

The Office: an Easter Parable

Preached by Rev. Dan Whitmarsh on April 4, 2010

Lakebay Community Church, Lakebay, WA

It can be listened to at <http://LakebayCC.sermon.net/sermonid/2380055>

Sermon texts:

Colossians 2:8-15

Luke 24:33-49

I suppose it was the loneliness that was the worst. Sure, there was the mind-numbing drudgery, there were the office games, there was the sarcasm and the gossip and the so-called practical jokes, but in the end, it was the loneliness. Getting up every day and eating my bowl of cold cereal, fighting traffic into the office, sitting there at my desk all day, surrounded by people but not really knowing anybody, then fighting traffic home and sitting in front of the TV all night, watching other people laugh and live and fall in love.

Life wasn't supposed to be this way. We all grew up watching Friends and thinking we'd find ourselves in that world; hanging out every night with our best friends, going on adventures, experiencing all sorts of crazy things, falling in and out of love but always having a place to belong, and friends to share it all with.

But that's not how it worked out. I don't really know why – I always figured I'd goofed up along the way, I'd missed out on the opportunities to make friends, that something was wrong with me, or otherwise people would invite me along, would want to spend time with me. Somehow. . .life just didn't work out that way.

It's not like I didn't have any life, though. Sometimes I'd go out with a few coworkers on a Friday night; we'd go out for drinks, once a year or so we'd head over to Safeco for a Mariners' game. We had the annual Christmas party, and the Halloween monster bash. And I had a few friends leftover from college; about once a month we'd connect on facebook and decide to get together for a movie or a trip to the beach when the sun was out.

But really, at the end, I still felt alone. Even when I was with those people, I couldn't shake the nagging feeling that they didn't really want me there, didn't like me all that much. And the truth was. . .I'm not sure I really liked them, either. They were a way to fill the time; we had some laughs and talked about sports and politics, but never really got that involved in each other's lives.

At work. . .it was even worse. It could be vicious there.

You might say that gossip was considered fine sport at work. That back-biting, that spreading rumors, that dissing people, insulting people, playing pranks on others were all considered normal behavior. There was the usual back-stabbing to get ahead; the lies told to the boss, the sabotaged reports. Then there were these four guys who worked in sales, who really made life miserable for everybody else. They were the hot shots; they drove the expensive cars, they took

their clients to expensive restaurants, they knew the company counted on them, and would back them up. They pretty much dominated the office.

I remember one time; it was really just a little thing. I'd gone into the lunch room and sat down with one of the newer girls; we were talking about past jobs, where we'd lived and worked, gone to college – that sort of stuff. Nothing serious, but it was nice to have a real conversation. Until Tony came in. "Got a new girlfriend there, I see," he said. It got really awkward. I looked at her, she stared at her sandwich. I told him "No Tony, we're just having lunch." "Not what it looks like to me," he said. A couple of his buddies came in behind him. "Hey, look! We've got a new couple in the office! I'm setting up a pool on how long it'll be until the first kiss." They all joined in.

Eventually they all left, but she and I really didn't have anything else to talk about. Every time we saw each other after that it was just weird, so we pretty much avoided each other.

Two more stories.

Jack was one of my co-workers, and actually a decent guy. Always had something nice to say. He remembered people's birthdays, he would stop by your desk and talk about life and personal stuff. He was one guy who gave me hope for this office. . .so one day, Jack had an important presentation to make, but somehow, before he got up there, these idiots got into his computer and messed it up. Nothing too obvious, nothing that would make it clear that this was all a joke – they just messed his numbers up, they changed the order of his slides, they moved a few things around, so that Jack looked like the idiot. I happened to look over and see the four amigos sitting back there, snickering; as we all left I saw them high-fiving each other. It was obvious this was their work. Surprisingly. . .Jack didn't say a word. He didn't get mad. He just apologized to everybody for not being prepared, and went on to the next thing.

One more. Every night around 5, as we were all getting ready to go home, the cleaning crew would show up. I knew one or two of them casually – we always said "hi" as we passed in the hall. I tried to show some appreciation for the work they did, because I knew they worked long hours and didn't get paid much. And some, like Rosa, are trying to raise a family on the meager income they make cleaning up our messes.

So this one time – it was right before Christmas. We'd had an office party, so it was kind of messy to begin with. And I think somebody had added a little something to the punch, because people were acting goofier than normal. And so it happened – we were heading out, and Rosa and her crew were walking in. . .and one of these guys says really loudly, "here, let me help you out." And tipped the punch bowl over on the floor. Which got everybody else going; pretty soon there were tater tots flying across the room, Christmas decorations thrown on the ground, jello salad dumped in the corner. And when it was done somebody shouted 'Feliz Navidad, cleaning suckers!' and everybody left.

You can understand why I didn't really like these people. Why none of us ever really got along with each other. Why we all mostly went about our business, trying not to stand out, not to get in the crosshairs of these crazy people. And yet. . .like I said, it was lonely. You can imagine living

in such a caustic atmosphere, where at any moment you might become the butt of the next joke; where any time you try to make a friend you just get laughed at, where you can only go along with the joke – if you try to fight back it only makes it worse. It was miserable.

It finally came to a head a few months ago, last spring. It was a sunny day so I decided to eat lunch outside. As I bit into my chicken salad sandwich Jack came by, asked if he could join me. We talked for a bit – he asked how I was doing, even seemed to care about my answers to his questions. So I asked him about his presentation – why didn't he try to fight back? Why didn't he get angry and tell those guys off? "You can't beat them at their own game," he told me. "They just act that way because they're insecure, too. They try to make themselves look funny, they try to dominate the whole office social scene, but it's only because they're miserable, too. What good would it do if I tried to get some revenge? If I made them look like fools in front of everybody else? They'd just have to one-up me, to gain back their power, and the cycle would keep going on. You just have to forgive them and keep moving on. Maybe one day they'll be honest enough with themselves about what they're doing, and cut it out. Maybe not. . .but the only way to really beat them is to respond to their games with forgiveness, with kindness. Otherwise, this whole office will be destroyed."

It made me think. . .but we had to get back to work, so I said 'goodbye' and headed to the office. Later that night, though, I saw it in action.

Some of us had gone out for drinks and something to eat at a local hangout spot, we were sitting in a corner booth; it was loud and dark in there. We were talking about college basketball, I think. Across the room near the door were our four salesmen, the four amigos; they were the loudest group in the room. I was a bit surprised to see Jack standing up against the far wall; he seemed to be in deep discussion with a person I'd never seen before. Anyway, we were all out for fun. . .but then Rosa and her crew walked in the door. Which probably wouldn't have been a problem, except one of the sales guys saw her and had to make a sarcastic remark about the 'servants mucking up the place.' I saw Rosa stiffen, but she and her girls kept walking past, toward a booth in the back. Only this guy didn't want to be ignored. So he made another remark, something about her inability to 'understand the English language?' The girls kept walking.

So this guy, and his buddies, get up and walk back to the booth where Rosa had sat. And started talking tough, a little threatening. Like a dirty kind of flirting, almost. It got awkward really fast. And we could tell it wasn't going to end well.

But at that moment Jack walked up, calmly but with an intent I hadn't noticed before. "C'mon guys, let's leave the ladies alone for a night, okay?"

"Why don't you butt out" was their reply.

"No, I just think these women are here to have a good time by themselves; this place is big enough for all of us. Let's just calm down and let them be."

I'll tell you, Jack had accomplished one thing. The guys were no longer interested in the ladies sitting there. Instead, they were all focused on Jack him.

“Mind your own business, Jack,” one said.

“I would, but Rosa doesn’t deserve to be treated this way. I’m just trying to keep anything bad from happening.”

Steve, the biggest guy in the bunch, got up in Jack’s face. He pushed Jack back a bit. “We’re just trying to have some fun, too, and don’t like you getting in our way.” But Jack wouldn’t back down. Calmly he told them “It doesn’t have to be like this. We could all enjoy this night, without all these games you’re playing.”

“Oh, so you think it’s a game, do you? Well, I don’t. I think this is serious.” And with that he knocked Jack to the floor. Before Jack could get up, one of the other guys had dumped his beer over Jack’s head. They all laughed. . .but then Jack stood, and looked them in the eye.

“I told you, it doesn’t have to be like this. You’re just making everybody miserable – yourselves included. Come sit down, and let me show you how much better it can all be. . .”

But that was too much. They knocked him back down – one kicked him hard in the chest, another kicked him in the gut. They were like pack animals with the scent of their prey – they couldn’t control themselves. We jumped up – for a moment – but the scene was horrifying. I seemed paralyzed, until I looked down and caught Jack’s eye. It was weird; I could tell he was in pain, but where I expected rage and anger, or even resignation, I saw none of that. It was almost. . .contentedness. Peace. Acceptance.

They picked him up and carried him outside – we followed at a distance. Soon I think he was unconscious, and still they kicked and stomped. . .right up until we heard sirens in the distance. And then they drifted away, and I ran. I ran in anger, I ran in disbelief, I ran in shame that I hadn’t done anything to stop it. . .I ran home to my lonely little apartment, where I spent the weekend locked inside, watching mindless television and sleeping the nights away accompanied by dark dreams.

Monday morning I got up like normal; ate breakfast, left for work. I had no idea what to expect. Would everybody just pretend it never happened? Would it all just go back to normal? Would these guys ratchet up their games, now that they had tasted blood? Would it always be intimidation like this?

But a funny thing happened. I sat down at my desk, and found a note with a phone number. All it said was “call” – and then the number. It wasn’t signed, didn’t say if it was work-related or what. So I warmed up my coffee, sat down at my desk, and called.

It was Rosa who answered. She sounded. . .excited. “I went with Jack to the hospital. He spent a couple days there, but they let him out earlier this morning. I was going to take him home, but he said he had something to take care of first. We’re on the way to the office right now. Meet us outside, at the picnic table in 15 minutes.”

And so I found myself there 10 minutes later; I watched Rosa's car pull up, watched as she and Jack walked over to where I sat – I was stunned to see Jack so soon, stunned to see him back at the office in the first place. And he came bearing gifts – he offered me a cup of coffee and sat down.

“So. . .what are you going to do? Report them? Get them fired? Get back at them?” I asked.

Jack shook his head. He paused, and then he said, “You still don't get it, do you? All these guys know is this game of domination, this game of humiliation, this endless cycle of trying to destroy everybody else. If I go in there and try to get some revenge, they will never learn. Nobody will learn.”

“But Jack,” I said, “you can't just let them get away with everything they did!”

“Listen,” he responded. “Why do you think they act they way they do? People aren't supposed to act this way, they're not programmed to act this way. They act this way because they're broken, and there's only one remedy for that brokenness. Can you guess what it is?”

“A really big stick?” I guessed.

“No. That's what a lot of people think. But the only true remedy for this kind of brokenness is love. These guys only act the way they do because they're afraid, too. They're lonely, they're ashamed of themselves, they think nobody will respect them unless they act tough. If we go in and try to get revenge, try to punish them, it will really just be stooping to their level. If there's any hope for these guys, they need to experience love. Which means I'm going to walk in there, and tell them that I forgive them.”

“What?” I asked. “Forgive them? After what they did to you?”

“Yes. I'm not saying what they did was right. It was wrong. Completely, utterly, horribly wrong. They deserve to be punished. But I'm going to let it go. I'm going to forgive them and love them. Because that's the only hope of changing all this.”

“But that doesn't make any sense,” I argued.

“Let me ask you something. How should I treat you right now?”

“What do you mean?”

“You saw me lying there, you watched it happen. . .and you ran away, didn't you?”

“I suppose you're right. But I don't know what else I could have done.”

“Well, maybe not just you. But all your friends were there, too. You saw what they were doing to Rosa. And none of you did anything. So I'm not sure that you have the moral high ground to judge those other guys. In a way, you're just as guilty for doing nothing.”

I have to admit, that struck home. It stung. I didn't want him to be right. . .but he was. All these years, we'd all just gone along with it. We'd put up with it. Sometimes we'd even joined in with it.

Then Rosa spoke up. "It's okay," she said. "I forgive you. I'm not mad at you."

I won't claim that everything changed in that moment, that the skies parted and the angels started singing and I won the lottery the next day. . .but something inside of me stirred. Some piece of me that had been left for dead started to breathe, just a tiny bit.

Jack went on. "I know you're lonely. I know it all seems so pointless. So let me tell you a little secret: This is the way this world works. Everybody's broken, everybody's ashamed. There's this sickness deep down inside of everyone, but they won't admit it. So they act out like this, playing these games - the put-downs, the teasing, the practical joking, even the abuse: It's just a mask people use to avoid the pain of facing their lonely reality. But it's a never-ending cycle, it's like a feedback loop. Violence leads to more violence, which leads to more loneliness and brokenness, which leads to more of this stuff. And on it goes. In the end there is only one solution, one perfect answer: love. And the only way to express that love is through forgiveness. So I'm going to go back up there and see those guys, I'm going to look them in the eye, and I'm going to tell them I forgive them. And I might just invite them to sit down and talk it over with me, see if I can't get past that hard shell of theirs, see if I can't get them to admit their pain, their need for validation. See if I can't get them to own up to all this, and change."

"Wow," I said. "I'm impressed you can do all that. I never could."

"Well, that's just it," said Jack. "I need you to. I need you to find that place where my forgiveness touches your heart, and see if you can't forgive those guys for all they've done to you. I need you to love them, too. Rosa's already told me she's in. If you come along, that's three of us. I may or may not be enough. . .but with all three of us, and if we can find some others to join in with us. . .we might just save this place yet. So what do you say? You know I care about you, right? You know I love you. I've always been your friend, always looked out for you. So let's go treat those guys the same way; let's go be their friends. Let's flood this place with forgiveness, and love, and see if we don't transform the world."

C.S. Lewis calls this story of the cross and resurrection "the strangest story ever told" because it flips the world on its head. Frederica Matthews-Green asks "What did Easter change? Easter changed everything." Alistair McGrath writes that "the resurrection can be seen as the pledge of God's ultimate victory over the disorder which plagues his creation on account of the fall. Death is the greatest enemy, and yet death has been defeated by God through Christ. And so we are given hope that the remainder of the powers and forces that confront us are similarly being defeated and their power broken." Earlier we read Paul's words about how Jesus disarmed the powers and authorities, by making a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them on the cross.

The cross of Friday, and the empty tomb of this morning tell us much, but let me highlight 4 quick things:

First, the cross reminds us of the awesome reality of evil. If this world was just a little bit messed up, God would have shown up with a mop. The fact that God came incarnate in Jesus to die tells us that sin is a very real problem. Some of you know that. Some of you have felt the sting of sin at very deep, broken places. Some of you go to work every day and think “I am more than miserable; I cannot stand this place.” You have felt abuse; you have felt anger and wrath. Sin is not just a little problem that we can fix with a self-help book. The brokenness at the center of this universe runs so deep that Jesus had to come and die a horrific death to fix it. We dare not look at these little games; we dare not look at people and decide just to put on a happy face and feel good about it. The cross tells us that sin is very real; it validates the pain, the suffering, the brokenness we feel.

But more importantly, the cross and the resurrection are the greatest display of love that we could ever imagine. I know there’s a theological strain that gets all worked up about the wrath of God, but what does that most famous of verses say? “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son.” And “that God demonstrated his love in this, that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.” Christ went to the cross in love, and even from the cross he cried out, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

For me, one of the greatest revelations of this entire story was when I realized Jesus, having the worst abuse this world could heap upon him, abuse and pain and sorrow and suffering like none of us will ever face – he shows back up and what’s the first thing he does? He speaks tenderly to Mary. He breaks bread with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. And he shows up to the disciples who had abandoned him in his greatest hour of need and the first word out of his mouth is “Shalom.” “Peace. Do not be afraid.”

Jesus did not come back saying, “Now you’re getting’ it!” He came back and said, “Don’t you understand? This was God’s loving plan from the start.”

The cross reveals just how strong evil is. The cross and resurrection also point out how much stronger is the love of God.

Third, as we read in Colossians, the cross laid bare the farce that is the powers, the authorities, the games we play. The Jewish leaders, the Roman leaders - they thought they were in control. They thought through their power games, through their manipulations, that they had won. Satan and all his forces, through lying and manipulating and stealing – they thought that they had won. And yet they crucified the one who never deserved to die, and from the cross Jesus mocks them. He says “this is the worst you can do to me? Look at me. I’m coming right back.”

Yes, the games still exist. Yes, we face them from the moment we are on the junior high playground all the way up until we hit the retirement community. The games of domination, the games of humiliation. Yet the love of God says it’s an empty mask. It has no hold, it has no power. It’s an empty shell. Christ humiliated them; he made a public spectacle of them. And we who are in Christ can laugh at the world and say, “You can’t touch us. Do your worst to us. We are held fast in Christ and he wins. And so we win.”

And yet all this happens under this rubric of love and forgiveness. Evil is not defeated with more evil. Power is not defeated with more power. Instead it's defeated with love. It's defeated with a loving display on the cross, and so comes our call to go and do likewise. When Jesus gathered with his disciples he taught them from the scriptures, and then he said, "And you will be my witnesses to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth."

Here at Lakebay we're in the middle of a series going through the book of 1 Peter, and Peter hammers this point home over and over again: Christ suffered. In his suffering is the redemption of the world. So, too, we endure suffering gladly, never returning evil with evil but with forgiveness, with love and gentleness and respect. We endure it all knowing that the redemption of the world comes through love and forgiveness. And so as Christ on the cross cried out "Father, forgive them," as Christ returned back to the world and said "I still love you, I still give you my forgiveness," so do we change the world by receiving the power of Christ's death and resurrection in our own lives, and by being like Christ, a people who endure suffering, a people who offer love and forgiveness. We respond to the world not in the manner of the games they play, but by looking people in the eye and saying, "It's okay. God loves you. I forgive you."

It may not change the world instantly. You may not go back to school and say "It's okay, I love you and forgive you" and see everything suddenly change. For many of the disciples it got worse. And yet this is the model that is laid out before us. Brokenness, shame, and evil come to an end when we take them and drop them at the cross. They are absorbed into Christ; he removes them and replaces them with love and forgiveness. As we are Christ's children in this world, so too do we love and forgive this world, until evil is finally defeated once and for all.