

“Extraordinary Power”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Isaiah 43:1-7; 2 Corinthians 4:6-15
May 19, 2019 - Fifth Sunday of Easter

I spent this past week at something called the Festival of Homiletics. (“Homiletics” is just a fancy word for “preaching.”) It was a conference of over 1,500 pastors from around the country and even from as far away as Iceland and Australia. We were gathered to worship and to hear lectures and sermons from some of the most accomplished preachers in the business.

It was an enlightening and energizing week. The conference was titled “Preaching as Moral Imagination” but there was a second common theme throughout the conference: how difficult it is to preach in these United States today. With so much division and anger in our country, it’s hard to bring the gospel of Christ — who stands with the poor and marginalized — to you prickly pugnacious purse-string protecting pew-possessive parishioners! I’ve never felt so blessed to be the pastor of this particular group of Christians.

Each time someone mentioned the tricky spot in which preachers find themselves, the people around me nodded, and so did I. Except I smiled a little bit, because I knew I had the easiest sermon assignment ever this week.

I’ve got a text that is hopeful. I’ve got a congregation that will always listen, even if they don’t agree. I’ve got an extremely talented music program to cover me. And, most importantly, I’ve got the baptism of a very bright and happy four-year-old, meaning nobody really cares what I say this morning as long as that kid gets some water on her head!

It is also true that my task is elementary this morning not merely because of the text and the excitement of the occasion. My job is easy because of you, the community that is baptizing Karina today.

It was nearly a year ago — just eight days shy of it — that we baptized Karina’s mom, Judy, here. Karina’s mom Pavlina was baptized as an infant in the Czech Republic. With this wonderful family having joined the church, the question arose from the two baptized moms, “What do we do about Karina and baptism?”

It’s a question designed to trick a Presbyterian. We frequently and readily baptize infants, welcoming them into God’s covenant of grace, as those who will raise them in the faith make promises on their behalf. And baptizing a child a bit older than Karina works, as the kid is able to answer weighty questions on their own with at least as much wisdom as — and maybe more than — most adults. But we were talking about a child too old to acquiesce silently and a little too young to grasp what was up.

Or so I thought.

“Precocious” is the first word I’d use to describe Karina. And I ought to know, as I’ve been her Sunday School teacher for a while now. Usually it’s just me and Karina and Nora Kane cracking each other up in the classroom connected to Miss Rose’s nursery. We read Bible stories and share about our weeks

and we always discuss what we noticed in worship that day.

Nora's little sister Reilly was baptized in October, and that gave us a lot to talk about. And then, one Sunday, Karina met me at the back of the sanctuary as everyone filed out and informed me that she had something to tell me when we got to class.

By the time I got in there, the girls were giggling nonstop. We checked in about worship and our weeks and I asked Karina what she had to tell me.

"I want to be baptized."

I was elated. But I had to press her a little bit. What did she mean by that? Why did she want to be baptized? Did she know what was going to happen?

"God loves me. Everyone at church loves me. You're going to put water on my head and pray."

Easy sermon. It's easy because she gets it. It's easy because you, the people of God, do all that hard work that makes moments like that possible.

If you walk around the ancient sites of the Holy Land, there's broken pottery everywhere. They are shards of former fragile cups and pitchers and plates and jars used to ship things.

Just about every Sunday a new jar of clay walks in here — a person taking the risk of worshiping with a church for the first time. They come looking for a new church. They come willing to give church a try. They come willing to give church a second chance.

They may not know Paul the Apostle from a character on *Game of Thrones*, or they may have a verse from 2 Corinthians tattooed on their shoulder. In my experience, from wherever they come they are looking for a place that will speak a meaningful word of hope into the afflicting, perplexing, persecuting, strike-you-down world they've seen. And they are looking for a place where earthen vessels are treated with care and filled up with a faith that requires lovingkindness and curiosity and a dream of something better than what Montgomery and Washington are cooking.

These jars of clay walk into our midst, and for decades, taking turns, you've done the hard thing. You proclaim "not crushed" and "not despairing" and "not forsaken" and "not destroyed." I get up and talk about it. You put flesh on God's Word.

You demonstrate an extraordinary power. That's why Judy and Pav and Karina and so many others have stayed and invested in this community. Her moms and I always chuckle at how excited Karina gets when she comes through the communion line. She loves bread. When the children of God are hungry for the bread of life, the people of God must offer it to them. This world is hungry for meaning. Feed it.

Paul explains that this kind of extraordinary power comes not from us, but from the one who shines light in our hearts...the one who says through the prophet: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you"

We will do the lovely thing, the sweet thing, the easy thing in just a few minutes. We'll pour water and make promises and y'all are gonna try to sing a hymn that always gets caught in my chest while I take

Karina around and introduce her to you. This is the easy thing because for us baptism is a tangible, visible sign of what God has already done in claiming Karina as beloved.

The hard thing remains — loving this child and all the other children and the jars of clay that have yet to walk in our doors and the chipped vessels we encounter out there in this world. Loving them all when they test the limits of our love. Loving them when the afflictions and the perplexing questions, the persecutions and striking down make this life feel so tenuous and gritty and *smashable*.

Thankfully we are not on our own. Christ will call our name and remind us that we are resurrection people, and we are resilient. We have the prophets of the ages telling us “you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you,” We have an extraordinary capacity to see each other not as vessels to be used and tossed aside, but as fragile containers, needing nurture and patience and grace, yearning to be filled with wisdom and hope and love.

Through the God of everlasting grace, we believe and so we speak, and the hard thing to do works its way into our bones and we find that our jars of clay can accomplish so much in relationship with other jars of clay. Every moment that the people of God are together and offering praise is a sacred moment. But let us not fail to notice the extraordinary when we have it, together. Thanks be to God!

Now — let’s get baptizing!