

“SUDDEN IMPACT”

April 7, 2024 Acts 4:32-37

Have you ever used a sledgehammer? Perhaps you needed to pound some stakes in the ground to wrap around a garden fence. A small sledgehammer will do the trick. Or maybe you needed to break up some concrete to lay a new sidewalk. Or better yet perhaps you wanted to do some demo work for a home improvement project. The sledgehammer is the tool of choice. It can make short work of any project that doesn't require much finesse. I mean you don't pound nails into wood with a sledgehammer. The weighted end is designed to smash, shatter, and break apart stuff, not build anything. The sledgehammer delivers a sudden impact upon whatever object or surface in front of it and you don't want that to be a body part.

Sledgehammers aside, there have been many events in history that could be labeled sudden impact events. The stock market crash, the 9/11 attacks, Pearl Harbor, Covid – 19, and so forth. Usually, impact events create lasting impressions for generations.

Of course, not all sudden impacts are necessarily negative in effect. Take the resurrection for instance. No one saw it coming, but the sudden rising of Jesus from the dead created an impact felt to this very day. The Book of Acts reveals the dramatic effect the gospel message had on the early followers of Jesus. Lives, whole communities, and eventually, even the mighty Roman Empire were changed. The world has never been the same since.

I suspect we take for granted the powerful effects of the gospel. Having grown up in the church, given a pattern of life that models Christ to a certain extent, and living in a nation where there is freedom of religion all make it difficult to grasp the people living in first century Palestine, Egypt, Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome. The Gospel was preached in multilingual agricultural societies of mostly servants, male dominated, run by a few rich people who controlled the rest. They were societies of oppression, especially for women, children, and the disabled. There was little upward mobility and many religions with multiple gods. Life was precarious, with the average lifespan of 25 years, of course given half the children did not live past age 5 really lowers the statistics. My point is, the gospel message entered a very different and certainly more challenging world from our own.

Palestine was a little no-nothing country controlled by the Roman Empire. So how does country rabbi with no money, no standing army, no formal training, no political connections, and rejected by the religious order of the time change the world? Simple answer? **He dies and he lives again.** Of course, there is more to the story, but that one event shifted reality as we knew it.

We observe the impact of the resurrected Christ through the life of the early church.

I. THE CHURCH FAMILY

As a youth, I would go fishing with my friends, especially for catfish. These bottom feeders liked earthworms, which were readily available in my backyard. Plus, catfish were fun to catch because they put up a good fight. I usually caught and released them, but I still enjoy cornbread fried catfish. However, there is a variety of catfish called the **striped eel catfish** I would not want to catch. These brown and white striped fish reach 13 inches in length. This species possesses highly venomous spines that they can use to sting when threatened. The venom can cause mild to severe symptoms in humans. Fortunately, it is native to the Indo-Pacific Ocean.

These fish often travel in tightly stacked packs along the ocean bottom. It looks like a moving seaweed mass. They do this for protection. After all, who wants to stick their nose in the pack of poison barbed fish? Although small they move as one body. That describes the early church.

“Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.”

The whole group of people who believed in the resurrected Christ acted as one body. Across all their differences, their faith in Jesus, bound them together in a very special way. The key phrase is, **“were of one heart and soul”**. These Christians were bound by love of Jesus, which

manifested in love for one another. They had common purpose, hope, and faith.

What other group in society was bound by love, purpose, and the sharing of common possessions at the time? A family! While one person's name may be on the deed of the family land, it and all they owned were the possession of the whole family, the extended family, and benefited each member.

Do you see the impact of the resurrection? It redefined the family, by extending the definition. The Apostle Paul picks this up in his letter to the Galatians when he writes, **“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.”**

In Christ, people found a place to belong, specifically a family with all its benefits to belong to. It didn't matter where they came from, what language they spoke, what position society had assigned them, nor their gender. They were a faith family and so are we. I wonder how church would be different if we truly saw and acted as though we were brother, sister, father, mother, cousin. What impact would we have on our community if we truly believed we were a family, and everyone who received the risen Christ belonged?

II. GREAT GRACE – GREAT POWER

Actor Toby Mcquire played Peter Parker in the early Spiderman movies. If you have never followed this comic book hero, Peter is a nerdy high school loner who lives with his Uncle Ben and Aunt Mae. One day he is bitten by a radioactive spider and wakes up with superpowers. As he is coming to terms with his new abilities, his uncle Ben gives him some sage advice. **“With great power comes great responsibility.”**

Now the truth is **François-Marie Arouet**, better known as Voltaire, the French author first coined the phrase. Although Jesus states the same in different words. **"From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked."**

Interestingly, vs. 33 of this morning's passage reads, **“With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.”** Great power – great grace.

The sudden impact of the resurrection is the release of Great Power – not to rule, subjugate, or control others, which is what most people use great power for. The resurrection releases the great power of the Holy Spirit upon the people to testify to the truth of the resurrection. Power to tell the story. Power to share the truth and power to receive the good news.

Yet they share that truth with **Great Grace**. Grace has a couple of meanings. Grace can mean something beautiful, pleasing, and good. The resurrection message is about God's wonderful love for us. The dictionary gives another meaning of grace, namely favor. If parents have a favored son or daughter, they put that child on a pedestal. It's the proverbial child-who-can-do-no-wrong. So, too, with the grace of God. God's favored Son, of course, is Jesus — but God doesn't put him on a pedestal. God puts him on a cross — or, at least, allows the horrors of the cross to happen. The beneficiary of God's favor that dreadful day is not God's Son Jesus, but us!

If we put these two ideas together, God's love and God's favor, then grace sends a powerful message. We have a God who is working for our good, who is for us, not against us. The good news is that you already have this great grace! And you haven't had to do a thing to deserve it. By his cross and resurrection, Jesus has already done it all. You just have to accept the gift.

Paul writes in Romans, **“If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?”** The Resurrection impacts us with hope. The resurrection tells us God's great power is radical love that blesses us with great favor. That message ran counter to most of the religions of the time and it challenges the cynicism of our time.

III. AFTER THE ECSTASY COMES THE LAUNDRY.

A few years ago, I came across a spiritual thought book that I didn't agree with, but I really liked the title. It was called, "**After the Ecstasy Comes the Laundry.**" That title describes the reality of our spiritual life. We may experience God's presence during wonderful times of prayer and praise. We might receive revelations and truths that set us free or grant us deep insight. But the laundry still needs done, the dishes need washed, and the bills need paid. There is always a practical side to our faith. If we have been shown great love and favor, the expectation is to show it to others in beneficial and practical ways.

Luke writes, "**There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostle's feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.**"

The impact of the resurrection was there was not **a needy person among them**. In other words, each person's daily need was covered by those who had something to share. They were family, they belonged, they experienced the favor of God, so the living to accumulate changed to living to give away. God's generosity begot generosity to others. That was the sudden impact of the resurrected Christ. And thousands flocked to it.

In 1997, Shane Clairborne and a group of friends moved into a small row house in a poor section of Philadelphia. Their vision was to

love God, love people, and follow Jesus, and they began calling their little experiment the “Simple Way.” Since then, they have shared food with folks who need it and run a community store out of their house. They have reclaimed abandoned lots and planted gardens in the concrete jungle. They have rehabbed abandoned houses and made friends with people in prison and on death row. Shane and his friends have seen a vision of another way to live — the Christian way. directed toward changing the world for the better.

You don’t have to move into inner-city Philly to meet a need, but you do have to take collective action. You can show up as a group at city council meetings and speak in favor of affordable housing. You can volunteer to serve a meal once a month at a homeless shelter. You can join a group that offers after-school tutoring for at-risk children. You can join a prison ministry and offer Bible studies for inmates. The work of rescuing takes many forms, but it is always best done as a group built on God’s Grace and love.

Here is the question I leave you with. What impact has the resurrected Jesus had on you all? Just as important, what impact are we having on our community and world? Amen.

First Presbyterian Church in Hawley

Sunday, April 7, 2024

Second Scripture Lesson

Acts 4:32-37

³²Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.

³³With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.

³⁴There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold.

³⁵They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

³⁶There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement").

³⁷He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be To God.