

Children

Toy magnet (Note: Be prepared with a magnet and several objects that will be attracted to it. Little metal figures would be very helpful!)

Good morning, boys and girls. How many of you have ever experimented with a magnet? Do you know what a magnet does? (Responses.) Do you understand how a magnet works? Well, without being too technical, a magnet is a piece of metal -- usually iron, steel, cobalt or nickel -- which has been charged with a magnetic field so that it attracts other particles of like metals. I have with me a magnet. Now, if I pass this over the spot where other bits of metal are, what do you think will happen? Let's try it! See, the smaller bits just jump onto the magnet and even larger pieces hold on tight. It is even possible for a magnet to be so strong that it is hard for a bit of metal to escape from its grasp. There are lots of ways in which magnets are used in our everyday world, such as electric motors, but we're not here to talk about that today. What I wanted you to see was the power of attraction, or the ability of the magnet to draw things to itself.

There is a passage in the Bible where Jesus speaks of his death on the cross in that way. He said that when He was lifted up off the earth, He would draw all men to himself. And over the centuries since He died on Calvary's cross, that is what has happened. Men and women, boys and girls, have been drawn to Jesus. We have learned of God's love for us and of the sacrifice that Jesus made to bring us back to God, and to be forgiven of sin. We have wanted to come to him. We are still drawn by Jesus to himself, and that is evident in the fact that we come here to this place to praise and worship him.

I hope our experiments with this toy magnet will serve to remind you of how God draws us to himself through the cross of Jesus.

I

A national magazine for pastors once carried a rating system for sermons similar to the rating system we're all familiar with for movies. It went something like this. The person who designed it was a little bit cynical. Here is the rating he gave to various kinds of sermons:

"G" - Generally acceptable to everyone. Full of inoffensive, childlike platitudes; usually described as "wonderful" or "marvelous" by those who leave church to shake the hands of the pastor.

"MC" - For more mature congregations. At times this sermon makes the gospel relevant to today's issues; it may even contain mild suggestions for change. Often described as "challenging" or "thought provoking," though no one intends to take any action or change any attitudes.

"R" - Definitely restricted to those not upset by truth. This sermon "tells it like it is" and threatens the comfortable; most often described as "disturbing" or "controversial;" usually indicates that the preacher has an outside source of income (since his job security is definitely suspect).

"X" - Positively limited to those who can handle explosive ideas. This sermon really "socks it to 'em." It is the kind of sermon that landed Jeremiah in the well, got Amos run out of town, set things up for the stoning of Stephen; always described as "shocking" or even in "poor taste." The pastor who preaches this sermon had better have his or her suitcases packed and life insurance paid for. (1)

According to this rating system the prophet Jeremiah was definitely an X-rated preacher. More than any other prophet Jeremiah suffered as a result of his preaching. People rarely wanted to listen to his pronouncements. And no wonder. It seemed, even to Jeremiah, that all he ever talked about was bad news. At one point Jeremiah cried out: "Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction . . ." (Jeremiah 20:8).

Jeremiah came from a family of priests. God called him to become a prophet at a very young age, and he served God for more than 40 years. He spoke God's words during the reigns of three kings and witnessed the nation's destruction by the Babylonians. He is called the Weeping Prophet because he also wrote the book of Lamentations after Jerusalem was destroyed including the Temple and its people carried off into captivity. Jeremiah was also a suffering prophet who was persecuted by kings and rejected by his own people because of his forceful condemnation of idolatry and social injustice. Eventually, according to Jewish and Christian tradition, Jeremiah was killed in Egypt by his countrymen who had fled there. (2)

God had called Jeremiah to "tell it like it is" to a people who had disregarded God's law. They rejected his teachings and they suffered for it. And he suffered as well because of their rejection. So it is quite refreshing to come to today's reading from Jeremiah. No fireworks. No scolding of the people of Israel. Jeremiah changes his tone altogether.

This passage was written during Israel's exile. It was a dark time in Israel's history. It's been said that the task of the prophet is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. Jeremiah had done his job superbly of afflicting Israel when it was in the comfort of its sin; now it is time for him to be a comforter during their time of exile. In

fact, this section of Jeremiah is often called the “Book of Consolation.” The words are so beautiful and so profound that they are welcome to our ears just as they were to the ears of Jeremiah’s audience:

“The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord.

“This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the Lord. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

Let’s think about those moving and hopeful words for a few moments. God is making a new covenant with Israel. Pastor Jeff Strite compares Israel’s situation to a situation in our own land just a few years ago. Some of you’ll remember when mortgage rates stood at 9 to 10%. But then interest rates went down to about half that. What did people do? That’s right. Many people marched down to the bank and refinanced their homes. They asked the banks to make out “new contracts” with lower monthly payments. (3) Jeremiah is saying that God is unilaterally making a new contract or covenant with the people of Israel.

God is giving the people of Israel the chance to begin again. That’s the wonderful thing about God, isn’t it? God is a God of second and third and even fourth chances.

One night in a church service a young woman felt the tug of the Holy Spirit in her heart. She responded to God’s call and accepted Jesus as her Lord and Savior. The young woman had a very rough past, involving alcohol, drugs and prostitution. But, the change in her was evident. As time went on she became a faithful member of the church. She eventually became involved in the ministry teaching young children. It was not very long until this thoroughly converted young woman had caught the eye and the heart of the pastor’s son. The relationship grew and they began to make wedding plans. This is when the problems began.

You see, about one half of the church did not think that a woman with a past such as hers was suitable for a deacon’s son. The church began to argue and fight about the matter. So they decided to have a meeting. As the people made their arguments and tensions increased, the meeting got completely out of hand. The young woman became very upset about all the things being brought up about her past. As she began to cry, the deacon’s son stood to speak. He could not bear the pain all this was causing his wife-to-be. He began to speak and his statement was this: “My fiancé’s past is not what is on trial here. What you are questioning is the ability of Christ to wash away our sin and make us new persons. So, does he wash away sin or not?” (4)

Powerful question: Does Christ wash away sin or not? If he does not, we are all in trouble.

an analogy of a trick bar of soap. The trick soap looks like a real bar of soap, but when you wash with it, you get dirty instead of clean. The more you wash, the dirtier you get. He recalls watching an episode of the old television program *Candid Camera* when

Allen Funt was the host. Funt had planted a fake bar of soap in a washroom and recorded the reactions of those who washed their hands with it. It was funny to watch them scrub and scrub and never get clean. It was comical. (5)

It would be comical if soap did not get our hands clean. If Christ does not wash away our sins, it would be more than comical; it would be tragic. In Jeremiah, God says to us, "I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

God is the God of second chances. God had a contentious relationship with Israel and indeed with all humanity. But Israel was God's chosen people. They were to be a light unto the world in God's behalf. In this passage from Jeremiah, God calls Himself a husband to Israel. But Israel continually wanders from the relationship. And God has to keep tugging her back. But each time He does bring her back. God loves Israel too much to leave her in her sin.

A few years ago, best-selling author John Grisham wrote a book titled *The Testament*. The key figure in the novel is a disgraced corporate attorney named Nate O'Reilly. Nate is plagued by alcoholism and drug abuse. After two marriages, four detox programs, and a serious bout with dengue fever, Nate acknowledges his need for God. Listen to how John Grisham describes the transformation:

"With both hands, he clenched the back of the pew in front of him. He repeated the list [of his sins], mumbling softly every weakness and flaw and affliction and evil that plagued him. He confessed them all. In one long glorious acknowledgment of failure, he laid himself bare before God. He held nothing back. He unloaded enough burdens to crush any three men, and when he finally finished Nate had tears in his eyes. 'I'm sorry,' he whispered to God. 'Please, help me.'

"As quickly as the fever had left his body, he felt the baggage leave his soul. With one gentle brush of the hand, his slate had been wiped clean. He breathed a massive sigh of relief, but his pulse was racing." (6)

That is a fictionalized account of a real life experience that countless people have experienced in confession over the centuries since Christ came into the world. They have known their sins forgiven. They have found themselves made clean.

And they have been able to make a new beginning. Here is the really good news for the day. We have a chance to start over. The past is blotted out. A new covenant with God is possible for us.

James Moore's father died in a car wreck when James was only thirteen years old away at camp. Tragically, young Jim read it in the newspaper before anyone could reach him to tell him about it. When he saw the picture of their smashed-up car on the front page of the newspaper, and read that his dad had died in that accident, he was thrust immediately and painfully into the shocked numbness of deep grief.

Strangely, one of his very first thoughts was covered with guilt. He remembered that, some months before at a family picnic, he had been showing off with a baseball. He threw it wildly, and it hit his dad and broke his thumb. Jim felt so bad about that. In his mind he thought, "What a terrible son I am!" He had caused his dad great pain. And he lived with that guilt for several months. Finally, he went to the camp's priest and admitted these deep feelings of guilt about breaking his dad's thumb/

He says he'll never forget how his pastor handled that. His priest was so great, he says. His priest came around the desk with tears in his eyes.

He sat down across from him and said, “Now, Jim, you listen to me. If your dad could come back to life for five minutes and be right here with us, and if he knew you were worried about that, what would he say to you?”

Jim Moore answered, “He would tell me to quit worrying about that.”

“Well, all right,” the priest said. “Then you quit worrying about that right now. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, sir,” Jim said, and he did. He knew the priest was saying to him, you are forgiven. Accept that forgiveness, and make a new start with your life. (6)

Those, of course, are exactly the words James Moore needed to hear. He could make a new beginning without all that guilt he was carrying around.

Here’s what we need to understand: Christ has made a new covenant with us. I said a moment ago that a new covenant with God is possible for us. It’s not really a new covenant. It’s a covenant that Jeremiah foretold and Christ made possible 2,000 years ago. Do you remember that on the night Jesus was betrayed, he took the cup, and said, “This is my blood of the new covenant which is poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins”? The covenant has already been made, but many of us have not appropriated that covenant in our own lives. God said through Jeremiah, “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people . . .” That happens as soon as we welcome Christ into our lives. It is why we speak of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the part of the Godhead that bears witness to God’s word. It is the Spirit that puts God’s law in our minds and writes it on our hearts.” And it happens to us the moment we confess of our sins, repent of those sins, and invite Christ to make a home in our hearts.

“This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the Lord. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” God is the God of second chances. Why don’t you take the opportunity to make a new start today?

1. Franklin Ishida, “Preaching on the Lessons,” *The Clergy Journal*, Oct 2001, p. 38.
2. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/58499038/Overcoming-Low-Self-Esteem-Jeremiah-1-4-10-Sermon>.
3. <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/a-new-hope-jeff-strite-sermon-on-kingdom-of-god-70969.asp?Page=2>.
4. Adapted from Andrew H. Rogers, <https://sermons.logos.com/submissions/11254-The-Blood#content=/submissions/11254>.
5. *Emphasis*, Mar/Apr 2001, p. 37.6. (Random House, 1999), p. 374; submitted by Greg Asimakoupoulos, Naperville, IL. Cited at http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/article_print.html?id=25164.
6. James W. Moore, *Standing on the Promises or Sitting on the Premises* (Nashville: Dimensions for Living, 1995), pp. 88-89.
7. The Rev. John H. Pavelko, <http://crossroadspc.org/thebarrel/20030706.htm>.

Although we aren't sure how it's going to work out, it does look like there will be Olympic games this summer. One of the debates I followed was whether they would acknowledge golf as a real sport, an Olympic sport. About six years ago golf received that recognition. It was a sport! In some ways, we can see golf as a nearly perfect sport. Because we think sports is not only about winning but also seeing what we have inside ourselves. In most every sport, I am reacting to someone else. In golf, it's only me and the ball. When I play the game, I know what's inside of me.

We can think of Lent as a testing of what's inside of us. The prayers of the Mass throughout this season emphasize again our Lenten practices, our undertaking a Lenten discipline, our being faithful to our Lenten commitments. Have we increased and deepened our prayer? Have we repressed our impulses? Have we been particularly generous to the needs of others?

Well, we have; and, indeed, we haven't. Lent shows us just how far we have to go to respond to God's invitation of love, to truly be followers of Jesus. But today's readings show us that the real drama of Lent, indeed of our faith, is not so much what we have inside ourselves. Rather, the question is: to what extent have I let Christ inside myself? To what extent do I let him work in me?

The reading we have from Jeremiah is yet one more reflection on covenant, a theme we have been exploring all through this Lenten cycle. Jeremiah is expressing the same frustration we saw in last week's first reading, how history shows just how much we have not been faithful to the covenant God has made with us. But this week we hit a line that should astound us. Jeremiah says that from now on God will place his law inside our hearts. God will do the work that we've not been able to do. God will give us God's faithfulness.

This is what Jesus does for us. He comes into human history, he comes into our community of faith, he comes into our hearts, to take on the very burdens that have broken us. He cries out on our behalf to God, his Father and our Father, the one who could save him from death. By taking on our burden of death he overcomes it on our behalf. Christ becomes the source of eternal salvation for everyone who lets him be the force of her or his life.

"When I am lifted up," Jesus says in the Gospel, "I will draw all people to myself." He says this when Greeks, gentiles, non-believers asked to speak with him. "All people" are the ones that God wants to be part of the new and eternal covenant that Jesus fulfills on our behalf. Because all people, every one of us, is in need the divine life. All of us need the love and power of God to radiate from inside us. We all need the new covenant of Jesus to be written deeply and permanently in our hearts.

What is inside us? We often look inside and see inadequacies, hesitation, doubts, and sin. We often see only ourselves, in our weakness, at work. Lent is teaching us that our salvation is precisely learning how Jesus is at work in our hearts, more powerfully than any of our own efforts and actions. When we become obedient to his grace, when we open ourselves up to his love, then we can see more clearly the grace of God as that which is deepest within us.

What's inside of us? What are we made of? Sports may tell us one thing, but Jesus tells us the most important thing, that his place is inside of us, working mercy and grace.

III

If you could spend an evening hanging out with a celebrity, who would you want to hang out with? An organization named CharityBuzz is an online auction site that allows people all over the world to bid on exclusive experiences with world-famous celebrities. All the money raised goes to support various charities. You can bid on a private tour of the Vatican, or a golf game with a professional golfer and caddies, or a behind-the-scenes tour of Conan O'Brien's show with Conan himself as your tour guide.

In the past, CharityBuzz has offered exclusive experiences like dinner and courtside tickets to a Dallas Mavericks game with Mark Cuban, attending a Hollywood movie premiere with Denzel Washington, a private meeting with soccer superstar Cristiano Ronaldo before one of his games. You can even bid on a personalized lullaby sung to you by the children's musical group, The Wiggles. (1)

But what would you do if you actually got to meet your favorite celebrity face-to-face? Would you be calm and composed about it? Or would you blurt out something embarrassing? A young man named Gareth Dimelow wrote on Twitter about the time he met Dolly Parton. As she autographed a CD for him, he blurted out, "I've loved you for over 20 years!" In her irrepressible way Dolly grabbed his hand and said, "Oh, honey—don't stop now!" (2)

We all hope we could stay calm and composed when we meet our favorite celebrity. We hope we wouldn't do anything too foolish. Like not recognize them at all.

Comedian Ellen DeGeneres convinced soccer superstar David Beckham to pose as a Target employee to surprise his unsuspecting fans. Beckham, dressed in the standard red shirt and name tag of a Target employee, stood at in the perfume aisle and tried to convince passing customers to buy his new David Beckham cologne. He started up random conversations with passersby, sprayed them with cologne, even made up and sang a really bad little jingle to advertise the new cologne. At one point, a small crowd of shoppers gathers around to sample the cologne. They are within inches of the world's most famous soccer player and they never suspect a thing. (3)

In this morning's Bible passage, some men from Greece were seeking to meet Jesus. I wonder if they were nervous about their potential encounter with him. Did they have questions for him? When they met him, did they blurt out something embarrassing? If there had been cell phones in Jesus' day, would they have asked to take a selfie with him?

We don't know for sure. But we do know that the Greek culture of that time idolized philosophers and philosophies about the meaning of life. Yet these Greek men came to a Jewish Passover festival looking for a humble Jewish rabbi named Jesus. What did they hope to find?

Jesus was not a philosopher. No one would compare him to Plato or Aristotle. We have nothing that he wrote, and not much of what he said. He did not employ complex

sentences or high-sounding ideas. He spoke mostly in parables and used the language and the symbols of the common listener. So why is it then that, 2,000 years later, we still hang on to his every word? Why is it that hundreds of thousands of brilliant men and women have studied every syllable that was recorded of his teachings, and whole libraries of books have been written concerning his impact on human history?

It was not what he said. It was who he was. There was something about the very person of Jesus himself that has fascinated people of every generation over the twenty centuries since he first caused such a commotion in that little region called Galilee.

That is why those words first spoken by some Greeks to the disciple Philip are so important to men and women and young people and boys and girls today: "Sir, we would like to see Jesus."

That is the most sincere desire of our hearts. We want to see Jesus. We want to experience him for ourselves. A second-hand report is not enough. We long to be in his presence. We want to assure ourselves that he is real—that he is relevant—that he is resurrected. We, like Thomas, want to put our hands into his hands and feet and side. We want to know him as our Savior and Friend.

We want to see Jesus. That is part of why we are in worship today. We haven't come to learn the latest political philosophy or to celebrate some dead theology. The hymns are lovely, the atmosphere is cordial, the prayers are reassuring, but none of it counts for anything if we cannot see Jesus.

We would like to see him because something is missing in our lives. Once we had such high hopes, such great dreams, such a fresh sense of Christ's presence in our lives. But time has taken its toll. There is something missing. We would like to see Jesus. Our lives sometimes seem so tedious, so lacking in vitality, as if we are on a continual treadmill.

Most of us think of treadmills as high-end exercise equipment. But did you know that treadmills were originally invented as a form of punishment? Some of you are thinking, "Yeah, I can believe that." In Victorian England, treadmills were placed in prisons. Prisoners were forced to walk for hours each day on a treadmill as a form of mindless, meaningless punishment. (4)

Many people suffer from such a deep sense of meaninglessness that their life feels like a treadmill. Constantly moving but going nowhere. Always busy but producing nothing. Something is missing in our lives.

Some of us are "life-tired." That's a new word that our German friends have coined. There are many languages that have really profound words for expressing a feeling we can't quite put into words. The German language often combines two words to make one new concept. And that's what German speakers have done to create a word that literally translates as "life-tired."

I think a lot of us can relate to the idea of being “life-tired.” In the Farsi language (which is spoken in Iran), there is a word that means “to practice holding sadness.” It conveys the idea of just carrying sadness all the time, like a burden you can’t put down. And there’s a Russian word that refers to “. . . a sensation of great spiritual anguish, often without any specific cause.” (5)

It may take us a lifetime to pronounce any of these words in the original language, but we can instantly relate to their meaning. Something is missing in our lives. And there is nothing we can do, nothing we can buy, no earthly substitute that can fill that sense of longing. “. . . We would like to see Jesus.”

We would like to see him because some of us have never experienced the peace that Christ brings.

We need something to give our lives not only meaning, but also new vitality. We are empty, and we are bored. And because we are empty and bored, we have no vitality, no zest, no drive. There is an energy crisis in our lives, and it has nothing to do with oil or nuclear power. It has to do with that inner emptiness. We are tired, listless, and apathetic. What we need is a new heart. Not a donated or man-made heart, but the heart that Jeremiah spoke of—a heart that only seeing Jesus can give.

William Gibson wrote the book *Mass for the Dead* to honor his parents and their devotion to their children. In the book, Gibson tells how he grieved his mother and wanted so badly to understand the secret of her faith, which strengthened her in life and gave her peace and courage to face her death.

So he took his mother’s gold-rimmed glasses and faded prayer book and sat in her favorite chair. He opened the prayer book because he wanted to hear what she had heard. He put on her glasses because he wanted to see what she had seen. He sat in her place of prayer and devotion because he wanted to feel what she had felt. He wanted to experience what had so deeply centered and empowered her. Nothing happened though. It did not work. That is not too surprising. He needed a faith of his own—not his mother’s faith. (6)

William Gibson needed to see Jesus. That’s what he was missing. It wasn’t the chair or the prayer book or the glasses that shaped his mother’s character or brought her such peace. It was her relationship with Jesus. Gibson’s mother saw Jesus, and that truth shone from her life in such a way that it caused her son to crave that same experience.

That’s what all of us need--to see Jesus and to know that he is real and that he is with us in life’s trials and turmoil.

Pastor John Jewell tells of a man named Charles who was lying in a hospital bed near death. Anyone who knew Charles would tell you he was not a nice man. He drank too much. He treated his wife and children badly. So the nursing staff was a little surprised when Charles asked for a chaplain.

Charles asked the chaplain to pray for him.

“What do you want to say to God?” the chaplain asked.

“Tell God I’m sorry for the way my life has turned out,” Charles said. “Tell him that I am sorry for the way I treated my wife and kids, and that I’ve always loved them.”

“Sure, I can do that,” the chaplain said. “Is there anything else?”

Charles hesitated. “Tell God that I know I have no right to ask this—but I would like to be able to live with him.”

And the chaplain bowed his head and prayed and told God everything that Charles had said. The next morning when he came to visit, the nursing staff told him that Charles had passed away in the night. (7)

Charles nearly missed seeing Jesus, but it’s never too late if that is the desire of a person’s heart.

Jesus came to show us that one day we can live with God. And we don’t have to deserve it. Before the creation of the world, God planned to give His life on the cross to guarantee it. No matter how much of a disaster our lives may seem to be, there is one who offers us more grace, more peace, more love than we could ever exhaust in a million lifetimes. “Sir, we would like to see Jesus.”

We want to see Jesus so that we may obtain new meaning, new vitality, new possibilities, and the blessed assurance that we are never alone.

My friends, Jesus is the Way. He is the Truth. He is the Life. No wonder we all long to see him, and we can see him. Through the eyes of faith, we can perceive him in our midst. He is here. He is available to us today. To all who would receive him, he is here. Let us take new hope, new courage, let us commit ourselves anew to his work, for we have beheld his glory: the glory as of the only begotten son of the Father.

As someone has so beautifully said, “Christianity is not a philosophy Jesus came to teach. It is a life Jesus came to impart.” Won’t you receive the life that he has to give?

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2. “When real life is better than fantasy!” by Carly Stern for DailyMail.com January 23, 2019, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-6624449/People-share-happy-stories-meeting-nice-celebrities.html>.

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