

“Point of Contact”

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I have told part of this story before. It was when I was a student pastor in Florida and I went to visit a man. This guy had been an over-the-road trucker. He didn't get to church very often, if at all. He had never developed any kind of relationship with God. By the time I saw him he had stage four cancer and he was dying. It was so frustrating, I remember it so vividly - even today - the way he would *beg* for me to do something, so he could know that God existed and that God loved him, and that God would take him home to Heaven.

Here was this man truly fulfilling what is described in the last verses of chapter 4 of II Corinthians. His outer body was wasting away and, yet, his inner body - his soul - did not seem to be renewing day by day. When I talked about him in a previous sermon some years ago, I said to you all that it was so frustrating, because no matter what I said, no matter what I read from Scripture, I couldn't get through to him. He died still feeling that God was a stranger - and he needed an intimate, loving God. No matter how hard he begged, he couldn't feel it; in part, because he had started at the very last moments of life. He could intellectually understand what I described about God's grace, but when you are in that last moment of life, when your future is dependent on the love of God and you have spent the last 75 years ignoring that, how do you ever feel that comfort, when you are facing the abyss right before your eyes?

That's the part I talked about a few years ago in a sermon, and encouraged us all to make God personal and intimate, to develop that relationship. But that, as Paul Harvey would say, there is still “the rest of the story.” Theology matters and his theology is what kept him from having a relationship with a loving God, because he understood God to be punitive. He understood God to have a big list like Santa Claus of who was naughty and who was nice - who gets into Heaven and who is excluded from Heaven. In that theology there is very little room, if any, for grace. There are those who have done works of righteousness well enough to achieve their own salvation, and there are those who have not, and so they are cast out into the fires of hell.

But so much of that theology is just plain wrong, and some of the people who tout that theology believe that it goes all of the way back to the Bible - to the earliest Church, they will argue. But it, frankly, just doesn't hold weight. Historically speaking that is not accurate.

This idea of the rapture, and I talked about “the rapture” before. I remember the movie (maybe some of you do, too.) [I] saw it in church (Ugh!), and in a Presbyterian church. It is so irritating. Where the guy is standing there at the bathroom shaving and, all of a sudden, you hear the razor still buzzing in the sink; but he has already been lifted into Heaven. Cars crashing into other cars and the highway is a mess, because God took those who were faithful into Heaven and left the rest behind. [The] “Left Behind,” series with Tim LeHaye - which he took all of the way back to “The Late, Great Planet Earth,” [by] Hal Lindsey, from the 1970s.

But they took it from someone else - this whole theology of “the rapture,” this theology of fear - this theology that doesn't have room for grace, but certainly has a whole lot of room for bad. A theology that talks more about the devil than it does the Divine, goes back to

1909. [It] goes back further, but it was actually written down in 1909. It was the Scofield Bible. That's not like the NRSV Bible that you have in the pews. It isn't how the Bible was translated. It was what Dr. Scofield, and those people who helped write it, had in the margins. It was like a study Bible.

The Scofield Bible, in 1909, and then was rewritten in part in 1917, took off like a fire storm, [with] everyone buying it, because it was really well done, in the way it gave people the opportunity to read their Bibles, and get an answer. The answers were on the bottom, like footnotes, and on the side, like explanations for all of these things.

That's when this whole idea of "the rapture" started coming about - in the margins. In the margins of I Thessalonians 5:2, where it talked about *the Lord is like a thief in the night coming to steal you away*. It was in the margins of Mark 13:32, where it talked about: *You will not know the time or the hour in which I am coming for you*, and took these and a few other innocuous passages and turned it into an entire theology of "the rapture." It scared my poor gentleman in the bed in Palm Bay, Florida, so that he could not die with peace, and could not hear grace, because the few times he had heard the theology of Christianity it was of a bitter, angry God, who was keeping track of who would be thrown into the rapture - into Heaven - and who would be left behind, and who would be left behind for all of eternity.

Where was the grace that is talked about in II Corinthians 4:13? Where is the love and support they would pick and choose their Scriptures to create this whole concept - this theological premise - that doesn't go all of the way back to the first-century church, doesn't go back to the first writings in the Bible, part of the New Testament canon?

It goes back to the twentieth-century canon by Scofield's Bible. I have one of those in my house - it was republished in 1945 - that my great-grandfather purchased, I was horrified by it. Go back and look at your grandparents' or your great-grandparents' Bibles, and maybe even your own parents' depending on your age, and I am willing to bet just about every one of you who has people of faith [in your history] has a Scofield Bible somewhere in their house. It transformed how we look at our faith in a very negative and difficult way, and it challenges us of faith to help explain a theology that is more true to the New Testament. How do you prepare people for the inevitability that our outer bodies are going to waste away? It is vitally important to who we are and what we are about.

But let's take that theology a little bit further. If, indeed, you are going to have a group of people who are going to be leaving this world and going up to Heaven away from this world, then this world doesn't matter. It is just a stopping point along the way. So, who cares if we pollute it, because we aren't going to be here anyway. We are going to be up there somewhere. Who cares if this world becomes totally destroyed? It doesn't matter, because we are going to be somewhere else.

Now, let's take it even a little bit further. If there is a list of people who have been naughty and are going to hell, and thankfully we - well, maybe not you and me, because I'm up here and if you are listening to me - and not really concerned about my salvation you might be in the same boat, you are going to Heaven - a different place away from those people who are damned, so what does it matter in this world if we have war and we kill them? God's already killed them. God has already damned them. They are dead in their souls, so who

cares if we blow them up - shoot them? It changes our theology; changes how we perceive others. Our theology changes the way we perceive the world in which we live.

But I believe that's not the theology that the Bible is actually talking to us about. A.) There is no grace. B.) There is works righteousness - and we better get on the right list by doing just the right thing. The Apostle Paul tells us, over and over and over again, "We can't earn it." We are all damned - except through the power of the Resurrection and the Triune God continually forgiving, healing and restoring us to new life. We can't do a thing to earn that. Everyone either is damned, or we are forgiven, healed and restored - without some rapture, or some are left behind.

I have said this, over and over again, not a single person in this world is so powerful that they can change the will and the mind of God. No human sin is so powerful that it is more powerful than God's grace. No human can sin so profoundly that God does not have the ability to forgive them through God's grace. We are not that strong and it is God's will that all of us be restored.

So what do we do with the new theology that doesn't destroy the world, negate and dehumanize others to the point [that] it is easy to go to war with them, and destroy them, and forget about them, because frankly they are all going to hell anyway?

We remember the totality of Scripture, the Old Testament and the book of Genesis, where God made the Garden of Eden and made each one of us in God's image - not just some of us who happen to be protestant, not just some of us who happen to be Christian, not some of us who happen to be white, not some of us who happen to be of a certain nationality, or live in a certain period of time. How arrogant is it to think that we are the generation that God is going to come again for, and that the Bible really wasn't written for all the previous generations? [That it is] only for this generation, because now is the time that the rapture is almost here. It was such a misrepresentation.

Scripture talks about, both in the book of Isaiah 11 and Revelations 21, of the new Heaven and the new Earth. John of Patmos said, "*I saw the new Heaven and the new earth; for the old Heaven and the old earth has passed away and the sea was no more. And I, John, saw the holy city coming down out of Heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*" The new Heaven and the new Earth. This place isn't something we can tear apart and destroy, because we are going somewhere else. As I have said before, God is recreating this place - this Earth - and making Earth and Heaven come together as one. When we act with love, openness, acceptances, inclusiveness we are bringing Earth and Heaven together, through the power of the Holy Spirit. We can't do it, but with the Holy Spirit working through us can.

I was so blessed on Thursday evening, because I saw the Spirit of God at work. Now, there are many days you go to work, even in a church, and you don't really see the Spirit all of the time. [Laughter.] But every once in a while, you get the chance and, oddly enough, it wasn't even in this building. We were downtown at the World Food Prize Center (used to be the Library downtown). It was called the Iftar Dinner. This was started in 1996 when President Clinton gathered the Muslim community together, during Ramadan, to affirm and support. The dinner happened through President Clinton's years, then George W. Bush continued to embrace these dinners in the community. I'm so impressed with George W.

Bush. Now, imagine how tough that was in 2002 - in June 2002 - and he did it. He continued to meet and have these dinners with the Muslim community.

You would get together and have speakers and recognize the relationship with the Muslim community in America, and you had speakers in the evening, and you couldn't eat until it got dark. So, I'm there on Thursday evening, we had wonderful speakers. It was just an amazing moment. But, they didn't eat until 8:46 p.m., because that was when the sun went down.

Now they were having inclusive food that I couldn't eat, so I had to go, but the speakers were marvelous. But, what made the event so meaningful, was that it was all put on by high school young people in Des Moines area, some West Des Moines, some other places in the larger metro. The reason they started putting it on was (it was started in 1996), with President Clinton, [it] continued under President Bush, [and] continued under President Obama. It stopped in 2017. There was no Iftar Dinner.

So, across the country, young people, young adults in high school started formulating these dinners. It was high school young people - including a young man named Fez who has spoken to our congregation downstairs - who formulated this event. There were a few hundred people at this event.

There were 16 different religious leaders from that many different religions and denominations represented. We all prayed, ate and learned together. [It was] profound to see high school young people setting the example of prayer, in a room of respect and inclusiveness and love.

I have never felt the grace of God abound like I did there. It reminded me that, as bleak as our world can sometimes be, that grace still abounds; that Heaven and earth are not fractured and isolated away from each other; that Heaven and hell are not some dualistic separation; but Heaven and earth - like the Irish have always known. (They talked about the "thin" places where Heaven and earth are closer at some places and moments and time.) I found a thin place on Thursday evening and it was miraculous.

It is our task to make thin places points of contact where we can be together experiencing love and acceptance, showing God's grace where all are included, rather than picking who's out and who's in, rather than scaring the hell out of people (and I mean theologically), [laughter] and showing a love that invites them in.

There should never again be some human being whose body is wasted away, flailing about until he takes his last breath - which is exactly what happened to that poor man that I couldn't reach. No one should ever be flailing about because they don't believe that God's grace can unite ever again. If you say, "If we are all going to Heaven, Scott, why do we need Evangelism?" [My response is:] Our Evangelism is to show - in a world that thinks Christianity is so barbaric - the truth of God's inclusive grace is still love.

That is the message worth sharing, the message worth living, and it is a message worth offering so other people can experience the thin places where Heaven and earth get so close that the Divine is so real. That is our task as individuals, as this church, and, like on Thursday night in our community. I pray that we are up to the task and I believe we are, because of God's grace.

Amen.