

Sermon for Sunday, April 23, 2017

DEAD OR ALIVE?

1 Peter 1:3-9

The Christian community, the “church,” has been confronted with a perennial question since its inception: “Why are there not more people joining the community when it has so much to offer?” Churches of all stripes and across all denominations have been scratching their heads raw for centuries trying to address and answer this question. Most often to no avail.

In the apostle Peter’s day, one reason why people would not join was probably due to the fact that Christians were ostracized, persecuted, scattered into the winds, and killed for sport. In many parts of the world, this is still the case today. Just think about the latest killing of Christians in Egypt on Palm Sunday. Violence was as effective a deterrent then as it is now, regardless whether it is politically or theologically motivated.

However, these days the Christian community, specifically in the Western hemisphere, and in particular in the United States and in Europe, is confronted with a different dilemma. The dilemma of “having to offer something.” Researchers tell us that if the “church” wants to grow, or at least hold its ground, they need to have so many parking lots, the bathrooms need to look a certain way, the church cannot place too many expectations on people, the dress code or music program has to be structured a certain way, it must be social media savvy, etc., etc., The list is endless.

I talked about all of this with a pastor/artist friend of mine when I was in Austin a few months ago for an alumni board meeting at Austin Seminary. He is deeply spiritual, humble, and one of the wisest persons I know. After I had finished my thoughts, he paused for a long time, stared at the dirt in front of him and finally lifted his head. He looked at me and said, “Dieter, I am not optimistic. But I am hopeful!”

When he said this, I realized that there is a difference between optimism and hope. Optimism places its faith in people and/or circumstances. Hope places its faith in God. Given this distinction, there is a fallacy in the question about “what the *church* must offer.” Rather, the proper question for any Christian community must be: “Why are not more people joining us when *God* continues to offer us so much? And what can we offer in return for *God’s* abundant grace?” This is a hope-full question focused on God, not us. Optimism, on the other hand, focuses on us trying to “offer” what is expected from us by a culture that is never satisfied and is always in search of the next best thing, where we only wear ourselves out to the point we fall down exhausted. The prophet Jeremiah had clearly recognized this: “If you have worn yourself out by running yourself ragged alongside people, how will you be able to run with horses (Jer. 12:5)?”

Our work, then, as “church” and as members of the Christian community is something we have shied away from for a long time. It is Easter work, theological work, or as the apostle Peter put it: we need to find a way to tell people what it means that the “God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ... by his great mercy ... has given us a new birth into a *living hope* through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” As “church,” we have to find a way to be honest and to say to people that we are not *optimistic* when we look at the state of the church and the world today. Instead, we

must tell them that we are *hopeful*. And then not just *tell* them about hope, but *live* as people born into a different reality where we choose hope deliberately because of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. This living hope is our inheritance as baptized Disciples of Christ. It is our only *hope*.

H. Richard Niebuhr, a Missouri native and Eden Seminary graduate, published a now famous book in 1951 entitled "Christ and Culture." In it he raised the Easter question: "How is Christ relevant to the world in which we live today?" He proposed five ways in which we might engage that question: Christ stands against culture, above culture, is part of the culture, in paradoxical relationship to it, or in the process of transforming it. Granted, it's all a little academic. But perhaps it is time to get back to some serious thinking regarding our faith and relationship with God in Christ rather than simply ceding the field to some bloviating blogger.

The apostle Peter was no fool. He was well aware that choosing hope against hope in a culture of violence is not for the faint of heart. It wasn't in his time. It isn't today. "Even now," he wrote, "you have to suffer various trials for a little while." So to stand with Christ and to count ourselves as members of his community, the church, means we are called to make the conscious and difficult decision, over and over again, to leave our old lives, our pre-resurrection lives, behind. Instead, we are to come to church_Sunday after Sunday to *claim* the hope we have inherited rather than hanging out at Deer Creek, Starbucks, or reading the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, or surfing the web. This, coming from a guy whose daily morning routine begins with coffee and an actual newspaper that stains your fingers.

Well, that's all fine and dandy, you might say, but what does a "new birth into a living hope" look like concretely? The text helps here ... not in the English translation but in Greek. There it says that we are "constantly in the process of being born upward" toward God and that we must choose hope permanently. "New birth" means we strive to *build* community rather than tear it down. That we welcome *all* because God welcomes *all* and because Christ died, once, for *all*. That we don't always have to put on a happy face for others, but are called live joyfully. That we don't sell people a bill of goods but are realistic. Or, like my Austin pastor/artist friend put, we tell people, "We are not optimistic. But we are hopeful."

Living into hope also happens to be what "salvation" looks like in the apostle's eyes. "Salvation" is not what happens when we die. It happens in the here and now. Every time we lift the burden of someone else, every time we unburden ourselves from our "old life," we experience "salvation." The only difference is that salvation in this life, the lifting of our burdens and others' burdens, is temporary at best. We only get glimpses of it from time to time. "Salvation" in God's kingdom, on the other hand, is permanent.

So, are we dead or alive to the resurrection hope in Christ? Is the old life gone, as we proclaim in our assurance of pardon, and has the new life begun? Are we merely optimistic or are we truly hopeful? God in Christ has it all laid out before us. We have got nothing to offer. But we have everything to live for.

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