

**Trinity on the Green Lenten Preaching Series
Palm Sunday – April 9, 2017
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Living Deep and Living Wide
Ezekiel 37: 1-14; John 11: 1-45

Comedian Groucho Marx once said, “We’re all gonna’ die... The only question is whether we’re alive when we do.”

When Jesus began his ministry, his church could be described as dying – so fixated on survival that it colluded with the powers and principalities of its time; obsessed with rules about every detail of life, but blind to the injustice of Roman rule; numb to the exclusion of all those seen as different; and to the huge chasm between the tiny numbers of the rich, and the countless, barely subsisting masses.

And Jesus’ response? “I came that you might have new life,” he said, “and have it abundantly.” “I came that all of you might have new life.” Never before in history... or after, has such a clear countercultural message of love and hope and radical inclusion been proclaimed, and lived... and died for.

Jesus knew, intimately, the suffering and brokenness of the world – conceived out of wedlock; born in a backward corner of an oppressive empire; and becoming a child refugee.

As he grew older, he sought out a small group of friends – ordinary people just like you and me, hungering for new life, hungering for meaning in all this suffering, willing to search out the presence of God within themselves. People with the seeds of faith, no matter how fragile, who wanted to live deeper in their relationship with God; who wanted to live wider in their understanding of who constituted their family and their community.

He taught them to become students again, but instead of academics, students of their own interior geography, scholars of the world's underside, whose teachers were the worst sinners they could find, including the despised Gentiles, a new tribe, learning to pray and worship and understand scripture in a whole new way. And then he sent them out to teach – sharing the joy of being servants for each other, of creating a world of *shalom*, one person at a time.

But, honest to the core, Jesus gave them the bad news as well – the price tag for this extraordinary freedom and joy – was to embrace the very suffering they were avoiding – to give up the comfort and security of their old ways; and, trusting in God, to keep a laser focus – well maybe he didn't use the word laser – a sustained focus on what really matters – loving God and loving their neighbor.

He taught them how to pray, and he taught them to act: to speak truth to power; to advocate for those who had no voice; to build a ragtag community to support them and their neighbors, and to stick with that community when it inevitably showed itself to be very imperfect.

Two thousand years later, Christianity is in the midst of a similar sea change, between a slow death and new life. The fastest growing religious affiliation in America is the “None’s,” – those with no affiliation at all, representing over one – third of our younger generations. Many have been raised in completely secular environments. When I ask these students to define Christianity, a common response is: *“It’s some nonsensical set of beliefs, mostly focused on what happens after you die, which for some reason seems to make people sexist, homophobic and mean.”* And those who have been raised in a church, often become just as disillusioned.

The truth is, we’re slowly losing the institution we’ve counted on historically to conduct spiritual practices, ritualize life moments, foster healing, inspire morality, house transcendent experience, mark holidays, support family, serve the needy, work for justice, and— through art, song, text, and speech — tell and retell a common story that binds us together – in short, a community that helped us cope with a deeply suffering world.

Without a common story, a common language, some form of communal life, we seek answers to our isolation, and the pain of our polarized society through individual solutions – by numbing out through constant busyness, or by relying on glitzy ads that promise self – care, meaning and relationships, through just one more purchase. I have a friend who has such trouble actually sitting down and meditating, that instead she purchases every single book and video on the market about... how to meditate.

Yet human suffering continues – within our hearts and across the whole human family. How do we keep from being overwhelmed? For those of us who hunger for greater meaning, who are passionate about making a better world, how do we rediscover the hope and joy and love that give meaning to suffering?

I suggest that the answer can be found in Jesus' original invitation to live deep, and to live wide.

Living deep – means becoming a student again, a disciple, practicing mindfulness of why we're here on earth – to be transformed in ways that bring wholeness to ourselves, and to our neighbors; to take a deep dive into spiritual practices like prayer, and worship, reading the stories of salvation, and making room for Sabbath in our lives. And not doing this because we're supposed to, but because the more we do them, the greater joy and hope and love we discover in our lives. It means defining faith not just as a set of beliefs, but as the content of our relationship with God, and doing everything we can to deepen that relationship. It's like the vertical arm of the cross planted so deeply in the desert soil of our lives that it becomes a well from which we draw the cold, clear water of Jesus' Good News.

And living wide? Living wide means daring to be sent out, to become apostles and teachers, practicing action, serving God in this world. To do this, it means building a network of relationships that keep us strong and focused; acknowledging that we have need of each other; that we simply can't find meaning in suffering alone, without companions who help us make meaning, who love and accept us for exactly who we are, who forgive us and expect forgiveness when we screw up, who are passionate about nurturing a community life that's based on caring for each other – all of each other. It's like the horizontal arm of the cross where, like Jesus, we stretch out our arms to embrace the world with compassion. Compassion, from the Latin, to "suffer with."

It's through living deep and living wide that we plug into the power of the Holy Spirit, letting her permeate every nook and cranny of our lives, so that we are not one person at work or in class, another at church, another when we party, and another in our relationships, but the same person everywhere – in the way we talk to others; the way we spend our time and our money; the way we treat our neighbors near and far – and what a relief that is!

The world is changing, and by living deep and living wide we can become part of that change. Look at the pervasive, intractable history of sexual assault and harassment of women; and at the sudden eruption of the #MeToo movement. Look at the explosion of passion yesterday among Americans in all our full diversity, led by young people who refuse to believe that gun violence in our schools will become the "new normal." This is living deep. This is living wide.

As we begin the journey of Holy Week together, remember that Jesus never asked his friends to do anything he wouldn't do, so on what we now call Palm Sunday, he turned his face toward Jerusalem, to the way of the cross. He knew that the path to every Easter, for each one of us, always passes through Good Friday. And he promised that through every death we encounter, he will always be our closest companion on the path into new life.