



Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church
Connecting faith with everyday life

Sermon Archives

Date: September 24, 2017

Title: "A" Students Don't Take Free Cuts

Scripture: Psalm 24: 3-5; Psalm 122: 1-2; Acts 2:45-3:1

Description: Worship is the central practice of the Christian faith. For a brief moment, once a week we go counterculture as we worship someone more important than ourselves. I challenge you to worship without missing for a month of Sundays.

East Mississippi Community College in Scooba, Mississippi specializes in recruiting drop-outs. Football drop-outs. Kids who received scholarships from big-name football programs but couldn't make it academically or violated team rules or got arrested go to East Mississippi Community College in Scooba, Mississippi for one last chance to play ball, and perhaps make it back into a big-time school.

East Mississippi Community College has won four national Junior College championships in the past five years with these kids. Drop-outs. The most challenging job in the school's athletic department is not held by the head coach, not the strength and conditioning coach, but a staff member in a closet-sized office apart from all the other athletic facilities. She's the Academic Advisor.

To remain eligible to play football, a student must maintain a 2.5 GPA. In a small community college in Scooba, Mississippi, this would not appear to be insurmountable. We're not talking Dartmouth, Harvard, or MIT. But the drop-outs at East Mississippi are not scholars. They are not in school to earn a degree; they're in school to play football and earn a scholarship at a "real" school.

For athletes and non-athletes, one aspect about college has remained unchanged forever. It's written in the U.S. constitution. Three free cuts. A student can miss three classes with no penalty. Four absences, however, and your grade drops a full letter. No negotiation, no exceptions.

The Academic Advisor gathers a small group of players in her office. It's the first full week of classes. "Guys," she pleads. "There have been three days of classes...and you've missed all three! You have no more free cuts remaining the entire semester!"

You miss one more class, you're off the team and out of school! Bye-bye!" They look at her impassively.

Like you, when I was in college, I claimed every one of the three free cuts allowed. So did everyone else I knew. I thought the three cuts were mandatory. During my junior year, I learned that the students on the Dean's List, ignoring the free cuts, never missed class. They were in on something I hadn't noticed. Attending class helps! It turned out "A" students went to class as often as possible!

In this sermon, I want to turn you into an "A" student. I want you to make an "A+" in one central element of your faith. Worship. For Christians, Sunday morning is the "game-on" time of faith. Having a Dean's List level faith is hard. It's a challenge. I want you to go for it.

These days in our culture, we are going against the grain if spend time worshipping something other than ourselves. Worship is my one hour of the week when I spend time remembering that there is something more important than me, even to me. In church at worship on Sunday morning is the one time and place where we get life right. For a short, intense hour, we put first things first. We see the world turned right side up again. In a tradition way older than us, we center on something way larger than us. We practice getting life right.

That isn't easy. It takes practice. There's no other area of our lives where we pretend something important takes no work. We think our faith has one purpose: to meet our needs. Our biggest need is to become better people than we are, to find more joy and peace in living, to make the world a kinder, more compassionate place. All these things take time and practice.

We're all about teaching our children to take practice seriously. So when the travel team calls a practice and coach pronounces it "mandatory", we go. We complain that the coaches are making life hard for us. But I admire their approach. They're putting some value on what they're doing. They're saying, "This is important. We want you here. *Your teammates are counting on you, because it won't be the same if you're not here.*" Sometimes they'll do this even on Sunday morning, which forces us to make choices. They know that practice makes a difference, and we all have to make choices.

Worship feeds our souls. What if we went to worship the way we shopped for groceries? "Yes, I knew when I moved here I'd need to look for a place to buy food. Life is better with groceries in the house. But I went to visit a couple of grocery stores and I just didn't get much out of the experience. I didn't feel like the store manager really valued me as a person. Would you believe they asked me for money?"

One place had hardly any shoppers and they were all old people. Another was stacked with brands I didn't even recognize. And the music they played in one—I didn't know a single song! Why don't they choose good music anymore?

Sure, groceries are essential, but I've looked and there just aren't any good stores out there. So I go back there from time to time, but there are a lot better things to do with my time."

If you're hungry, you're going to find a grocery store and you're going to shop there regularly. You might have to settle for one you're not crazy about, but you wouldn't give up. Nutrition is important.

This stuff takes work. God's love is unconditional and God's grace is free. But a meaningful life requires work. It isn't intense, like running from a fire; it's like running a 10K when you run and run and run all those long runs to prep for the race. You may never even actually enter an official race, but the running makes you love running more.

Worship is how people of God practice being in touch with God. That's when we do what we are created to do. We pray, speak, sing as though God were truly listening. We listen to God's word for us. We confess who we really are and what we are really like. We make peace with each other. We affirm that the God who has been involved with the world since time began is involved with us, too. We are fed and we go forth with a blessing. Doing these things regularly makes them second nature to us.

We are simply unable to do these things over time all alone. We might be by ourselves and have an experience of God in nature or on a walk wearing our headphones or watching a scene from a movie, but over the long run, we can't keep in touch with God on our own. There are faces to be seen, voices to hear, hands to touch, bread to share. Faith is a dance, a ballet with people, the dance of God.

Everything we do in worship teaches us that we are not alone. We are not alone. Everything in culture leans towards the message that we are, in fact, alone. We're on our own out there, with perhaps the exception of a very few family members in a very small, tight circle. Worship teaches us that we are not alone. Even when we worship among people who are strangers or sitting among people we barely know. We are not alone.

In faith, we do not fly solo. Touching and being touched by each other, we know that we are touching and being touched by God. Because we are touching and being touched by each other. Often it's hard to tell the difference.

It was the last night of camp, Sara was sobbing in her counselor's arms. Tomorrow she would go home to her parents, who were divorcing. Everything was going to be different. Her older sister was happy about it; she hated their father. As for her brother, he was using all his energy pretending it didn't matter.

But Sara was sobbing, not so much about what she was going home to but what she was leaving. "Here at camp, I could be real. My new friends here get me. I don't know if I can do this without them."

I call it the Benediction thing. The mix of joy and panic when the time we spend among people who love deeply in the name of Christ ends, and we have to go back into a cold and alienating world. Maybe you've felt it at the end of a guys' camping trip, a girlfriend getaway, or when a support group goes extra deep. Maybe you're fortunate enough to feel it every Sunday when worship is over.

You enter here with your first-day-of-camp self: shy and awkward and unable to break in. Then you become your Friday self, the veteran camper with a million new best friends and shared ghost stories (Some of them were true, you know.), and adventures to last a lifetime. Once found, that Friday, last-day-of-camp person is you. Once sparked, that pilot light will never go out.

I want to offer a challenge. I'm not trying to inspire you with this sermon; I'm trying to challenge you. It takes an entire life to learn to live a life. You need meaningful, regular worship. You dig a deep well one shovel at a time. You also can do almost anything for a month. Decide to worship for a month of Sundays; thirty in a row. Let's say a February of Sundays, which reduces it to twenty-eight. That's seven months, from now to April. Enough to take you through winter. As a matter of fact, Easter falls on April 1 next spring.

So Easter Sunday is a "free space." So is Christmas. Then give yourself a bonus for being in church Christmas Eve. Don't forget your three free cuts. A month of Sundays—now until April—worship every Sunday. I can't promise that every Sunday will provide an unforgettable moment. But some of them will. You just won't know ahead of time which ones. And I can't tell you which ones will have somebody here who really needs you. You'll have to discover that for yourself.

I can promise this: your weekends will become less cluttered, less frantic. You won't have a dozen things you have to get done on Sunday morning; you'll have only one thing. You won't have to decide or choose what you're going to do during that time; you've already decided, already chosen. I can promise you that you're going to

grow closer to the people who sit around you, because you're seeing them regularly instead of occasionally. Try being in worship for a month of Sundays.

We all know that Adam and Eve are a story about temptation, sin, and punishment. But what if the origin of sin and guilt are not the main part of their story? What if sin and guilt are not even the main part of life? I'm saying in the first story in the Bible, God helps us with our primary challenge, the most important task in life—the challenge of living a life of love.

"The greatest of these is love," the Bible teaches. Adam and Eve teach us how love lasts. When we look at it that way, we see surprising things.

The story starts out well, and then it doesn't. Adam and Eve are banished from the garden but, surprisingly, they stay together. They could have gone their separate ways but they stay together and they have children—two sons.

It's all good again, except more so: father and mother, two sons, happy family. It's all good. And then it isn't. The brothers' relationship turns sour fast. Both brothers make sacrifices to God. Cain offers fruit; Abel his choice sheep. When God prefers Abel's sacrifice, Cain is livid. He can't get over it. When the two brothers are alone, Cain murders Abel. When God asks what happened, Cain issues one of the Bible's top ten most quoted lines: "Am I my brother's keeper?"

We're not even a paragraph into the life of the first family and already we have the first family dysfunction. And not just the mild Thanksgiving variety, but the scandalous TV miniseries variety. (Statistics show that about a quarter of all murders are a family member killing another family member. Once again, the Bible gets it right.) I want to talk about the tragedy of Cain and Able from the perspective of its effect on their parents, Adam and Eve.

Here's a basic truth from the Bible: family is hard. All relationships are hard, but family is especially so. And children make it worse. I've heard lots of sermons about how to have a great marriage, how to raise successful children; I don't know if I've ever heard a sermon that acknowledges this truth: families are hard; children are even harder.

There have been countless studies on how parenting affect children. In the 1950's the first study was made on how children affect parents. The study contained this list of complaints of mothers: Loss of sleep, chronic "tiredness" or exhaustion, giving up a career and the loss of income, additional washing and laundry, guilt at not being a "better" mother, the 24/7 requirement of an infant,

gaining weight after pregnancy. Fathers agreed, adding one more item: "less sex." And this was written in 1957, the era remembered as "Happy Days."

Having children removes the word "your" from the term "your life." Studies show that having children doesn't make the parents happier; ninety percent of new mothers and fathers report a decline of happiness in their marriage after having children. Then after a few years, the numbers level off as parents begin to enjoy the many benefits of having children. The happiness of pre-children togetherness doesn't return, but it's replaced by joy. Jennifer Senior gets it right in her book, *"All Joy and No Fun: the Paradox of Modern Parenthood."* The title is all you need to know.

What's the difference? Happiness is all carbs. Happiness is intense, it's fleeting and superficial. Joy is quieter and deeper. Joy includes the deep sense that you've done something worthwhile in your life. It's the difference between hot and warm. Joy is about being warm, not hot.

Being a parent weakens happiness, but it also strengthens meaning and purpose. Children can bring great satisfaction and deep joy into your life. But "fun" is not the first word people use to describe being parent.

Cain and Abel. There's been a lot of opinions offered on what went wrong: why did God prefer one sacrifice over the other? How did they know God's opinion on this? What went wrong between Cain and Abel? I want to ask a different question: what went down between their parents when they learned the bloodcurdling news? How did this tragedy play out between Adam and Eve?

There are no words for the broken hearts of parents losing children. I'm going to guess that the first thing Adam and Eve struggled with when they learned of Cain's murder of his brother was the haunting question: Were they at fault? Are parents to blame for the faults of their children? Our society continues to say yes. After the Columbine High School shooting in Colorado, 85% of Americans believed that Dylan Klebold's and Eric Harris's parents were to blame. Just as successful, well-adjusted children are the result of good parenting, bad children are the result of bad upbringing.

In the story of Adam and Eve, the Bible does not go there. The blame on Adam and Eve is entirely absent. "Whose fault was this?" is not a helpful question. In fact, in the Bible story, the blame on Cain himself is relatively minor. God treats the killer very gently. Cain is forced into exile, but like his parents after their sin, he goes with God's blessing. God gives him a mark that will prevent others from harming him. Cain may not be his brother's keeper, but God appears to be his. Far more than God being an angry judge, God is consistently a steadfast protector.

When tragedy happens, unlike God, blame is usually the first place we go. We blame others or we blame ourselves. A rabbi tells the story of having to officiate at two funerals on successive days for two elderly women. Both had died "full of years", as the Bible would say, both succumbed to the normal results of aging after a long and full life. The rabbi visited both families on the same afternoon.

At the first home, the son of the deceased woman said, "If only I had sent my mother to Florida and gotten her out of this cold and snow, she would be alive today. It's my fault that she died." At the second home, the son of the other deceased woman said, "If only I hadn't insisted on my mother's going to Florida, she would be alive today. That long airplane ride, the abrupt change of climate,

was more than she could take. It's my fault that she died.¹" It is very tempting to assume that if we had done things differently, the story would have turned out better. In this story of the first family tragedy, the Bible does not go there.

What does it take for a couple to stay together after a tragedy? The death of a child is likely the pinnacle of all tragedies. I'm asking what tragedy can teach us about staying together. How do relationships endure hard times and stay together? This is not a small-target question. If you include stillbirths, the death of children under 21 and the death of adult children, one in five parents experience the loss of a child.

In a well-known talk, Brene Brown offers this story:

"Christmas eve, beautiful night, light snowfall, young family of four in the car on the way to Grandmas' house for dinner. They're listening to the radio station, the one that starts playing the Christmas music right at Halloween. "Jingle Bells" comes on. The kids in the back seat go crazy. Everyone breaks into song. The camera pans in on the faces of the kids, mom dad. What happens next?²"

The most common answer is, "car crash." In fact 60% give that answer. All of us are hostages to fate, and parenting intensifies that sense of vulnerability. But how else can you know awe? How else can you experience ecstasy? "Joy is grief inside out."

Some form of tragedy enters every long-term relationship. Adam and Eve take that to the extreme, not only losing a child but having the other child responsible for that loss. How do you deal with the aftermath of a tragic loss? Can the pain Adam and Eve suffered because of the loss of Abel and because of the crime of Cain teach us something?

There came a moment when they faced a do-or-die choice. Each partner had to make an affirmative decision to recommit to the relationship. They had to give love a second chance. The Bible says so much in a simple sentence. (Gen 4: 25) "Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth..."

We were born to love but we are not forced to love. We choose to love. To choose to love after a tragedy is even more courageous than to do it the first time. Adam and Eve already knew the risk of suffering and heartbreak having another child might bring. *The birth of Seth represents a heroic choosing to love.*

The first couple elects to become a couple again and have another child. "Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son." Wow, that is blow-you-away courage. That is "love bears all things" love. Love isn't always romantic gazing at the moon. There is something far richer than that. Love can grow richer after hardship. Adam and Eve make a recommitment in the face of loss and despair. Genesis doesn't spell it out in detail, but is it clearly there.

Do you believe that love can actually grow stronger out of this kind of hurt? I believe love comes from God, and God is especially generous to those in pain. "Divorce is more common among parents who lose a child." I've heard that for years. But it is not true. Research shows otherwise. Relationships can grow stronger, deeper, maybe with less happiness but with much greater joy after enduring pain. You need to decide if that is something you can believe. Because some kind of pain will inevitably enter into any relationship. It may not be the intense, ultimate pain of Cain and Abel, but there will be some form of pain. Love is stronger than pain. Choose love.

Having a child and losing a child are both things you can never prepare for nor take in stride. Such loss can bring clarity as well as pain. You don't stop loving a kid when that kid dies. You do eventually stop trying to figure it out, because trying to figure it out is exhausting and crazy-making. You discover that your heart has become juicier and your world more tender. You grow slightly kinder to yourself. You recognize these things are gifts from God. You eventually get back to living a life, except with more memories and more tears...and more love that is stronger and deeper than you could ever have known. The question is, what are you going to do with those tears and that love? Sign up for life. Choose to love. Learn from Adam and Eve.

1. From *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*, by Harold Kushner, published by Anchor Books, 1983.
2. Ted Talks, Brene Brown. https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability