest. "There was not a needy person among them". How can that even be statistically possible? I get that the writer of Acts wants it to have been that way or wants to remember it that way. But it just doesn't seem to be the way the world works. This feels like those communities that claim to be one big happy family. We share a lot in families, but I don't know of any family where everyone's needs get met all the time. We often get into full on combat over who is on whose side of the back seat.

The kids start their study of the passage from John today. It's a hard one. It comes from the end of the Gospel of John, just before Jesus enters Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. That journey ends with the resurrection on Easter after the Crucifixion on Good Friday. Just before he enters Jerusalem, some new people show up. They're not looking for the miracle worker or the healer. Jesus announces that the teaching phase of his ministry has passed. He tries one last time to sum it up. It's so radical, it's so amazing that he has to explain our life in faith in terms of a grain of wheat. A single grain, by itself isn't much. But let it pass through death in the dark ground and it will grow back again, much more abundantly.

The kids will tackle learning through metaphor next week, in case any of you would like to brush up on that instead of coming to worship in the sanctuary. For this week, we're going to ask them to look at a whole bunch of things they do in daily life so they can experience what it's like to hold onto life just as it is.

Think of brushing your teeth. If you had two categories you could put it in, good for me or bad for me, where would you put it? Of course. But what if, in the course of an exercise, it ends up in the bad for me category. Is there ever a case when brushing your teeth is a bad idea? How about if the building is burning? It's a rare case, but it's one of those times when holding onto life just as it is is a bad idea. The real point here is to not let anyone do our thinking for us. Almost every time it's a good idea to brush your teeth. But in a very few situations, it's not. Live a life of reflection and awareness and you'll be able to spot those few situations.

If we all look at our lives, there are probably parts of them that are destroying us. Hopefully not brushing our teeth. But quite often they are the incessant every day dramas that seem to perpetually stand between us and happiness. Like we're always running late. Or we're always short at the end of the month. Or we're overweight.

If you ever express your frustration with that kind of thing, doesn't some well-meaning soul always share some helpful data, like "eat less and exercise more" or "spend less than you make" or "set your watch ahead 5 minutes?" This thing that grinds you down, day after day, that make you so miserable that you'd be willing to share it with someone and that's the news flash they offer you? What is this strange new idea? I have to exercise more?

For the stuff that's destroying the joy we have in our life, it's rarely more data that we need. But we are using it to hold onto something in our lives just as it is. Take the running late thing. Maybe we're always running late because we're holding onto the idea that we show our reckless love for other people by letting their schedules take precedence. Maybe it's because we want our kids to be able to finish something and they aren't as good as scheduling as they need to be. Maybe it's because we hate asking for help or because when we ask for help people do such a crappy job that we have to redo everything anyway.

If we don't look behind the things that are driving us to distraction, we won't see how we're using them to hold onto life just as it is. We won't see how we're choking off the possibility of change.

Let's say that's true. We sit down with ourselves and we realize that, indeed, we show our love for others by putting their schedules first. Isn't this just another piece of data, like setting our watches ahead 5 minutes? Just knowing that to be the case doesn't really change anything, does it? In some ways, we're as helpless as before. We still love the other people and they are still not in the car when we need them to be.

When we let go of the fact that we are always late and, in reckless love, say something like "I show my love for you by letting your schedule determine mine. As an observation, it doesn't appear to be the way you show your love for me. Do you have any interest in seeing if we can come up with a better way of showing our love for each other that doesn't mean that I am loving you from the center of a howling pool of frustration because I am always late?"

Yes, that is as unrealistic as the description of the early church, when they held everything in common and there was not a needy person among them. Let's roll our eyes and acknowledge that the world doesn't work that way.

The one thing that looking behind the thing we are holding onto does do for us is let us see part of what is really driving us. We can actually be much more loving with ourselves when we acknowledge that it is not our own inability to figure out what it means when Mickey's big hand is on the 12 and Mickey's little hand is on the 9 and we have a 9:00am meeting 20 miles away. We might be more humane with ourselves when we apologize for being late, or more reasonable with ourselves when setting our schedules for the next week. We may find we're being more reckless in our love, even if it is just with our own selves, when we stop holding onto life just as it is.

Holding on to life just as it is can mean holding onto the assumptions that are keeping us trapped. But when some of you heard the reading from John today, you heard "destroys that life" and you knew just what Jesus meant. It meant cancer or the abuse you suffered as a child. There are no assumptions that are keeping you trapped. There's no love hiding anywhere behind what is destroying your life. Exploring that horror is not going to free anyone to be any more reckless in their love now. More data isn't going to help, more digging through assumptions isn't going to change one flicker of life today. That's the way the world really works.

Yes. Yes. But keep listening. Jesus goes on to say, "But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal." Let what go? It can't be the cancer or the abuse, because if you could have let it go, you would have, long ago. The cancer, the abuse, has a hold of you. You couldn't let go of it if you tried. And you've tried.

Jesus is teaching. He teaches by comparing two things that are not alike to help us understand the unfamiliar with something we do know. On Easter morning, Jesus rose from the dead. Of all the many amazing things that event signaled, his life after death meant that this world is not all there is. The real and the eternal that we can't understand are explained by something as incomprehensible as the resurrection. We may not understand the resurrection, how it happened, what exactly it means, how it works. Even plant biologists are still exploring how the grain of wheat dies and sprouts and reproduces. But the fact that wheat does die and rise again more abundantly is how the world works. The fact that Jesus was just the first of those to rise from the dead is how the world works. Of all the things that the resurrection means, it means that this life is not all there is. That what comes after this life is even more abundant.

Perhaps the thing we have to let go of is the limit we place on how the world works. Perhaps the early church could lay wealth at the disciples' feet so it could be distributed to each as any had need. Perhaps we are more than just someone who is constantly running behind. Perhaps cancer and abuse are not forever. Perhaps letting go of our conviction that we know how the world works is what it takes to have life forever, real and eternal.