

FOUNDATIONS FOR
LAITY RENEWAL

Transforming Daily Life

719 Earl Garrett Street
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Three Sermon Outlines on
Work and Faith

**“Obsessing, Digressing, and
Progressing!”**

George Cladis

SERMON NOTES

*The
High Calling
of Our
Daily Work*

*Making a real living connects you to a bigger picture,
a grand design, an abundant life.
Each of us has only a small part to play, but what a part!
It's the high calling of our daily work.*

– Howard Butt, Jr., of Laity Lodge
TheHighCalling.org

Three Sermon Outlines on Work and Faith *Obsessing, Digressing, and Progressing!*

Introduction to the Sermon Series

The workplace is where most of our congregation spend about a third of their lives so the metaphor of sacred journey fits well in this constantly changing environment. How common it is for us to seethe and obsess over a colleague's betrayal, the boss publicly holding up for ridicule some sincere effort of ours to advance the company, or a major client dropping out of our portfolio over a misunderstanding that couldn't be corrected no matter how hard we tried. Also on the journey with God at work, there are times when we are called to a higher level of creativity – seeing beyond what is expected to the fantastically new. Still, there's more. The Bible is filled with testimony after testimony of those whose lives were complete ruins, the charred remains of people who started off like everyone else thinking life would be this great arena of achievement, one great thing after another, only to find eventual disaster, either self or other inflicted, and now reduced to ash.

Three scenarios. Three real life experiences people in your church know well. Related to the journey motif, it is about getting unstuck from resentment, accepting and even valuing the detours and breaking the chains of the past to progress boldly. The preacher today has a marvelous opportunity to touch a raw nerve of those bedraggled folks who shuffle into pews Sunday after Sunday searching for a way to make sense out of an unpredictable present and frightful future.

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Sermon Three: “Progressing: You Can’t Move Forward Until You Release What is Backward.”²

Text: Isaiah 43:18-19

¹⁸“Remember not the former things,
nor consider the things of old.

¹⁹Behold, I am doing a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.

Luke 9:61-62

“I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.”

⁶²Jesus replied, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”

Ephesians 2:4-9

⁴But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – ⁹not by works, so that no one can boast.

[Alternative text: Mark 5:1-20. In this text, the Preacher could compare the individual in the text who is chained and hurts himself, to those who are chained to the past and hurt themselves repeatedly with past memories. The person in the text, then, can be compared to those with addictive or self-destructive behaviors. Christ can break those chains and liberate us from our own self-destructive behavior as a result of guilt over past memories.]

Theological Point: Jesus Christ is the Redeemer. By way of the cross, we have been set free (Is. 42:5-7) of the bondage of sin and death (Rom. 4:25). We have been given new names (Is. 62:4) and made new (2 Cor. 5:17). The Lord of the resurrection is making all things new (Rev. 21:5), redeeming the past and restoring us (Gal. 6:1) to a new present and future. Just as we are being renewed, we are also re-newers in Jesus Christ (Is. 58:11-12, especially in *The Message*).

Hermeneutical Connection: The grace and mercy of God given to us through Jesus Christ equips the church to be a community of the forgiven, redeemed, restored, and renewed. Our ministry, then, is to reach out to the broken-hearted and those crushed by sin and circumstances, declaring the power of God to forgive and make new, and to then become witnesses to this redeeming power of God. Some have difficulty releasing the past to fully embrace God’s grace and mercy. The church has the wondrous task of coming alongside those so burdened and helping them to be free of the past to become all God would have them be.

Introduction

*The Preacher might want to begin by reminding the congregation of the series: *obsessing, digressing, and progressing*. Last week, we looked at those holy detours from God that serve to open our eyes to something new and wondrous that we would have otherwise missed. For the workplace, this can mean great moments of new discovery and innovation.*

The week before we saw what it is like to be stopped in our tracks by annoying preoccupations that keep us from the path to joy. God is able to free our minds from those workplace annoyances that we tend to obsess over – they stall us from our forward progression.

Today, we see that God calls us to be on a sacred journey with the Almighty, moving into a Larger World that the Lord unfolds for us. However, sometimes our forward progression is hindered by what pulls us back from the past. The Bible is filled with testimony after testimony of those whose lives were complete ruins, the charred remains of people who started off like everyone else thinking life would be this great arena of achievement, one great thing after another, only to find eventual disaster, either self or other inflicted, and now reduced to ash. In the workplace, this is often associated with bankruptcy or being fired. The experience is such that those afflicted feel chained to the past and just can’t move forward into God’s new future for them. To make matters worse, shame and guilt might play a role, acting as a wrestling tag team, pummeling their victims relentlessly. How can one recover from such an experience and move forward?

² I know the grammar isn’t the best, but it works in a colloquial sort of way.

A. Unpack the Scripture.

The Preacher can examine Scriptures that focus on redemption and God's mercy. One way to go about this is to simply read verse after verse of grace. Or, unpack the Scripture readings for today. Other passages to look at are: Jer. 31:2-3; 2 Cor. 12:8-9; Heb. 4:16; John 1:14; Acts 4:33; Acts 11:22-23; Rom. 1:1-5; Rom. 5:12-21. Here, the Preacher has the wonderful opportunity to declare God's grace and forgiveness through Jesus Christ that can be accessed through faith. This is the most ancient and basic testimony of the church!

After declaring the biblical basis for forgiveness, the Preacher may want to illustrate this point. Here is one: Martin Luther was a Roman Catholic monk who became a doctor of theology and taught at the University of Wittenburg in the early 1500s. Luther studied Scripture intensely and was particularly moved by two passages. The first was Psalm 22, "My God, My God. Why have you forsaken me?" Luther realized that the One who was the supreme Judge also felt the desolation of being apart from God when he was on the cross. Then, in his study and teaching of the book of Romans, he was touched by Romans 1:17, "And the just will live by faith." The study of the Bible brought Luther to an "Aha!" moment when he realized that the elaborate merit system of the church, complete with indulgences to pay for your sins, was contrary to the simple message of grace in the Bible.

More on this at <http://www.religionfacts.com/christianity/people/luther/bio.htm>.

Preacher, also a true story from my own experience: I met at a local restaurant every week with a wonderful group of retired gentlemen from my congregation. We ate our meals and then opened up the Bible, read a passage together, and related it to our lives. I still look back today with fondness for the good sharing of those men.

On one such occasion we were working our way through the book of Romans when I commented on Luther's "Aha!" moment – when he realized that the good works of a Christian are always in response to grace through faith and never to earn grace. One of the gentlemen, who had been in church all of his 70 plus years, was astounded and began to debate this. Year after year he was in church and never had the Gospel message broken through to him. I had the opportunity to share the Gospel with him and, after resisting it because it seemed just too good to be true, he broke down in absolute joy over this great Truth!

We can be in church all our lives and never really *hear* this foundational truth of the Gospel: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8-9).

B. But do you really believe it?

Even though we may know and understand with our minds the truth of God's grace received through faith in Jesus Christ, we may not believe it with our hearts. Out of our past may come strong hands that hold us back from fully embracing this wonderful truth. These strong hands are a memory, or memories, of things you did, or didn't do; things you said, or didn't say; and you just can't shake that painful memory. Guilt and shame have tag teamed up on you, pummeling you with a past memory, and you just can't move forward into the Light of God's joy because of the strong grip of the past that won't let go.

Worse, we sometimes self-medicate to try to forget. Or we hurt ourselves with self-destructive behaviors as a way of trying to pay for our misdeeds. We let the past determine our present and haven't been able to bring grace and mercy into our lives in a way that breaks those chains of the past and sets us free.

Illustration. Here's one I found: There is a magazine that's been around for many years now called *Backwoods Home*. There are lovely magazines such as *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Boston Home*, and many like that – print and online magazines that exhibit beautiful homes and gardens. *Backwoods Home* is different. It's for the self-reliant, backwoods folks who try to do as much on their own without much help from anyone else. And they aren't sure they trust the government much, either.

In 1997, an ad appeared in the classifieds of *Backwoods Home*. You can view the ad here: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1862079/> (great to put up on screens). **Wanted: Somebody to go back in time with me. This is not a joke. P.O. Box 91 Ocean View, WA 99393. You'll get paid after we get back. Must bring your own weapons. Safety not guaranteed. I have only done this once before.** It turned out the ad was a joke. It was placed in the classified section by the editor who wanted to boost readership. The ad went viral, as only it could in 1997, being picked up by news wire agencies and reported in many newspapers around the country. A writer saw the bogus ad and wrote a fictional story around it which became the basis for the movie *Safety Not Guaranteed*. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Safety_Not_Guaranteed.

There is a particularly moving scene in the film when a character named Maderus (played by Aubrey Plaza) explains to the supposed time machine owner why she wants to go back in time. To paraphrase the film's dialogue, she describes

how she was just a bratty fourteen year old when her mother called one night saying she was on her way home and could she pick something up for her. “Yeah,” she blurted out, “some chocolate milk.” Her mother turned into an all night market, picked up the milk and called her again saying she had the milk and was excited to see her. “Whatever,” was her cold reply.

That was the last time she ever saw her mother. She was abducted leaving the store and murdered.

To paraphrase the scene, she said to the man with the Time Machine: “You see, I have to go back. I have to fix this. I need to tell mom, “Don’t stop! Come straight home, mom. I just need to be with you. Just come home!” “You see,” she said to the man with the Time Machine, “I just have to fix this!”

Preacher. Be careful here. You have a sacred entrustment. This is a powerful illustration and you have to use it wisely. You will be able to hear a pin drop. So be careful here. Perhaps say something gentle, like: You know, we all want a time machine to go back and fix something. To right a wrong we did, or speak up when we didn’t. We all have something back there we want to go back and fix. We need to go back and talk some sense into ourselves, and not do the deed, or say the word, or to do what should have been done. We all want to go back and fix something . . . but we can’t.

Preacher, now you get to go into the Good News!

C. There’s no time machine, but there’s Time Redeem!

You see, there’s no time machine. We can’t go back and fix it, but God gives us something better. The Lord give us Time Redeem! God is able to reach into your past and find that painful memory that just won’t let you go, and redeem it! Just as God forgave Israel for the nation’s bad behavior, and gave them a new name and new hope, so God can forgive whatever might be in your past that haunts you at night, that is the source of your mental bruising, and has you wrapped up in chains of shame.

Preacher, preach it now! Don’t let your congregation stay in the past, still wondering how to go back and fix it with a time machine – preach about the Lord who redeems the past and sets us free to live in the present, full of the grace and mercy of God, renewed and restored!

Illustration: There are many. Here is one I like for a place like this.

<http://www.plough.com/en/articles/2013/november/where-every-war-veteran-can-find-healing>

*I especially like these words from this illustration: “I trust in the forgiveness I have found—and I really have found peace, by looking into my own heart and confessing the things that burdened me. I’ve never been tormented by the past again, and I feel that there has been real closure. Of course, I still regret the past, and I will always feel the pain of it, **but it has lost its power over me.**”*

Wrap it Up!

Preacher, this is a bit of an emotional sermon. Your pastoral counseling hours may increase this next week. Help people really “get” the grace of God and the Lord’s ability to break the chains of the past to liberation in God’s love and mercy. One way to do this is to move people now off the focus upon themselves to living out that grace in the community! Something like:

Now here’s the problem. Many of us have come to know this grace and mercy of God in wonderful ways. But it isn’t meant to just stay in us. It has to be lived out of these walls, in our offices and homes!

Bring it home! Have you been touched by the grace and mercy of God? Have your lives been redeemed, restored, and renewed? Then, we have to let it out to the world around us, showing for that same mercy in the world, living as a forgiven people who are also *forgiving*, and curbing our tendency to judge harshly when we ourselves are the beneficiaries of such amazing grace!

We have the opportunity now – as the forgiven and made-new people of God – to live out these verses from Isaiah in *The Message* translation:

**You’ll use the old rubble of past lives to build anew,
rebuild the foundations from out of your past.
You’ll be known as those who can fix anything,
restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate,
make the community livable again! – Is. 58:11-12**

AMEN!