

Sermon: *Signs of Life-Outstretched Arms*
Texts: I John 3:16-18 & Luke 10:25-37

July 24, 2011

Today we conclude our final section of readings from the book, *Signs of Life*, by David Jeremiah. Over the last six weeks we have invited this book to point us to certain Bible passages that guide us in living this life that God has given us. Through the daily devotions the author has nudged us over and over again to ask ourselves how we demonstrate signs in our life that show others this faith that is in us through Jesus Christ.

As I said a few weeks ago, the author is not from a Lutheran tradition and the theological approach he takes in some places is NOT the approach that I would take. Yet, as Lutherans who have a reputation for being a little less demonstrative of our faith, I think it is right and spiritually healthy for us to be nudged about how we show our faith. My prayer is that this book did not make us feel guilty about what we may not be doing, but rather that the book raised up for us our amazing God and our opportunity and mission to share God with others in how we live.

I have to say that I have enjoyed the many stories and illustrations that the author shares in the book. As a pastor, I love good stories that help me understand our faith and our life and I found another one this week. It is a story that some of you may know, but I did not before my reading. It is a story that comes out of the 1960's when our country was engaged in battle in Vietnam and it is about two military men that became prisoners of war.

“Better place, worse place.” That was the threat posed to naval flier Porter Halyburton by his captors after his plane went down in Vietnam. His captors hoped to get him to talk, to reveal American secrets and so there was this promise/threat: they can take him to a better place or worse place...the choice was his. But he would not budge. He only gave them the scripted-Name, Rank, Serial Number, and Date of Birth. And so they moved him a few times trying to get him to talk, and he ended up being thrown into a small cell with another American, Fred Cherry. After a few locations where he was alone in small, dark cells, why was he placed with someone else, a companion? That sounds like a better place and yet Halyburton had not given up any information.

Halyburton was a product of his day: a white, naïve southerner. Even the Vietnamese knew what this meant: probably a racist. So they threw him in this cell with Fred Cherry, an Air Force pilot, and the first Black officer captured by the North Vietnamese. They put these two unlikely prisoners together in hopes that the racial tension would rush Halyburton to talk to them about American information just to get out of the same cell as Cherry.

The days, months and years that followed were much different than what the captors hoped and expected. These two POWs forged a relationship through these horrible circumstances. Fred Cherry was badly injured when his plane went down and there was question about whether he would even survive his injuries. Halyburton realized that he would have to care for Cherry and do whatever he could for him. You can imagine how personal that care would have to be. Not only would he tend to his wounds, but he would help him to the waste bucket. And when months had passed, without being able to shower,

Halyburton appealed to a guard until he was allowed to take Cherry to a shower where he had to wash him repeatedly to fully cleanse his body and hair.

After they were set free, Fred Cherry acknowledged that he would not have survived without Porter Halyburton. Halyburton said the same was true about him, that he would not have survived without Cherry. As David Jeremiah tells the story he says, “Caring for Fred gave him a sense of mission and purpose, it enabled him to forget his own problems and serve someone else, and it taught him to love a brother in need.” (Signs of Life, p.228)

As stories go, that one is amazing and powerful. Jesus, who was the best storyteller, gives us another story much like it today. Perhaps one of the most familiar to us, it is the story of the Good Samaritan.

A lawyer asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus tells him to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” Then the lawyer asks the next logical question: “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus answers with this story about someone badly injured and in trouble, much like Fred Cherry.

On his way from Jerusalem to Jericho, a sixteen mile journey through hilly terrain, a man is attacked by robbers and left for dead by the side of the road. Luckily, a traveler comes by, a priest who is very likely to help this man in distress. Certainly he would help this man. But, he doesn't want to get involved apparently so he crosses to the other side of the road and keeps walking. Another man comes, a Levite this time. Surely he will help. Levites were also set apart, much like Priests, but at a different level. Unfortunately, the Levite responds the same way the Priest did.

But then comes a Samaritan, who is the least likely to help it would seem. Samaritans were outcast. There was prejudice against them; no one expected anything good of them. Just a chapter earlier in Luke's gospel, Jesus himself is passing through a Samaritan village, but the village wouldn't welcome Jesus. The bad feelings between Jews and Samaritans were intense. Yet, in Jesus' parable here, the Samaritan...the least likely one, comes to the aid of the wounded man and ensures that he is cared for, even at great personal cost.

When Jesus finishes the story he turns back to the lawyer and asks, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” The lawyer answers correctly when he says that the neighbor is the one who showed mercy. Jesus tells him to go and do the same. In other words, live as a neighbor to those in need. Show mercy to those in need.

Isn't that what Porter Halyburton did for Fred Cherry? The surprise in the Good Samaritan story is that the Samaritan did the loving, compassionate, godly thing. The least likely person became the neighbor. The surprise for the Vietnamese was that an unlikely southern, white man brought up in a racist time and place, would do the loving, compassionate, godly thing.

We all are unlikely people, sinners, thrown together by time and circumstances often beyond our control. We have our prejudices, we have our self-interests, and we have our needs. Who would expect anything from us?

God stepped into time and circumstance in the person of Jesus Christ to meet unlikely people like you and me. Revealing the most amazing love ever known, God showed mercy upon our fallen world by sending his own son, Jesus, to die on the cross, bringing healing and hope for all of us. And in the ultimate healing, God raised Jesus from the dead so that we may live as he lives.

Now that means that we sinners, unlikely to care beyond our own self-interest, have been transformed by this Jesus to live free from our sin and free for a life of compassion that we cannot achieve on our own. With the example of Jesus before us and the presence of Jesus within us and the power of God behind us, the world can expect that we will be people who care and who show care to our neighbors, all those in need around us.

Porter Halyburton and Fred Cherry were two unlikely people thrown together by life's circumstances to extraordinary ends. God takes all of us, unlikely people as we are, and throws us together in life's circumstances to bring about extraordinary ends.

We give thanks to our God who makes this kind of life possible. We give thanks to God who steps into life with us and who doesn't give up on us. God knows we can be the people that we are made to be. God knows that purposeful, selfless, unconditional, sacrificial love can change the world. And God wants to do that with us, in us and through us.

Have you thought about who God has brought into your life to bless you? It might be the person you thought least likely to have an impact on your life. That person might surprise you.

At the same time, have you thought about who God has sent you to help? It might be someone you can't imagine helping. Maybe it is someone with whom you have nothing in common. Maybe it is someone you don't think even likes you or wants you around. God might surprise you there too.

God knows what amazing love and grace and compassion can do. May we know it as well and live it and show it, trusting that God will bless it to extraordinary ends.

Amen.