

Britt Carlson
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Community Church of Issaquah
Issaquah, Washington

"For I am a Sinful Man"

Luke 5:1-11

If there's one reason I'm glad to live in one of the least church-ed areas, it's that in the NW I have never encountered phenomena of "hell houses." Hell houses were something brand new to me when I moved to the South. I hate to even use the word Christian in relation to the hell houses because I think that they're so *unchristian* but the people who put them on think of them as sort of a "Christian" version of a haunted house. You move from room to room basically watching scenes that are supposed to show that the wages of sin is death. So for example, one room has a homecoming queen who has sex on prom night and then down the slippery slope she goes and suddenly she's a prostitute. It almost seems absurd. But the churches putting on these shows are serious. They see hell houses as *evangelism* because the scarier they can make sin (or what they perceive to be sin), the more grievous sin's consequences look like, the more pressure is going to build up on someone who isn't Christian and in their minds the pressure is going to drive that person to find some sort of salvation... which is when they walk into the final room which is heaven and there is Jesus, willing to save you from your sins if you'll just have faith.

Now trying to undo an understanding of salvation like this will probably take this preacher her whole life to explain why it is SO not the Gospel. But what I want us to focus on today is this:

In the hell house, confession of sin comes before meeting Christ. In the Gospel, Christ comes before confession.

You see, when we meet Simon Peter and the other future disciples on the shores of Lake Gennesaret, they aren't especially tuned in to

their moral lives. They aren't meditating on their sin or despairing of salvation. They're just fishermen, trying to make a good living and doing all of the things that fishermen do: recovering from a long night of fishing, anchoring their boats, and washing their nets.

But then, Jesus shows up. "Put out into the deep water and throw down your nets for a catch." Now, Simon Peter says, "But Jesus we've been fishing all night long and caught nothing. If you say so though, I will do it." Simon Peter is right to be a little skeptical. The whole reason Simon and James and John and the others were *done* fishing was that their nets were only designed to work at night. In the darkness the fish couldn't see the lines of the net and would swim right in. In the daytime the fish could see the net and avoid it. So when suddenly, as the nets sink down in the water, Simon Peter feels a tug on the net and then another and then another and then oh my gosh the boat is creaking under catch's weight, she's about to sink it is nothing short of a miracle. The extravagant abundance is an act only God could do. An abundance of fish—probably more than these fishermen have ever caught—and caught in broad daylight.

It is grace. Unearned. Unasked for. Completely God acting unilaterally, one-sidedly, for the good of those he loves. Not because humans asked for it, but because God is God and God's nature is gracious.

And in the face of this grace, Simon Peter falls down to Jesus' knees and says, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." Simon witnesses the grace and life that pours from Jesus and suddenly all of the areas of his life that are fruitless and lifeless and dull—the markers of sin—come into sharp relief. "Go away from me,

Lord, for I am a sinful man. You are full. I am empty.” It is Simon Peter’s confession. A confession that comes *after* the divine grace that has come *before*.

The problem with hell houses or the problem with most hellfire and brimstone preaching is that Christ comes second and sin comes first. It’s starts with sin. It starts with “You are a really bad person.” But according the Gospel of Luke, God didn’t start with sin. God started with Jesus. Divine grace coming before human confession is how it works here with Simon Peter because it’s how God works, period. We’re only a month away from Christmas, but it’s so easy to forget that day—when unasked for, unanticipated, unbelievably God himself came to be with us in human flesh. That’s how the Gospel of Luke begins. God comes to us before all else. As Colossians says, “He himself is before all things” (Col 1:17).

As one of my very, very favorite verses Romans 2:4 says, “Do you not know? It is *the kindness* of God that leads you to repentance.” It’s not feeling that you are such a bad sinner. Look. If the path to salvation necessarily entails *you* feeling so guilty and bad and ashamed, it’s still about YOU. And as a very wise theologian I know says, “It’s about *God*, stupid.” It’s about *God* and God’s kindness to us.

The difference between salvation starting with trying to work up feelings of shame and salvation starting with Christ has very practical ramifications for how we raise our kids. Any parent who has cracked down harder and harder on their child to no avail knows that being stern does not a heartfelt obedient child make. I think some of us worry about being too soft on our kids. The best way I’ve seen different ways parents discipline visualized is like this. This line is for support (encouragement and nurture). And this line is for accountability or control (limit-setting, discipline). So this box is little support and little accountability. It’s a neglectful parent.

Here is high accountability, but little support. That’s a punitive parent, the stern parent. This might be where folks who think that hell houses are a good idea fit in. It emphasizes the scariness of what you’ve got coming to you if you don’t obey. This box right here is high support, little accountability. That’s a permissive parent. But this box up here: That is high accountability and high support. This is a restorative parent. It’s a parent who isn’t apathetic to their child, who doesn’t withhold love, but who encourages their child *and yet* still sets firm boundaries. This is a parent who is *for* the child, and who loves their children enough to say, “**This** is the way in which you should go.”

Jesus emphasizes the love and support. He’s not holding anything back from this nurture line. He pours out unconditional grace. He is *for* Simon Peter without limits. He gives fish until the nets *break*. But *then* he gives a new direction. He says, “From now on you will be catching people.” He redirects Simon Peter’s life. He sets up NEW lines of how Simon’s life will go.

This is the good news of Jesus’ restoration of sinners. Sinners encountered by Christ are not condemned to live their pasts. Simon Peter was not condemned to live out his past. We are not condemned to live out our pasts. Jesus is the giver of hope—the hope that comes when in the same moment, Simon recognizes his sin, Jesus him the next steps on how to move forward. Knowing our sin and knowing God’s grace are in the same moment. High encouragement. High accountability.

In some ways we’re coming up on the season of accountability. This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday is the beginning of the season of Lent. Now many of us I think can get a little twitchy about the entire concept of Lent, and I understand. The first I ever heard of Lent was in college, and it was because I had girlfriends giving up dessert for Lent. I think people have this idea of Lent as a time of giving

things up, a time of self-denial, a time of refusal of the things that give us pleasure. And if that's what Lent is, we should have problems with it! Listen to Colossians 2:

“If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” ... [Those commands might seem to have the] appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but [they] are of no value against fleshly indulgence.

Did you hear that? Self-abasement and severe treatment of the body are of no value against fleshly indulgence. The solution to our sin isn't white knuckling it past the ice cream in the frozen food aisle. Severe parenting can only get you so far and it's not very far. On a side note, a psychologist once told me that we all have a limited amount of self-control. You can exercise that self-control muscle and increase your ability for self-discipline, but we all have a max. The trick is actually learning how to use our limited self-control wisely. Many people's practice of Lent assumes you have limitless self-control and can just tap into that by stopping being lazy or gluttonous or whatever for these forty days.

But, you know, there's another way of understanding Lent. Not as a time of self-denial. Not as a time when we have to carefully avoid the cookie section over at Safeway. But as a time where we look toward the Cross and remember that we aren't the ones who save ourselves. A time in between Christmas and Easter to remember God's grace that comes before us and goes in front of us to save us. Lent can and should be a time when we remember that we are waiting for the one whose kindness permeates our hearts and turns us to himself, a time of waiting for the God who makes the all of the first moves in this dance of love. And maybe if this is how we practice Lent, maybe then we will enter in a little bit more to a world where fishermen

have miraculous catches and sinners see grace. A world where divine love concretely shows up and transforms our declarations of “I am a sinful man” into discipleship to the Creator. Perhaps this Lent we can learn a way of living that says Christ has come. Christ is coming. Christ will come again, and witnesses to the grace that comes before, during and after. Let us end with this prayer of St. Patrick:

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down,
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in the eye that sees me,
Christ in the ear that hears me.
Amen.