

“You’re Fired!”
Acts 2: 14a, 36-41 Luke 24:13-35

The inspiration for this sermon comes from a piece of junk mail that we received a couple weeks ago. When going through the mail I make it a practice to always have a trash can right beside me so I can throw away most, if not all of the junk mail. This piece almost went into the trash can but its message grabbed me. The front cover is a photograph of a note tacked to a notice board like you may have in your kitchen.

The part that got my attention is in big, bold letters. It says, “YOU’RE FIRED!” The note in full says this, “Dear Lisa, I’ve had it. You don’t show up when you say you will. You leave behind cobwebs, dust bunnies, and grime. And nothing changes when I complain. YOU’RE FIRED! Sincerely, Unhappy Homeowner”

When you open the cover of this brochure you read, “Try us today. Fire them tomorrow.” The brochure goes on to read, “Switch to the cleaning authority and step up to a premium level of clean. Switching is easy.” The brochure then goes on in very explicit bullet points to list all the details of their extraordinary cleaning service.

I know this is just “get your attention” advertising, but it still made me cringe a bit. I couldn’t help feeling, “I understand wanting a clean house but what about Lisa?” I don’t know about you but I have had the experience of being fired; deserved or not, it is a humbling if not humiliating experience. I have also been in the position of making the decision to let someone else go; that is not any fun either. It represents a failure on everyone’s part, including the one doing the firing, but at the end of the day it is still the one fired who most directly experiences the loss.

Once I had the unenviable experience of firing myself. Now there’s a thing! I said to myself, “Stephen, could you come in and sit down? I need to talk with you. I really like you, Stephen, and I appreciate all your efforts and all that you have contributed to this company, but things are tough. It is just not working out, so I am afraid that I am going to have to let you go.” The awkward thing about firing yourself is that it is really difficult to figure out who to be angry with, but so it goes. “You’re fired!” is never a pain free message.

I thought of that in connection with today’s gospel passage. The two disciples were going home to Emmaus, shuffling along with all the dejection of a couple guys who had just lost their jobs. They had thought that in following this Jesus guy they were really on to a sure thing. They had hoped that he would be the one to really make a difference, and they were among the first so they would be in on the ground floor. But in the space of one week all those hopes had been dashed. There were no final checks to cash just a trudge back home.

These two guys have lost it all, lost their faith, lost their hope. They are skeptical of the women's account, because after all when the men checked out the scene they didn't see Jesus, so why even bother to look for him? So they are heading to Emmaus.

WE don't know much about the village of Emmaus, but I want to suggest that Emmaus is a symbol of where we go when life gets to be too much for us – the place we go to escape, a bar, the beach, a movie, wherever it is we throw up our hands and say, "The heck with it all. It makes no difference anyway." Emmaus may be going shopping, buying a new suit or a new car or smoking more cigarettes than you really want, or reading a junk novel. Emmaus may be going to church; it is wherever we go or whatever we do to try to make us forget that the world holds nothing sacred: that even the wisest and bravest and loveliest die; that even the noblest ideas that humankind has had – ideas about love and freedom and justice – have always in time been twisted out of shape by selfish people for selfish ends, and none of our motivations are entirely pure.

Cleopas and his companion are trying to escape and Jesus comes close and goes with them. They are so consumed with their own sense of loss that they don't even recognize him when he joins them. Yet Jesus chooses this place of loss to meet them right where they are. Jesus doesn't try to talk them out of it, but he uses scripture to interpret that sense of loss to them. He offers a different lens through which to view our sense of having lost.

Nobody I know likes to be thought of as a loser. Do you remember Ted Turner? He is a billionaire businessman, used to own the Atlanta Braves, was in the television business, in fact he founded the first 24 hour cable news channel CNN. He was once quoted as saying, "Christianity as a religion for losers." A couple years ago Ted Turner donated a billion dollars to set up a foundation with the United Nations. Within the last couple weeks it has been announced that he has entered into a partnership with the Lutheran and United Methodist Church with a donation of \$200 million with the objective of eradicating malaria. I happened to see an interview with Ted Turner this week. He described losing his position of control over CNN. He talked about having two failed marriages. Life is teaching even Ted Turner what it feels like to get a slip that says, "You're fired."

I remember that a lot of people took offense when he said that Christianity was a religion for losers, but this week I thought about it. I don't have any idea what Ted Turner thinks about Jesus Christ, so he might have just stumbled on this, but there is a real sense in which he got it right. Now I am not saying that Jesus was a loser, but there is no denying that Jesus was willing to lose everything for the sake of the world. He completely emptied himself of all that was his to claim, and what Luke tells us in this story is that this pattern of not being afraid of being labeled a loser is a pattern of how God has always most powerfully expressed God's love toward us. God's love is always shown in love giving itself away.

Jesus is so patient with Cleopas and his companion. He walks with them in their sense of loss. He helps them to see beyond their own personal sense of loss to see how it fits into a larger pattern of God's salvation of this world.

It is a tragedy of religion that far too often our message is "Get right with God and God will get right with you." "Get acceptable, clean yourself up, and God will accept you." The gospel is the opposite of all that kind of thinking. These two losers are walking down the road and Jesus comes up close to them and walks with them just as they are. He accepts their invitation of hospitality. He breaks bread with them. Wherever hope has been shattered and aspirations have been fired, Christ desires to be fully present. Jesus is as alive today as on the road to Emmaus.

That is such a poignant expression of loss, "But we had hoped that he would be the one to redeem Israel ..." How many places can that same sentiment be heard today right here in this community?

But we had hoped that we could find success in finding a job that would pay enough so we could afford a decent place to live ... but we had hoped that an illness would not wipe out all of our savings ... but we had hoped that this relationship would last and being real love to our lives ... but we had hoped that the doctors would find a cure ... but we had hoped ... perhaps you can fill in the blank in your own way

Perhaps as we wondered if we had hoped in vain, did someone draw near and speak a word of comfort and encouragement to us? Was someone willing to just be there when you needed them? Was there someone to remind you that God has entered into human life in all of its joy and sorrow?

This week I heard a young man talking about his journey of faith. He described a very unhealthy situation he was in. He said, "I finally hit bottom and decided that I just needed to leave everything behind and just leave and get the help I needed. I even left my dog behind. I don't need anything I left behind. The only thing I'll go back to get when I am strong enough is my dog."

That young man knows the power of God in his life. His witness gave me a challenging question. My life is very different today than his. I have all kinds of stuff. Most of us do. The question is this, "What am I unwilling to let go of to follow Jesus?"

The Holy Spirit is patient with our slowness of heart. The Holy Spirit deals with us one thing at a time, an judgmental attitude, a selfish love of possessions, a physically destructive habit, an unforgiving attitude, an unwillingness to serve our neighbors, hardness of heart toward others, evading the truth about who we are. Whoever we are, wherever we are, the Holy Spirit to let go of that slowness of heart.

Jesus will not take what we are not willing to let go of. The risen Christ never resorts to snatching or manipulation. But he is always consistent in his pattern. Christ will always bless and give thanks for what we are willing to offer, and he shares in our brokenness, and then the miracle happens, he gives it all back to us but it is never the same. It has been transformed into abundance and joy. What does it ask of us? Only a willingness to receive God's love with empty hands as pure gift.

That is the pattern of God's love that we celebrate every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper, but the grace and God is never restricted to a religious ceremony.

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