

## The End of the World as We Know It

Ecclesiastes 4: 9-13

2 Corinthians 5:17

About ten years ago, I had one of those deep conversations about faith that people sometimes have, if our conversation goes deeper than the weather, or the tough economy, or the NCAA tournament. The gentleman who had asked to talk was not a “church person.” He was hopeful that the church might have something to offer him, but deeply skeptical that it would. In fact, we met for coffee because he didn’t want to meet me at the church.

He called because his father had passed away—suddenly—unexpectedly—and the event had just broken loose a lot of questions about life, faith, God, church, and what it all means. He called me the way you find a mechanic in a strange town—he knew someone who knew someone who said he should call the Presbyterian Church.

I tried not to answer his questions too quickly—they were questions too big for small answers, and I sensed that he was resistant to answers that were too easy or too pat. Finally, I said something like,

“It seems to me that you don’t have any trouble believing in the existence of God, but you a lot of have trouble with church.”

And the conversation changed like a cloud going across the sun—his posture changed, it got tenser; his voice changed, it got harder. This must be what we were here to talk about.

“I always thought church was for people who are weak.

I’m a businessman,” he said. “I **worked** for everything I have. I earned my reputation. I earned my position by working harder than everyone else and by doing my job well. I know right from wrong and I do the right thing just as often as anybody in church does. And I think the church is full of people who go there to be important because they can’t be important or measure up anywhere else.”

Now there are a lot of cues in that response: church people are weak. I earned my reputation. I earned my position. I do the right thing as often as they do. They can’t measure up.

Do you hear all the language of competition there? I'm as good as anyone and I can prove it. You wanna arm wrestle? Let's go! You think you're better than me? You're NOT!

And yet—he didn't want to come to the church to talk...not even on a weekday when nobody else was there. We had to meet in a coffee shop. And what I took that to mean was..."Church scares me to death. I don't know the rules. I'm afraid I'm NOT good enough. I'm afraid I'll be judged and found wanting. And you can't reject me if I reject you FIRST."

Add it all up with the reason he called in the first place—his father's death...and the source of his questions became clear: **if** there's a God...**if** there's a heaven...how do you know if you're good enough? If you made the cut? Did my dad make it? Would I make it? I'm a businessman—where are the spreadsheets, the performance standards, what is the grading scale? And if I can't measure up, I want nothing to do with it.

We sipped our coffee for a minute and then I said, “I guess you’re right, in a way. The Church is for people who are weak. It’s for people who can’t measure up. I mean, if you look at the Bible, that’s exactly who Jesus hung out with. The people who couldn’t measure up physically—he healed; the people who couldn’t measure up financially—he fed; the people who couldn’t measure up morally—he forgave; so I guess you could say that the church is like the island of misfit toys, with all of being imperfect in our own particular way. But it’s not at all a club for losers.”

He said, “Why do you go to church?” That can be a strangely tough one for a preacher to answer—I have my doubts and questions as much as anybody else; I have my times when church isn’t “doing it for me” or connecting in the same way; I have times when my prayers feel forced; but I get paid to be here! So, beyond that great big obvious distinction, why DO I go to church?

I said, “Because church helps me to see the world differently.”

And then I told a story.

“I went to college on a military scholarship. As a reward, I got to spend a summer training with the marines, in Little Creek, Virginia. And the second day there, they took us out onto the confidence course, which was like an obstacle course on steroids.

We were all young strapping college bucks, so we set out to prove we were up to the test: climb the 40 foot cargo nets, pull ourselves over the eight foot high wall, bruise our ribs leaping from one platform to another. And one by one by one, we failed.

We missed an obstacle and the instructor told us to go sit down. When only two or three were left, the instructor called us all together and had them stand in front of us: the best, the strongest and the fastest. And he said:

“Worms,” (‘cause they call you encouraging names like that) “these gentlemen you see before you.....are dead.” And turning to them he said, “You left your group behind, you went off on your own, and you got your sorry butts shot.” “And you,” he said to all the rest of us,

“are dead. You tried to do it all yourselves, you came up against something bigger than you were, and you failed.”

“Worms, this is called a confidence course because it is designed to build confidence in your platoon—not yourself. Try it by yourself, and you might be strong enough...for a while. You might be good enough...until you aren't. You might win...until you lose. It's not designed for you to work alone.”

And then he sent us back through the course as a team. And with that understanding, every one of us finished. The strong ones lifted the weak ones over the wall. The first ones to the top reached down to help the ones below. The ones who didn't fall lifted the ones who did.

“I go to church,” I said, “because I have learned that my confidence is not in myself. My confidence is in Jesus Christ and in his church.”

Just like the marine gunnery sergeant changed the rules from rules where everybody fails eventually to rules where everyone can succeed, so Jesus has changed the rules to ones where we don't

have to earn our way to heaven or prove we deserve to be there. We just have to stop trusting in ourselves, our strength, and our accomplishments, our goodness. We have to stop PROVING our worth long enough to REALIZE our worth. We're worthy not because we're GOOD but because we belong to GOD.

As Paul says in our scripture lesson from 2 Corinthians, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" A new chance. A fresh start with a whole new worldview. Baptism is, if you will,

THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT, where love must be earned and worth must be proven, and you can only trust what you can earn, so grace is a thing to be grasped.

If anyone is in Christ, life becomes a confidence course where our confidence lies outside ourselves.

That is the truth we celebrate this morning as we baptize Hank and Caroline. They're bright, beautiful, wonderful children who have done

NOTHING to earn the love of God. They're too young to know the right theological answers, too young to make the proper professions, too young to prove to the world that they belong. In other words, they're wiser than we are right now.

We baptize them and we begin a lifelong process of saying to them, "Caroline, Hank, you are in Christ. In the words of the old hymn, 'Your hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness.'

Through our touch and through our teaching, they will come to know the church not as a place of judgment where they will be constantly measured and found wanting but as a place where they will know love without measure.

But one final word—what we have done today is a communal act. Undeniably communal. Unavoidably communal. There are those—more and more of them in fact—who say, "I believe in God, but I don't go to church. I am spiritual but not religious." Our scripture lesson from Ecclesiastes speaks to that error—"Two are better than one,

because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help.

THERE IS SHARED STRENGTH IN THIS PLACE.

Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone?

THERE IS SHARED WARMTH IN THIS PLACE.

And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one.

THERE IS PROTECTION IN THIS PLACE FROM THE THREATS AND HURTS OF THE WORLD.

A threefold cord is not quickly broken, the writer says. And friends that is what baptism is—a threefold cord. It symbolizes the tie that binds Caroline's life—Hank's life—your life—my life—the life of the individual.....to the life of Christ.....and to the life of Christ's church. BAPTISM IS THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT—AND THE BEGINNING OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD.  
Amen.