



seven week sermon notes for church leaders

40acts 2015

For use during Lent 2015: 18th February – April 4th 2015

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series introduction

what is 40acts?

40acts is a generosity challenge, which invites people to do Lent a bit differently.

During the forty days of Lent, 40acts participants will be invited to take part in forty simple acts of generosity, which will challenge them to 'do Lent generously' in 2015.

Lent marks a pivotal point in the history of the church, when Jesus prepared to give himself up as a sacrifice.

Traditionally we mark Lent by giving something up, but what if it could be more than that? What if Lent was a preparation for a lifetime of big-heartedness?

Small acts of generosity, performed by thousands of people across the UK and beyond, have the power to make a big change to our communities, to our churches and ultimately, to our world.

how to use this resource

These seven sermon outlines - each one looking at a different sign of generosity taken from Jesus' life - are designed to help your church explore generosity by sharing with you ideas and Biblical principles that underpin the Easter message.

Because we know that churches come from a wide range of denominations, we've chosen not to provide you with fully scripted sermons. Instead, we have given you the **key ingredients** and added in some essential questions, allowing you to complement these with anecdotes and take the detours that will work best for your congregation.

about this series

'Signs of generosity: the book of John' is the 40acts Together 2015 seven-week sermon series for pastors and church leaders.

Thematically, the seven studies weave in an understanding of generosity, God's 'indefinable gift' (2 Corinthians 9:15) to us.

These seven studies draw their ideas from the miraculous signs of Jesus in the Book of John. The gospel writer places these signs in the early chapters of his narrative so the reader can begin to ask and answer two important questions: First, 'Who is Jesus?' and second, 'What did He come to do?'

One of the traditional signs, Jesus walking on water, has been replaced in this series with what we have called Jesus' last miracle: His forgiving of those who executed Him on the cross.

The cross, when seen as a final sign, also points to who Jesus is and what He came to do. He is the Son of God who came to save us by His death. He is the One who offers us forgiveness and eternal life through the power of His resurrection.

Lent is a period of seven weeks before Easter when people are especially sensitive to spiritual values and are asking these and other questions. However, the sermon outlines can be used at other times of the year or as standalone.

'Signs of generosity - the Book of John' sermon notes can also be used alongside the linked small group resources through which people can begin to meditate on Christ, to reflect on the significance of the cross, and to celebrate His resurrection. Using the material in a small group setting, people can examine each sign by looking at some study questions that build to a recurring vital question: 'What do these signs say about Jesus?' This question is the summary prompt at the end of each study.

week one: generous with our will and purpose

key focus –

Sometimes being generous requires us to change

key bible feature – Jesus changes water into wine

John 2:1-11

On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples. When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now there were six stone water jars there for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. And he said to them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the feast." So they took it. When the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and when people have drunk freely, then the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now." This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him. (NRSV)

key sermon framework –

Introduction

As well as being a Sunday school favourite, this passage also throws up some seemingly tricky questions for older readers. Why does Jesus do it? Why does Jesus - the physical manifestation of the unchanging, ever-constant God who placed stars into space and who measures out the rhythm of the planets - allow His mother to make Him change His mind? Does she not hear Him when He says 'my hour has not yet come'? Or does she simply choose to ignore Him? Was Jesus being in some way disobedient by his initial reluctance to act?

These are all reasonable questions, but they risk missing the wood for the trees. *Why does Jesus appear to change his mind?* **Because generosity puts people first!**

We serve a God who is willing to change plans in order to offer a practical, tangible demonstration of compassion to others.

Application

What this could mean for us...

If God in His generosity would change for us, are we willing to change for Him?

- Are we held back by fear, insecurity or doubt? How much are we willing to trust in Him, as Mary did?
- Are we willing to believe that God can change us, yet are unsure of what to do? Do we need to rethink some of our notions about what God can and cannot do through us?
- What do we need to let go of in order to be transformed? Do we allow others to encourage us to act generously, and do we reciprocate?

Jesus turned water into wine, and wedding parties can become real-time sermon illustrations.

- Remember that this was 'the first of his signs', implying there were more to follow. If we're concerned that there's a lack of transformation going on around us, perhaps we need to make the first move, trusting that more will follow.
- What situations will people face within the next few days where they could be used by God to pour out His loving generosity to others?

Church isn't made up of some who are water and others who are wine. We're all valued and viable.

- Perhaps it is time for some of us to challenge the notion that God works through pastors, church leaders and other 'professional' Christians more than He does through the rest of the congregation. All of us are tools to be used by God; all of us have the potential to express His love and generous care for others.
- What dreams and hopes of serving God have we buried? Do some of them need to be resurrected?

Exploration

Further links we can make...

Romans 8:28 reminds us of the truth about God's love for us:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

So let's worry less about the amount of time we've spent procrastinating, and instead let's focus on the ways in which God can use our attempts at generosity to bring people into contact with His love – and take action accordingly.

key worship features –

Suggested songs

- We are a shining light (Do something beautiful) – *Graham Kendrick*
- Everyone needs compassion (Mighty to save) – *Reuben Morgan & Ben Fieldling*
- Jesus, you are changing me – *Marilyn Baker*

Suggested prayer of response

Almighty God, You showed us through the life of your Son Jesus Christ, that You are willing to do something different for the sake of generosity. Please give us hearts of compassion like yours and help us to be alert to those in need of Your transforming love. Help us to be ready to be changed ourselves as we reach out to others. Show us ways to restore our relationships, our community and our world. We ask this, in the precious name of Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

week two: generous with our actions

key focus –

Generosity requires us to act, not just observe

key bible feature – Jesus and the man at Bethesda

John 5:1-18

Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals. Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. Here a great number of disabled people used to lie – the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?”

“Sir,” the invalid replied, “I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.”

Then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, and so the Jewish leaders said to the man who had been healed, “It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat.”

But he replied, “The man who made me well said to me, ‘Pick up your mat and walk.’”

So they asked him, “Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk?”

The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there.

Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, “See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.” The man went away and told the Jewish leaders that it was Jesus who had made him well.

So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jewish leaders began to persecute him. In his defense Jesus said to them, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.” For this reason they tried all the more to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God. (NIV)

key sermon framework –

Introduction

The man in the story had spent the best part of forty years waiting to make it to the healing waters. So why did Jesus ask whether he wanted to be well? Maybe it was because Jesus recognized that it is not uncommon for people, who have experienced a lifetime of disappointment, to assume that it’s their lot in life. Jesus also makes the point later that in order to be fully healed (to receive His full generosity), the man would have to respond actively. He had not just to get up and walk, but also to stop sinning.

Sometimes for us also generosity can be a profoundly disturbing thing, and we’re not just talking about those on the receiving end either. Remember the widow’s mite? Generosity is relative, not absolute; a fact that goes against the grain for many. We’d rather know just how far we have to go (so that we can stop), than be involved in a continual cycle of giving.

And yet that’s precisely what generosity is: a continual cycle, a thriving relationship, an endless flow of God-given goodness. Sometimes we will be aware of just how much we are receiving. At other times we will be aware of the extent to which God is involving us in the giving. At all times, we have an active part to play.

Application

What this could mean for us...

Are we able to see how our wrong actions have consequences?

- All of us sin and many are guilty of sin that we have been repeating for years. What would it take for us to change? What are we waiting for? Sin leaves its mark on all our lives, just as it did for the man beside the pool. The instruction to us is the same as it was to him: 'Stop sinning...' (v14)

How much potential for good are we sitting on?

- Generosity can also send ripples out far and wide. Common expressions like 'what goes around comes around' and films like *Pay It Forward* all resonate with this truth. What are the people in your community paying forward?
- Jesus' miracle at the pool led to him talking about being God's Son which led ultimately to the most radical act of generosity in action ever witnessed: the cross. Perhaps this would be a good time to remind people of the vision for your church community and help them see the part that they can each play.

Exploration

Further links we can make...

James 2:14-17 is a great passage to read alongside this:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. (NIV)

Christians have occasionally been criticised for being 'too heavenly-minded to be any earthly good'. It's good to remember that our actions are valued by God. We were made with free will and when we choose to put our beliefs into action, we give life to faith.

key worship features –

Suggested songs

- Who, O Lord, could save themselves (You alone can rescue) – *Matt Redman*
- Have courage and wait – *Jill Sutheran*
- God of Justice (We must go) – *Tim Hughes*

Suggested prayer of response

Loving Lord Jesus, as we come before you now, we are conscious of all that stands between us and stops us from entering your pool of righteousness. Help us to know forgiveness and your healing power today. Let the ripples of your love flow out from us to others. Enable us to play our part fully in the renewal of your creation. Amen

week three: generous with our possessions

key focus –

Being generous will cost us

key bible feature – Jesus and the loaves and fish

John 6:5-14

When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming towards him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "It would take more than half a year's wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!"

Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?"

Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there). Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish. When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." (NIV)

key sermon framework –

Introduction

When John D Rockefeller was asked, "how much would be enough?" he famously replied "just a little bit more". And while the quote speaks to our insatiable consumer appetites, it can also be applied to the fact that generosity should cost us. How much is enough? Just a little bit more.

None of us own any of the resources at our fingertips. Our money, our time, our talents are all just on loan. Our reputation, our sense of security, our desire to take a risk for God – all these things, which can be so powerfully used by God, are resources with which we are entrusted. So the question remains: what are we going to do with them?

The unnamed boy in the bible story gives his food. He empties his basket into Jesus' hands. He holds nothing back, and he serves as a model for us all. We will never know his name and we don't know what happened to him afterwards, but can you really imagine his life ever being given over to hoarding or withholding? Surely once you've seen Jesus work a miracle with your tiny offering, wouldn't you be hungry for more?

That same offer is available to us: to empty what we have into Jesus' hands and watch Him work wonders with the offering. All we have to do is be willing to say yes and look to meet the needs around us.

Application

What this could mean for us...

Do we see the bigger picture?

- The disciples could only see things practically. They could see only the economic, logistical and practical problems. They forgot about the power of generosity. They forgot that God's not looking for heroes, just willing servants. Are we like the disciples – overwhelmed by the scale of the problem, anxious about our lack of resources? What would it look like if we chose to be generous, to trust God and watch and wait for Him to act?
- We can probably all relate to the boy in the story – aware that what we have is no match for the need. But the most significant thing about the boy's offering was not the quantity; it was the fact that he kept nothing back for himself. He ran the risk of going hungry on a hunch that Jesus might be able do something bigger and better with his meagre resources. Are we willing to take that same risk and be, as Jesus said in Matthew 18:1-3, childlike in our trust of Him?

And what about worship?

- We talk a lot about worship these days, and sometimes it can almost appear as if we think that true worship happens when we sing the loudest. The truth is that we worship what we give our hearts to. Of course songs have a part to play in that – helping to inspire us to follow God more closely – but the true test of our worship is to be found in our actions. What are we prepared to make a sacrifice for? What are we willing to go hungry for? What are we prepared to make a fool of ourselves for? The more we can answer "God" to those questions, the greater sense of freedom we will enjoy.

Exploration

Further links we can make...

Look at 2 King's 5:1-19 to remind yourself of the story of Naaman's little servant girl and how she is generous with her words. It cost her to help him as she did, given that Naaman probably led an army that killed her parents.

Generosity is an incredibly powerful force. What problems in our own lives and those of our local community really need fixing? Could our forgiveness and grace be tools for generosity?

key worship features –

Suggested songs

- I will offer up my life – *Matt Redman*
- Jesus, all for Jesus – *Jennifer Atkinson & Robin Mark*
- God in my living (Everything) – *Tim Hughes*

Suggested prayer of response

Bountiful Lord, thank you that you are willing to take all that we offer to you and then multiply it for good. May we be willing today to give you our whole selves so that You can make us channels of grace and forgiveness in the communities in which you have placed us. Amen

week four: generous with our words

key focus –

Our words are just as valuable as our money

key bible feature – Jesus and the man born blind

John 9:13-41

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath. Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. "He put mud on my eyes," the man replied, "and I washed, and now I see."

Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath." But others asked, "How can a sinner perform such signs?" So they were divided.

Then they turned again to the blind man, "What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened."

The man replied, "He is a prophet."

They still did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they sent for the man's parents. "Is this your son?" they asked. "Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?"

"We know he is our son," the parents answered, "and we know he was born blind. But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don't know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself." His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders, who already had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. That was why his parents said, "He is of age; ask him."

A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. "Give glory to God by telling the truth," they said. "We know this man is a sinner." He replied, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"

Then they asked him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"

He answered, "I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?"

Then they hurled insults at him and said, "You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses! We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from."

The man answered, "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." To this they replied, "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" And they threw him out.

Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"

"Who is he, sir?" the man asked. "Tell me so that I may believe in him."

Jesus said, "You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you."

Then the man said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshipped him.

Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind."

Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, "What? Are we blind too?"

Jesus said, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains." (NIV)

key sermon framework –

Introduction

This is the first record within John's gospel of someone acknowledging that Jesus is the Son of God, and it is a telling passage. In a different context the silence of the once-blind man's parents could be a sign that they are giving their son the opportunity to share his own testimony. Yet in this case we read that they refuse to explain about his healing because they are afraid of losing their status within the synagogue. Fear holds them back... but not their son. He refuses to hold on to his words even though they end up costing him.

Our words matter. This is the first of the miraculous signs in the book of John where the person healed **did not ask** Jesus for healing. The expression of faith comes **after** his healing, not before. After his healing, from the overflow of his heart, the man born blind confesses Jesus as Saviour. He worships. Our words are just as much a tool for generosity as our bank balances and homes. Who are we more like in this passage? Are we like the parents, afraid of losing our place in society? Or are we like the man who knows that if not for Jesus' grace and mercy, his life would still be in darkness? When we have the opportunity to be generous with our words, they should always point to Jesus.

Application

What this could mean for us...

What or whose words are we really listening to?

- In what ways are we like the disciples, or are we like the Pharisees or the parents? The disciples were listening to their own preconceived judgements, the Pharisees were listening to their own spite, and the parents were listening to their fears.

Are we prepared to speak up for Jesus?

- Are we like the man whom Jesus healed? Do our words point people to Jesus or do they reveal more about our insecurities and fears? Perhaps this is a challenge that many of us need to hear.

Are we prepared to be better listeners?

- Can we learn to become better listeners, to reflect on others' words well, giving them time and thought, attention and love. Once we have waited, then will we choose to speak few well-chosen words - positive, brave, God-focused words? Could we become the sort of people whose words point in all ways, directly and indirectly, to Jesus?

Exploration

Further links we can make...

Writing in Ecclesiastes 6:11, Solomon's words remind us: *'the more the words, the less the meaning, and how does that profit anyone?'* (NIV)

Years later, Paul makes clear *'that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.'* (Romans 10:9, ESV)

In these days of easy social media, our words travel faster and further than they did when we were all younger. That means there's plenty of risk, but so much potential as well. Are all our words – those we speak as well as those we type – honest, bold and true?

key worship features –

Suggested songs

- May the mind of Christ – *Kate B Wilkinson*
- Give me a heart of compassion (Enable your servants) – *Jim Bailey*
- May the words of my mouth – *Tim Hughes and Rob Hill*

Suggested prayer of response

Word of Life, help us at all times to be generous in our choice of words so that they can bring peace and hope. Forgive us when we speak instead out of spite and selfishness. Give us ears to listen and tongues to speak your praise. May our hearts and minds focus first on you so that we might bring good to others. Amen.

week five: generous with our hearts

key focus –

Being generous should lead us into contact with people who are struggling

key bible feature – Jesus heals the royal official's son

John 4:43-54

After the two days he left for Galilee. (Now Jesus himself had pointed out that a prophet has no honour in his own country). When he arrived in Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him. They had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, for they also had been there. Once more he visited Cana in Galilee, where he had turned the water into wine. And there was a certain royal official whose son lay sick at Capernaum. When this man heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to him and begged him to come and heal his son, who was close to death.

"Unless you people see signs and wonders," Jesus told him, "you will never believe."

The royal official said, "Sir, come down before my child dies."

"Go," Jesus replied, "your son will live."

The man took Jesus at his word and departed.

While he was still on the way, his servants met him with the news that his boy was living. When he inquired as to the time when his son got better, they said to him, "Yesterday, at one in the afternoon, the fever left him."

Then the father realized that this was the exact time at which Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live." So he and his whole household believed.

This was the second sign Jesus performed after coming from Judea to Galilee. (NIV)

key sermon framework –

Introduction

Good parents will do anything to protect their children. They will beg and sprint and abandon themselves to the sole task of getting help for their loved ones. This father was no different, he knew his son was close to death, so he sought out Jesus and begged him to heal the boy.

This father doesn't come with false motives, just wanting to see signs and wonders from Jesus, he comes with a genuine need. He continues to plead with Jesus, knowing in his heart that Jesus can do something, even though the boy is far away. Then Jesus says the word and the boy is healed.

Jesus' compass always swings towards those in need; towards those whose hearts are broken. Our world today is broken, and no one is exempt from pain and sorrow. We all become ill, we all sin and death is part of our experience. Jesus is ready to meet us in each of those situations. None of them are off limits for Him. His generous love rescues us from guilt and shame. He covers us in his love. His love through his death and resurrection points to a complete renewal and total healing.

He lays down the path for us to follow.

Application

What this could mean for us...

What are our motives?

- Do we recognize that belief starts from the heart? It is impossible to know God through a merely intellectual process. We must surrender our will and our hearts to Him. In doing this, we acknowledge our own dependence on Him, our own sufferings, our own failings, our own brokenness. If we are to show God's love to those in need, we must first become aware of our own need for healing and hope. Are we seeking signs and wonders, looking for miracles rather than seeing the need and responding out of generosity? We need to get beyond a desire to see the miraculous and look to God to know what is best in a particular situation.
- Are we quick to love, to forgive and embrace those who are hurting or who have hurt us? Like the royal official, we should allow ourselves to be moved, disturbed and inconvenienced by the hurting and the broken in our world.

Where is the need?

- Often we wonder about what it is that God has called us to. Should we apply ourselves to this particular ministry or grasp that particular opportunity? Too often we tie ourselves in knots, when the answer can be incredibly simple. What's the need? Where are there people who are hurting? Where is there suffering or injustice? Seek them and you'll find the places and the people that Jesus would have spent time with.

Exploration

Further links we can make...

Remember the father in the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)? His response on the return of his lost son is to welcome him back fully into the family, to robe him with honour and to embrace him with love. This is a model of how God the Father loves us, and of how we should welcome the lost and the broken

Take a look at Isaiah 25 and Revelation 21 where we are reminded that '*The Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces...*' What might this mean in the life of your community? Hasn't God nearly always chosen to use other people in order to deliver His healing and comfort? Doesn't He love partnering with us to demonstrate His love?

What needs and broken hearts are there around you that God could be calling you to?

key worship features –

Suggested songs

May my life (Sacrificial love) – *Dave Bilbrough*

Bless the Lord, O my soul (10,000 reasons) – *Matt Redman & Jonas Myrin*

Hosanna – *Hillsong United*

Suggested prayer of response

Lord Jesus, when we look at our communities and at our world, we see sickness, brokenness and pain. We know that this breaks your heart too. Thank You that in Your life and death here on Earth, You experienced for Yourself both sorrow and suffering. Thank You that by the power of Your Resurrection and through the Holy Spirit You offer fullness of life to all. Help us to look at the needs of the world with right motives and a contrite heart. Help us to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with You, Our God. Amen

week six: generous with our faith

key focus –

Faith is a gift we have been given and can give

key bible feature – Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead

John 11:17-46

On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. ‘Lord,’ Martha said to Jesus, ‘if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’ Martha answered, ‘I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.’

Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?’

‘Yes, Lord,’ she replied, ‘I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.’ After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. ‘The Teacher is here,’ she said, ‘and is asking for you.’ When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there. When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ‘Where have you laid him?’ he asked. ‘Come and see, Lord,’ they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’ But some of them said, ‘Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?’

Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead

Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ‘Take away the stone,’ he said.

‘But, Lord,’ said Martha, the sister of the dead man, ‘by this time there is a bad odour, for he has been there four days. Then Jesus said, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?’ So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, ‘Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.’ When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth round his face. Jesus said to them, ‘Take off the grave clothes and let him go.’

Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.

key sermon framework –

Introduction

Not all giving is an act of generosity. There are times for each of us when we can be tempted to give because we want to assuage our guilt or get through an awkward situation. We give to make something unpleasant go away.

True generosity – the sort that Jesus modelled – is different. It is always sacrificial, sometimes painful and constantly personal. *Why embrace generosity?* **Because we are designed for relationship.** We give to demonstrate how we feel about the other person, who is often the recipient, but sometimes God himself. We give because a generous God first gave to us.

For the Christian, the most important thing we can ever give is our faith. By trusting God and doing what He says, we move closer to Him and closer to the plans He has for us. When we start to make life choices with this as our foundation, some interesting things happen. We start to see giving as an expression of gratitude to God. We stop wanting to give with strings attached. We become like Martha, able to draw strength from faith in the midst of trial and suffering.

Application

What this could mean for us...

It is often in our hardest times that we feel as though our faith is being tested. Does it have to be that way?

- By any measure, Christianity stands and falls on this one single point: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Everything in scripture points to this, from the near sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham to the death and resurrection of Lazarus. And the impact of the cross continues to affect us today. Not only does it deal with sin and make a way for us to approach our Father, it also deals in an instant with the fear that can cripple so many of us. Death, as the poet reminds us, has finally lost its sting. Our hardest times are no longer our defining moments. Our failures are not our destiny.
- Yet that does not mean that we live with a permanent smile upon our faces, unable to acknowledge the struggles in life. Jesus weeps at Lazarus' death even though he is just minutes away from being reunited from his alive-again friend. He weeps because as fully God and fully man Jesus knows that there is deep pain in the reality of death. It is good to weep over the pain.

Generous faith is easy to spot

A generous faith sees both the realities of life and death and the unseen hopeful promise of resurrected life. Generous faith sees it all: the rain and the rainbow – in the rough and when life is running well and suffering seems distant. We don't just trust God when things are difficult. We learn to trust Him long before that.

Exploration

Further links we can make...

Remember Romans 4:18-21?

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, '*So shall your offspring be*'. Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.

Abraham, as Jesus was with Lazarus' death, sees the reality that his body is '*as good as dead*' but doesn't weaken in his faith. In hope, against faith, he believes. Are there people in your community who need support as they struggle with suffering? Are there people whose faith has grown cold? Are there people within your community who just need to see for themselves what it looks like to trust God?

key worship features –

Suggested songs

- When all around is fading (Whole world in his hands) – *Tim Hughes*
- O the deep deep love of Jesus – *Samuel Turner Francis*
- Men of faith, rise up and sing – *Martin Smith*

Suggested prayer of response

Most Loving God, Thank you that you remain constant with us through all the changing scenes of life. Help us to trust you in times of joy and in sorrow. Be our shepherd in the darkness and in the light, so that we might be living beacons of hope for others. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

week seven: generous with forgiveness

key focus –

Forgiveness is a gift we have been given, and can continue to give.

'To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.'
C.S. Lewis

key bible feature – Jesus dies on the cross

John 19:28-37 / Luke 23:24

Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips. When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jewish leaders did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe. These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken," and, as another scripture says, "They will look on the one they have pierced."

As Luke's gospel tell us:

Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots.

key sermon framework –

Introduction

The passage from John details the grim agony that Jesus experienced on the cross, and in Luke's gospel we discover that this is where one of the final miracles of Jesus is delivered. It arises out of the blood and torment of the darkest moment of His life. By forgiving his killers, Jesus reminds us of his first ever miracle, saving the best wine to be served last. Forgiveness can transform even the darkest night. Forgiveness can make miracle workers of us all.

However, forgiveness is a hard thing to offer. When we are wounded and in pain, when others have mistreated and abused us, it is not easy to put aside bitterness and resentment and to forgive when an apology is offered.

Yet for Jesus there is no apology from the soldiers here. Ignorant of who He was or what they were doing, did they believe that they were in fact doing a good thing? Did they believe they were right? Rather than offering an apology, they scavenge his final possessions.

Forgiveness is a truly revolutionary thing, especially when offered to those who do not seek it or deserve it. After all, it changed everything for us, didn't it? Why shouldn't we offer it to others?

Application

What this could mean for us...

If Jesus can forgive His killers, what does that mean for us?

- Can we face the challenge – once we know we are forgiven, what can we NOT do when it comes to forgiving? There's something wonderful about this, but also a little daunting. So how do we forgive? We can only follow in His steps, follow His model. All forgiveness begins at the cross and we can only forgive one another if we have experienced His deep forgiveness. To put it another way, if we want to be able to show Christ's love and mercy to others, we have to experience it for ourselves. We all live with shame; we all know what it is to feel guilty. Let's never forget the importance of confessing our sins to God, asking for help from others if we need it and to accept without question God's forgiveness.

If we were generous forgivers, what would life be like?

- Forgiveness is air; we die without it. Jesus on the cross, struggling for breath, uses the last of his remaining strength to speak. The only thing he can do is breathe out forgiveness. What would life be like if we could forgive as naturally as we breathe? We would lay down the hurts that hold us, release people from our expectations, judgements and painful memories. We would be quicker to give and receive; gentler in giving and receiving; more loving in giving and receiving forgiveness.

Exploration

Further links we can make...

Take a look at Matthew 18:21-35 – the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant. Peter asks Jesus about forgiveness. In response, Jesus talks about money. First he tells Peter that he needs to forgive 'seventy-seven times' (Matthew 18:22, NIV). That bit of coded language would have been understood by any Jew; since seven is the number linked with godly perfection, seventy-seven (or seventy times seven, as some translations have it) stands for infinity. In other words, there should be no standby button for the mercy we hand out to others.

How would your community be different if you lived this way?

key worship features –

Suggested songs

- When I survey the wondrous cross – *Isaac Watts*
- Help us to help each other, Lord – *Charles Wesley*
- Brother, Sister, let me serve you – *Richard A M Gillard*

Suggested prayer of response

Living Lord, You call us to be a shining light, let Your fire burn in us for justice, peace and joy. You call us to be the salt of the earth, let Your cleansing power stir us to action. You call us to forgive as You forgive, let us follow your example to forgive, forgive and forgive again. Amen.

acknowledgements

About Stewardship

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