Luke S. Oliver August 9, 2009
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Good morning.

It's kind of strange to come back here and realize that there are a good many of you that I don't know. I used to feel like I knew everyone, but of course that was about eight years ago when I was still in high school. Anyway, for those of you that don't know me...I'm Luke, I'm Gregg's son. I'm not a pastor. In fact this is my first "sermon" that I've ever given. So bear with me if I'm a little nervous or scattered.

I've been planning to come home this weekend for Brian and Regan's wedding yesterday and my dad and Cal Hart and a few others thought it would be a good idea for me to share with you about my upcoming journey to Alaska and before I knew it, I had to step up to Nick Brandenberg's level and give a whole "sermon." So here I am.

Well, let me start off with telling you about Alaska. Many of you have already heard about this, and if you haven't...that means that I don't have your email address and so if you would like to hear from me over the course of the year, and I would love to be in contact with all of you, then you should see me after the service...anyway, Alaska...

I have been given the opportunity join the staff at Alaska Christian College as adjunct faculty, registrar and probably about five other jobs. I'm going to be teaching ethics this fall, which should be a challenge given that I've never taken an ethics class or really studied the subject per se. But I always love a good challenge.

ACC is located in Soldotna, Alaska. This is a big city by Methow standards, about 4000 people, about a three hour drive from Anchorage. It is a part of the Covenant church and in fact they serve as a essentially a mission agency within the Covenant. All of the staff up there, including me, are unpaid missionaries. I am relying on support from churches and individuals to go about this mission. I am in need of about $1200-1500 per month over the next nine months to cover my expenses. I am already well on my way to reaching that minimum goal, but am still in need of a bit more to close that gap.

ACC exists to serve Native Alaskan people groups, Inuit and Yupik and others.

because the Native Alaskan villages are rampant with depression, with alcoholism, with physical and sexual abuse, with suicide. There is no hope for life in these villages. Keith Hamilton, the president of ACC, told me a story of going into a grocery store in one village...there was a man standing outside the door who asked him to buy a gallon of milk. "They won't let me inside the store anymore," the guy said, he had come inside drunk too many times. The guy gave Keith some money and Keith thought, "No harm in buying a gallon of milk." So he did. He came back out and handed it to the man and then watched as the man walked over to his truck, dumped half of the milk out of the jug, then refilled it from a can of diesel fuel and began to drink.

These villages are desperate.

These are neglected peoples. The history of the United States' relationship to Native groups hasn't been stellar. Alaskan natives perhaps did a bit better than some others, but nevertheless, they have been an oppressed people group in the midst of a culture that has had little compassion for those entrenched in difficult and unjust situations. We are a culture that believes in the American Dream...a doctrine that says, "Just work harder...You can be anybody or anything...If you are poor, then you only have yourself, your own laziness, your drunkenness, your own choices to blame." Maybe we don't say it explicitly. But this idea is embedded in the American psyche.

These villages are desperate. They are desperate for more than a church. They are desperate for more than a sermon about giving their hearts to Jesus. They are desperate for more than condemnation over their sins. They are desperate for transformation. A transformation that comes only through the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. A transformation that isn't about getting to an ethereal afterlife or a salvation from Hell. They are looking to have their present reality transformed from hopelessness to hope***ful***ness. They are desperate for a theology of life...true, rich, real, abundant life.

I want to suggest that for most of the history of the church, Christians have within a theology of death. This theology is characterized by an emphasis on the depravity of humanity, on our sinfulness, on death and afterlife, and on going to Heaven. Sadly, this has all too often been used as an excuse...

It's an excuse for us to be imperialistic in our evangelism...we as Christians have got it right, so let's push our religion on everyone else and if they don't accept it, to Hell with them. Forget about what they might have to offer us, Truth is found in Jesus, in the Church.

It's an excuse for the neglect of the earth. We can rape the world of it's resources without concern for what it looks like a hundred or a thousand years from now because odds are Jesus will have come back by then. Let's take what we can while we can because it doesn't matter if we lose another few thousand species of plants and animals this year...we'll lose them all pretty soon!

Perhaps worst of all, it's an excuse for us to promote and maintain the status quo. We say to the poor, to the oppressed, "Don't worry. This life is bound to suck. That's the result of sin. Just suck it up and wait until Jesus comes back and then the last shall be first and you'll be ok." But for now, we worry more about our rights, our economic security, our Way of Life...we distance ourselves from the fallout consequences of our actions, from the fact that the demand for resources that our way of life creates greatly contributes to conflicts all over the world, like ongoing civil wars in Africa, in places like the Congo and Uganda and Sudan.

I came up here this weekend with a few friends. That's Bryce, Kate, and Jordan sitting back there. I don't want to embarrass them, but they are doing some cool stuff. Kate has spent a good portion of the past few years over in Africa, working with refugees,

relief, and aid. I wish that she could get up here and speak to you for a few Sundays...I'm sure she'd be more interesting than me. I've learned a lot from Kate about his, though, about how the aid money that the US gives to Uganda to help fight the warlords that are abducting child soldiers...in the end that money is too enticing...and so the Ugandan government puts on a show of going after this group, the LRA, but in the end, just let's them go so that they can have more money.

We protect our way of life and the status quo through our fear of change, through our fear of the outsider. In the end, we are afraid that someone is going to take what we believe is ours...but what this really boils down to is that we are afraid that we will not have a leg up on the rest of the world. And so we milk whatever we can get out of life and believe that we deserve it. We protest policies that seek to give a hand to the poor if it comes at the expense of the wealthy. We shut our borders to immigrants because we don't want them coming to the land of opportunity and taking our jobs.

My friend, Jordan there works in Portland as a paralegal for a firm that deals with immigration law, specifically among the Latino population. Jordan has been educating me over the past year or so, telling me stories of families that are ripped apart, of people who are denied asylum in the US because of some bureaucratic process and sent home to violent circumstances. She even convinced me to go with her a couple of months ago from Portland to Tacoma with a group called the New Sanctuary Movement, for a protest at an immigration detention center. This is a facility where immigration detainees are held while they are processed and usually sent home unless they can get ahold of legal help to get them asylum in the US. This facility currently holds about a thousand detainees with an expansion in progress for another 500. The facility is owned and run by a private company that the government contracts to hold these undocumented immigrants who were picked up for things as silly as having a brake light out or trying to make an honest wage or standing around on the street when the wrong person walks by. This company gets paid $95 per head, per night...that's nearly one hundred thousand dollars per night to hold mothers of children, fathers who are trying to feed their families, teenagers who would like to go to school. Families are ripped apart as most of these are sent back to their home countries, sinking them further into the cycle of poverty and oppression.

Where is the justice? Where is the gospel of Jesus Christ in this situation? Where is the release for the captives, the freedom for the oppressed, the gospel for the poor? Can we as Christians really turn our backs on a situation such as this and say, "Sorry. You didn't wade through the correct red tape. We realize that your home country is dangerous or that there is no work or food for you there or that you are a law-abiding, tax-paying resident...but you'll have to leave."

These are the consequences of the theology of death.

But I do not worship a god of death. You do not worship the god of death. We worship the God of Life. And this God abhors death in any and every form that it takes. He abhors death that comes through disease, through hunger and starvation, through

murder and neglect, through suicide bombers as well as through military bombers, through collateral damage, through depression, through deforestation, through greed and hoarding, and through selfishness that causes us to look out only for ourselves.

He is the God of Life. And the worship of the God of Life demands a theology of life.

Turn with me to Luke 4. This is the passage where Jesus begins his ministry in the Gospel of Luke. He's just getting started here.

Luke 4: When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:
18 "The Spirit of the Lord Yahweh is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."
Luke 4.20 And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus started his ministry by talking about freedom from oppression, about release and healing, about abundant life. If we read through the teachings of Jesus we find that he has a lot more to say about life here and now than about life in the hereafter. Jesus is concerned with what happens on the earth. He is concerned about the poor and oppressed...and not just the Christian poor and oppressed. He is concerned for everyone whether they recognize him as Lord or not. He is concerned for the sparrows and the lilies. Just because the Bible says God cares for you and I more than the sparrows and lilies does not mean that he doesn't care about them at all. It's just that we are special.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is about life. And we are called to pursue rich, abundant life for all people. The gospel demands it. Jesus demands it. In fact, it's my belief that when Jesus lambasts the Pharisees, he is critiquing their failure to live out a theology of life, their failure to love their neighbors. And the reason that he is so harsh with them is because they are the ones who are so close, they have so much potential for good...

You see, the Pharisees get a bad rap among Christians. And I think that it's a bit unfair. Here's the story: back in the 8th century BC, the Israelite people were divided into two nations...the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. In the 8th century, the Assyrian empire came in and destroyed the northern kingdom. A hundred and some years later, the Babylonian empire came in and took the southern kingdom as well. As the Israelites were carried off into exile, they began to ask why...why would

Yahweh God abandon them and let them be destroyed? Why would God let these evil, pagan nations defeat them? Despite their sins, weren't they at least better than Nebuchadnezzar? You see, for Israel, the concept of salvation was tied to the land. Hebrew theology didn't have much concept of an afterlife. Yahweh's salvation was all about covenant, the covenant that Yahweh promised to Abraham to give him the land of Israel. Living in the land, possessing he land, being the chosen people...that was salvation...that meant that they were in covenant, in relationship with Yahweh.

So what did it mean when they were taken from the land by these pagan nations? Well, they said, obviously it is because Yahweh let us be conquered, because we failed to live up to our side of the bargain...we were told that if we didn't uphold the Law that we would be destroyed." And so when they Jews were allowed to return to the land, a priestly sect developed that sought to guard against another ghastly defeat and exile by creating a buffer zone around the law. "We're not supposed to work on the Sabbath," they said, "So let's define work...and let's make sure that we are thorough enough that we don't get caught off guard and sin accidentally...let's say that dragging a stick is work because it's kind of like plowing...so you can't drag a stick on the sabbath." And so they went, creating an oral tradition to interpret the law.

And This is where the Pharisees came from. They were the ones who very, very truly and rightly and honestly wanted to be holy, to be righteous, to pursue relationship with God. But as they did that, they became concerned with what they should NOT do, more so than with what they should do. They were concerned with those who weren't living up to the high standards they set for themselves. It was those sinners who actions kept Israel from being an independent, holy nation. If those guys would stop failing, stop sinning, then we would be holy and Yahweh would liberate us from our oppressors.

And so more and more, very slowly, the Pharisees in their pursuit of loving God drifted away from truly loving their neighbors. They were very sincere in their worship of God. But in doing so, they lost their concern for seeking justice, for seeking the welfare of all people, for seeking abundant life.

And so here's the crux...Are we, Christians, the new Pharisees? Are we the ones who are getting in the way of the good news, the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Are we so set in our beliefs and our doctrines and our Sunday rituals and our morning devotions and our prayer that we have failed to see, failed to help bring about the Kingdom of God in our world? Have we abandoned our post as prophets to our culture, as the one's who speak up and call our culture and our nation to account for the injustices perpetrated in our names? Do we lament and mourn the death of Islamic militants, of Somali pirates, of Sudanese refugees, of Alaskan teenagers who are stuck in a cycle of alcoholism and abuse?

It is time for you and me, for Christians, for the Church, to once again rise up as the prophetic voice, the voice which cries out against injustice, and against oppression, against our government when our government is wrong...when there are democrats sitting in the White House AND when there are Republicans sitting in the White House.

It is time that we speak not only against the taking of life through abortion but against the taking of life through war. It is time that we sought the good of our neighbors down the street and across the country and across the world.

This is justice. This is righteousness. This is the pursuit of God.

When Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, and after forty years of wandering in the desert, he stood on the brink of the promised land, a land which he would not enter. He had led Israel through their complaining, their failures, their lack of trust in Yahweh. He at times stood between Israel and God pleading to him to not destroy the entire nation for their idolatry. He had given them the law and taught them who God was and what he was like. And so as they stood on the brink of the promised land, just before he died, Moses gave one last speech...this is the book of Deuteronomy. In this speech, Moses retells the story of Yahweh God's relationship to Israel. He reminds them of the law, of what it means to pursue God. He reminds them that this means taking care of the poor, the widows, the orphans, the aliens in their midst. And he tells them of the blessing that will come if they follow this law...blessing not because of how Yahweh will be pleased with them, but blessing because everyone would be better off when everyone is taken care of. But he also warns them of the consequences of their failure to follow the law, of how they will be torn apart from inside and out by strife and war. Again, not simply because of Yahweh's anger, but because the Torah, the law is a recipe for good relationships and abundant life.

And so after laying out the blessings and curses, Moses comes to the pinnacle of his speech in Deuteronomy 30.15:

Deut. 30.15 See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. 16 If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. 17 But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, 18 I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. 19 I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, 20 loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

So choose life. Choose to live in the theology of life. Choose to pursue justice and righteousness. Choose to participate in the Kingdom of God coming to earth, seeking the good of not only yourself, not only your culture, not only your country, but of all people. Cry out against death and and lament injustice in whatever form it takes. Choose life.
Thanks for listening. Would you pray with me.