

“SHAKE OFF THE DUST”

Message for the Third Sunday after Pentecost

From Pastor Norman Staker

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EXODUS 19: 2-8A ✨ ROMANS 5: 1-8 ✨ MATTHEW 9: 35-10:8 (9-23)

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS
RISEN INDEED!!

Have you ever sat down at a table trying to talk to someone and found that you're losing the battle with their cellular device. You're trying to look into their eyes, but their eyes keep dipping down to glance at the little screen. You're trying to talk about reality, but everything in their body is really attending to this virtual reality that's wooing them with differently toned beeping noises at odd intervals.

Is it me, you're asking yourself? Am I too boring, too threatening, too intense, too in-your-face, too demanding, just too much for you? Maybe the problem is that that little electronic device offers you a future of texted assignments or emailed future plans, or You-Tubed funny moments or twittered allegations, a whole fantasy world of unaccountable possibility and non-material alternatives. But I, sitting here in front of you, offer you simple, prosaic, present-tense reality, and no escape hatch.

And that overwhelming tsunami of reality is what [encountering] God feels like. Before we get too self-righteous and resentful about the colleagues, friends or family members who seem increasingly addicted to a life of distraction and allergic to being present face to face with us, just wait a moment. That's what we're all like before God. We're all fiddling and fantasizing and distracting and avoiding eye contact and pretending to be tired and looking bored and being addicted to elsewhere.

God is the one who is longing to look into our eyes. We are the ones who fidget and slouch and find a hundred ways of asking if we can get down from the table. That's what it means to be indifferent. Indifference is saying, "Can I think about something else, please?"

This is the reaction God gets from us, all of us, almost every second of every day. And if you're going to join in the mission of God, this is the reaction you're going to need to get used to. When Jesus sends out his apostles, he says, "As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town."

There are two verses in our texts for today that I would like to call to your attention. The first is in our lesson from Romans which says: "But God shows His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." and the other verse is found in our gospel lesson saying: "When he (Jesus) saw the crowds, "He had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

These two verses, I feel, sum up for us the meaning of the gospel message, the Good News of Jesus Christ. God showed his love for us while we were still sinners, or enemies of God, and Jesus had compassion for the people. But what does that mean?? God loves us and Jesus had compassion? These two words often times have a vague and mysterious meaning. What does it mean to love?? What does it mean to have compassion??

In Roget's Thesaurus, which is a book of synonyms and antonyms, the author lists many words which describe or expand on the meaning of love and compassion. These words are, sympathy, charity, mercy, generosity, pity, and we could go on and on. And each of these words can be described with many others. The list is endless. But that still doesn't get us to the meaning, to the heart of the matter, what does it mean that God loves us, what does it mean that Jesus had compassion? Maybe scripture might help, how about John 3:16, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that who so ever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

"Yes, that verse speaks about God's love for us, but does it describe it? Can we see love in that verse? Yes and no. Yes we can see love because God's love is visible only through Christ. No, we cannot see love, because we do not see the actions of Christ. The only true way to see God's love, to describe God's love is to see Christ. Christ is God's love incarnate, or God's love made real in this world. So, as we look through the New Testament, as we look for descriptions of what it means that God loves us, we need to look at the actions of Christ.

When Christ had compassion on the crowds, He was in a sense, in all reality, showing the people, showing us what it means that God loves us. As He healed, as He forgave sins, as He brought people together, as He made especially women feel part of God's created order, He showed us and them God's love.

Jesus is the one who shows us very dramatically what God's love is like. It is a forgiving, accepting, caring, merciful, compassionate love. It is a love which allowed God's only son to be killed on a cross so that you and I might have eternal life. It is a love which was willing to sacrifice God's son so that reconciliation might happen on this earth. "While we still were sinners, Christ died for us." While we still were sinners, Christ reconciled God the Father with the creation.

So, if one is to describe God's love, it can be described in the action, words and deeds of Christ. It can be called a reconciling love, a love which brings people together. It is a love which forgives; it is a love which is willing to sacrifice; it is a love which is willing to give instead of take.

That love of God is seen through Christ and the cross, but at the same time, the love of Christ is seen today not only through the actions, words and deeds of Christ in the Bible, but through the actions of the Holy Spirit working in the lives of people today. Paul says very clearly, that you and I are like "little Christ's" out in the world. People see Christ today through us, through you and me. Paul says in Romans 12:9: "Let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good, love one another with brotherly affection, outdo one another in showing honor."

Paul says further in another of his letters, to the Ephesians chapter 5: "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." Paul says further, "for once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord, walk as children of light,"

As you can tell, you and I are to be little Christ's in this world. We are to be Christ like, loving one another as Christ has loved us. We are to be free with our love, expressive with our love; we are to be generous with our love toward our neighbor.

I would like to tell you a story which sums up for me this love of God through Christ and then my love for my neighbor. It is in the experiences of these stories, that Christ becomes alive for the individual. I hope and pray that as you listen, Christ will come alive for you and then you in His love will become alive for your

neighbor. Our faith is not static, but alive and expressive. As you listen to the story, decide which character you are. Who are you in this story??

"A group of men were traveling across the desert. They were total strangers when they started, some were well to do business men, others were common working men, and one was a criminal, a thief. This band of men traveled together across the hot desert sand. They encountered more wind storms than they anticipated, so their food, their water began to run low. They wore woolen hoods to keep the hot, biting sand from stinging their faces as they traveled. As they traveled, a man noticed that one was missing, the one called Jasmin. They looked around in the driving wind storm, but all they could see was his empty camel. No rider. The men thought it wasn't worth going back to look for Jasmin since he was the thief among them. He wasn't worth saving. But, Lawrence, a wealthy business man, a man who had a lot to lose risked leaving the group to go back to look for Jasmin. Lawrence traced over their route, and finally found Jasmin, half mad with heat and thirst. He shared what little water and food he had, placed him on his own camel, and led the camel forward once more. They traveled on and on until they reached the group. When they arrived, all were surprised they had made it. They were bewildered that Lawrence, the rich man, would risk his life for a thief, a crook. They marveled at his love, his respect for a human life.

Do you see yourself in this story?? I do, I am Jasmin. In my relationship with God I am the criminal, I am the outcast, I am the sinner. I am the enemy of God. But Paul says, "For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son." You and I are Jasmin, having broken God's laws, having become lost in the storms of life and failed to live according to God's commandments. But all is not lost, Christ is Lawrence. Christ saves the lost. Christ finds the lost. Paul says, "much more, now that we are reconciled shall we be saved by Jesus' life."

Folks, we are not perfect. We need the love of God, the transforming love of God in our lives. If you and I were not or are not at one point or another a pack of wolves, if we did not have a sense of our own sinfulness, then, then, you do not need Jesus Christ; you do not need to be here; you do not need to come and eat and drink this morning; you do not need the cross; you can get up and leave right now because there is nothing here for you.

But in you sense you can be and at times are that pack of wolves in your lives, if you treat people badly, if you reject God, if you feel life is not as perfect as you would like it, then, you are in the right spot, because here transformation takes place; here lives are changed; here you and I encounter God and Christ through the

Holy Spirit. Here you and I have a personal relationship with Christ through the Word, through the Sacraments, through fellowship with each other. Here hurts are healed, here lives are made whole, here fellowship and love are present.

Lutherans have far too often been accused of being stuffed shirts, non expressive in our faith. But I think Lutheranism is broad enough to allow for expression, to allow for joy, to allow emotion of faith to be expressed. I have said many times in other churches, but probably not here yet, that if someone would shout an amen, or praise the Lord, or alleluia during one of my sermons, there is a gentleman from St Paul who says Hallelujah after I say 'He is Risen' and I'm okay with that. I would know that maybe someone was listening, that someone was interested, that everyone was not asleep. There is a power present here that means something; it means business is not usual. Life can be changed. People can be renewed.

All of us at one time or another can relate to the hurt, the pain, the abandonment that some people feel. If we are honest with ourselves, we have all been there.

Folks, I hope and pray that does not ever happen here, because all of us have someone, I hope we have Christ, and we have Christ incarnate here in the church. If we do not, then there is something wrong with the church and its members.

Here is where the power of Christ is present. Here is where the compassion of the people of God should be present. Here is where love should abound for each other. Here is where we should and do feel free to express that love for Christ and love for neighbor. Here is where deeds of mercy and love should begin and then spread out across the land. But if we cannot love each other here in this particular family of God, then I do not know where else that love can be felt.

With the exception of St John who is at least 90-95 % family by blood, I like to think of the church as a family and in that family, each of us gives of ourselves, receives from others and is willing to sacrifice for another. In that way we express Christ's love for us and we become little Christ's for one another.

It's hard to imagine anyone responding to Jesus with indifference. But of course they did. Feel the venom in the words of Revelation toward the church in Laodicea: "I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth." What does Jesus tell us to do?

Jesus says, "Shake the dust off your feet."

Don't judge them -- that's God's job, not yours, and only God knows why they're so distracted or so passive or so frustrating or so silent. Shake the dust off your feet.

Don't go on a self-righteous rant that assumes you're a perfect embodiment of the gospel and anyone who doesn't repent and be baptized this instant must be stupid. Shake the dust off your feet.

Jesus faced indifference. He said we would face indifference. Don't be surprised; don't be devastated; don't be bitter. Shake the dust off your feet.

Isn't this why pastors and missionaries burn out? Because we offer wave upon wave of effort and hope and energy, and find ourselves met with indifference and passive aggression and a shrug of the shoulders that says, "Whatever." Because we can't get over the indifference.

What is dust? Dust is dead skin. Dust is dry earth. Remember what God says to Adam in Genesis chapter 3? "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." It's what we say to each other on Ash Wednesday. Dust and ashes. Dust is death.

You made anything out of dust and ashes lately? 'Course you haven't. Can't be done.

God made anything out of dust and ashes lately? 'Course God has. Does it all the time.

Shake the dust off your feet.

By shaking the dust, you're letting God do what only God can do. Shaking dust isn't sadly washing your hands of failure or angrily tossing aside a broken project. Shaking dust is a prayer that God will do a miracle by making beauty arise from ashes and making life come from the dust of the earth. You have prepared the way of the Lord; that's all you can do. Now, pray that all people will see the salvation of our God.

Shake the dust and see the glory of what God alone can do.

AMEN!