

What If It's Not About You?  
John 20:19-23; Rev. 19:4-8  
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights  
April 16, 2017 (Easter Late)  
Pastor Dave Carver

*If you would like to hear the sermon, you can do so by visiting*

I was raised in a home that, while wonderful in many, many respects, did not have a great deal of disposable income. There were times when our family struggled financially. That might explain why I have such vivid memories of the “gifts” that my dad would sometimes bring home from work. He’d show up with a paperboard drum from the plant and say that now we had a brand new container for our baseball bats. I remember how happy I



was to get a pile of stickers from his work – sure, they all said things like “fragile” or “load this end” or “packing list enclosed” – but you know what? They were stickers, and they were mine, and it was awesome.

But there was one thing he brought that gave me, the middle child, a queasy feeling. It was a motivational poster that warned, “If you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem!” I know his intentions were good, but why would you give that sort of thing to a nine year old?

My nine-year-old self read that and was terrified. I mean, money was tight, which led to parents arguing, which led to fear and uncertainty that only a middle child who desperately wants everything to work out and nothing to be his fault can understand. I didn’t want problems. And I most certainly did not want to BE a problem. No sir. Not me.

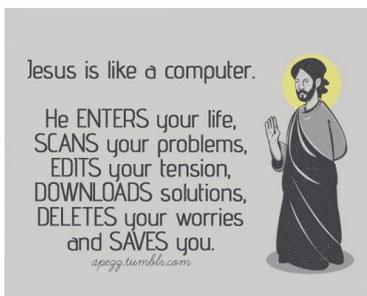
There is, believe it or not, a theological application to this. Hear me out.



In certain circles of American Christianity, there is a school of thought that might be summed up by saying, “You! You are a sinner. You are dirty, evil, and destined for ruin. On your own, you are nothing and nobody. YOU ARE THE PROBLEM. But, thanks be to God, Jesus is a problem-fixer. He can clean you up, and make you acceptable, and is even willing to save your soul so that you can make it to heaven when you die.” To be honest, some of our best-loved hymns carry this line of thought.

Look, I don't want to deny the reality of sin and brokenness. And yes, there are some really terrible things that you've done (me too.). But a theology that has as its deepest affirmation something along the lines of, “Wow, I was horrible and then Jesus said, ‘Hey, man, relax. I've got this’, so now I'm just chilling over here waiting for heaven...” is a horrible, insufficient theology. For one thing, it's a gospel of shame; and for another thing, you can't simply say that Jesus' main goal was to keep your sorry butt out of Hell.

And when I put it like that, you, being the kind, sophisticated and genteel people that you are, would say, “Oh, heavens, no! Of course, Dave! That's not the kind of theology we're interested in.”



A kinder, gentler version of this line of thinking is that you are not necessarily the problem, but let's be honest, you do have a problem. A big, ugly problem. I'm fundamentally a good person, but I just need a little help taking care of this one thing over here... there is some sin in my life – an addiction, or greed, or lust, or whatever – but when Jesus comes and stands next to me it's all good. Everybody knows that nobody really wants to be a jerk, but sometimes it

happens. We accept the forgiveness that we have in Christ and it's all good.

The difficulty I have with those variations of theology is that neither one of them is really adequately supported in scripture.



<sup>1</sup>I mean, let's take a look at how Jesus behaved in what John said was the first face to face meeting that took place between the resurrected Jesus and his disciples. You heard that in the Gospel lesson a few moments ago. The disciples are all hiding out, afraid that they're going to get what Jesus got from the religious leaders and the Romans. They're sure that they've let Jesus down, they're not sure what they can do, and are pretty much paralyzed. And then, into that room walks their resurrected Rabbi.

If the most important message of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus was that you are a horrible person who needs to be filled with shame about what you've done and where you've been, and the only way to make anything better would be for you to come groveling back and then go over there and stand in that line of people waiting to get into heaven, well, this would be the ideal time for Jesus to lay that one on them.

Clearly, the disciples had disappointed Jesus. The past few days had been filled with betrayal, abandonment, denial, and cowardice.

But what does Jesus say to this group of losers?

“Peace. As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.”

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<sup>1</sup> Jesus Appears to the Disciples After the Resurrection (Imre Morocz, 2009)

What? No dressing down? No 37 Choruses of “O! Precious is the flow that makes me white as snow; no other fount I know: nothing but the blood of Jesus”?

Nope. Not here. He settles them down (because they think they’ve seen a ghost) and then he tells them that he’s sending them out.

And *how* is he sending them out? In the power of the Holy Spirit, as he himself was sent. As practitioners of forgiveness. In this, the first concrete example of what life in the kingdom of the resurrected Son of God will look like, we discover that the hallmark of the early Christian community is forgiveness – forgiveness that is modeled and shared and lived.

Jesus looks at the disciples – and, by implication, at you and me – and says, “You – you are not the problem. And, while you may have problems, it’s not really all about you and your problems. The reality is that the entire cosmos has a problem. It’s why I came. And it’s why I’m sending you out in the way that I was sent, so that you can continue the work of resurrection in the places you go.”

The first thing that the resurrected Jesus told his followers was that they were agents of and ambassadors for reconciliation.

This is my point: that the resurrection is not a little agreement between you and God wherein the Lord looked at you and said, “Wow! That’s ugly! That’s a problem. Look, here’s a way out of that mess.”

No, the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth was the next step in the expression of God’s intentions to reconcile not just those disciples, or you, or me to himself, but rather to reconcile all of creation to itself and its Creator.

And there in that dimly lit upper room, the disciples are given the task of modeling, sharing, and living forgiveness and reconciliation to the world.

Of course, there is a profound brokenness in my life and in yours. We are in need of forgiveness and reconciliation. But it's bigger than us!



Paul writes in his letter to the Romans that all of creation cries out for restoration. John writes in Revelation that he can see a “new heaven” and a “new earth”. In the commission of Christ to his disciples, we participate in that restoration as we take seriously our call to be stewards of the planet. The Church of Jesus Christ does not need “Earth Day” to motivate us. We proclaim reconciliation and we live resurrection whenever we act as though we care about the devastation of strip mining, or overfishing, or toxins leaching into our water table. God created humanity to live as caretakers of the garden, and that task is still ours! The way we treat the earth is a statement about what we think God is like and expects from us.



<sup>2</sup>The early Christians embarked on a pattern of behavior and relationships that meant that the church was never intended to be a haven for one particular kind of people. Instead, the book of Acts describes how wall after wall of exclusion and intimidation was destroyed leading to a vision of a church that was truly reflective of the vast diversity of humanity. John writes in Revelation of people from every tribe and language singing around the throne... that's what the restored Kingdom looks like.

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<sup>2</sup> The Golden Rule, by Norman Rockwell (1961)

We participate in that reality as we are willing to risk leaving the safety of our own desires or cultures or homes in order to learn how to be fully present to someone else. We find a way to greet them in a language that makes sense to them; we open our homes to those who are unlike us, and we work to ease the suffering of refugees or victims of war and famine. Why? Because conflict and hunger are not a part of God's intentions. We have been sent to announce that reconciliation is the goal – and to do what we can to effect that.

The resurrection can and should have great meaning for you and for me personally – but not simply because it means that we've got a great fire insurance policy that kicks in when we die.

The resurrection gives us our marching orders as we prepare for and practice living in such a way that the great Hallelujah of which John writes in Revelation makes sense. We are called to walk in, to live in, and to share freely the reconciling work of God in Christ to the end that all creation will echo with the joy for which God intends.

Listen: in a few moments, a dozen or so of us are going to come up here and do our level best to sing the Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's *Messiah*. We've been practicing it for a month. I don't want to spoil it for anyone, and I don't want to disrespect my fellow singers, but I can pretty much guarantee that it won't be the best version of this piece that you've ever heard.

On the other hand, I'm almost certain that it *will be* the best version that any of you have ever heard *in this room*. I bet that you'll be singing along and tapping your toes. Great.

But here's the deal: when we finish that song, it's up to you to go out and *be* the best version of the Hallelujah

Chorus that the folks in your house, on your bus, in your home room, and at your office have heard on that day. We are called to go out and practice Hallelujah so that the world might know that Christ is risen – he is risen indeed. Hallelujah! Amen.