

SERMON NOTES
Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 4:16-19
“Incarnational Retrieving”

Intro:

- Nicki was the first dog I had ever owned
- *Beth and I got her at Christmas time in 1978 soon after we moved to Ely, MN to begin our first pastorate*
- Nicki’s favorite activity was to retrieve tennis balls – preferably in a lake
- *My arm would get tired of throwing before she tired of retrieving*
- Her second favorite activity was to go with us cross country skiing

- *This particular day in March of 1980 was perfect for skiing – a bright, sunny and pleasant 10 degrees with fresh-fallen clean snow on the ground*
- We decided to drive up the Echo trail and then ski the Bass Lake trail to some waterfalls where we loved to go hiking and swimming in the summer
- *In the summer it’s about a 45-minute hike to the waterfalls from the nearest road*
- And by the way, Beth was 7 months pregnant at the time

- We were skiing the hiking trail, and as we got closer to the lake and the waterfalls, Nicki could not resist the temptation to check out the lake which she remembered from summer hikes
- *The lake itself was solidly frozen with thick ice – but Nicki got too near the falls and fell into the open water*
- She could not get out on the ice – *and the shoreline was too steep and too rocky and too slippery to get out that way*
- She swam around the open water near the shoreline looking for an escape – but could find none
- *She was a good swimmer and could handle cold water pretty well – but it was becoming clear that she was helpless to get out – and if we didn’t do something – she would likely die*
- Our beloved retriever needed retrieving

- My mind was racing – I was vaguely aware of the danger of the situation
- *I knew that if I fell into that water – I would not last as long as Nicki would – and even if I could manage to get out of the water – it would take the better part of an hour to get back to the car and the nearest road in wet clothes in that cold air*
- And, of course, this was back in the days before cell phones

- My first instinct was cautious – but not particularly intelligent
- *I knew I didn't want to get too close to the edge of the ice and the open water*
- So I took off my skies – crawled on my belly close to the edge – and extended my ski toward Nicki and told her to grab on so I could pull her out of the water
- *Brilliant – eh?*
- Then I realized that I was going to have to crawl closer and grab her forelegs with my hands and pull her out that way
- *Seeing the panicky — yet trusting -- look in Nicki's eyes helped me to take my mind off the risks I was taking*
- The Lord must have sent extra guardian angels to the scene – because somehow I managed to pull a 75-pound dog out of the water without the ice breaking or falling into the water myself

- Some might question whether saving a dog is worth risking your own life – but any of you who have ever loved a dog would have done the same thing
- *I wonder if there were some angels in heaven who might have questioned whether saving sinful men and women was worth the Son of God not only risking – but actually sacrificing -- his life*
- But you see – this act of going back to retrieve the lost, the weak, the helpless -- is what makes Jesus the unique Savior that he is and is what makes Christianity unique among the world's religions

- *Dr. Diane Langberg of the America Association of Christian Counselors – in a powerful message called “Leadership Lessons of the Incarnation” – calls this “Regressive Leadership” as exemplified in the Incarnational ministry of Jesus*
 - Jesus was repeatedly going back to retrieve – to gather up and heal and rescue and bring to safety and wholeness – the lost, the weak, the sick, the needy and those on the margins of society
 - *In His Incarnation Jesus descended from heaven to earth in order to seek and to save the lost*
 - **Those who bear Jesus' name are called to do the same – to go back and retrieve the same kinds of people that Jesus went looking for**

I. FROM THE FORM OF GOD TO THE FORM OF A SERVANT

Philippians 2:6-8 ⁶ Who (Christ), although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men. ⁸Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

- *This is Paul's description of the Incarnation – The Word becoming flesh – God the Son descending from heaven to earth in human flesh*
- The Deity of Christ is clearly stated: ***Existing in the form of God***
- The word for “form” is *morphe* – referring to the essential nature and attributes as shown in the form
- **Jesus is fully God**
- *When He came to earth and was born of the virgin Mary – Jesus also became a human being*
- **So Jesus is both God and man**
- *The Son of God existed eternally in the form and substance of God – possessing the very nature and essence of Deity – and then He came to earth as a Man – Jesus of Nazareth*
- *In the Incarnation we see the Infinite in a womb // the Divine Glory in a barn // The Creative Intelligence and Power that created the heavens and the earth manifest in the form of a helpless baby*
- **Christ emptied himself and limited himself in the Incarnation**
- *Always existing in the form of God – He took the form of a servant when he came to earth from heaven*
- The word form is the same as in verse 6 – *morphe* – meaning that his humanity was as real as his deity
- **Without losing his essential nature as God – He took a fully human nature into Himself**
- Now, Paul could have said that Christ took the form of a man – but he went even further than that: *He took the form of a servant*
- The word is “*doulos*” – it means slave
- This is radical
- ***He took the form of a slave – that is – just as his essential nature was that of God – so also in His Incarnation, his essential nature was that of a slave***
- What are the essential attributes of a slave?
- *A slave is best defined by what he is deprived of: NO FREEDOM // NO INDEPENDENCE // NO RIGHTS*
- ***He emptied Himself – made Himself nothing – taking the very nature and form of a slave – giving up all his rights***
- **The eternal Son of God was manifested in the flesh in the form of a servant**

II. CHRIST'S MISSION TO RETRIEVE THOSE LEFT BEHIND AND FORGOTTEN

- What kind of servant was Jesus? What kinds of people did Jesus come to serve?
- *Jesus describes his servanthood in his mission statement in Luke 4:*

Luke 4:18-19 ¹⁸**“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has appointed me to preach Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the downtrodden will be freed from their oppressors,**
¹⁹**and that the time of the Lord’s favor has come.”**

- A key word describing Jesus’ ministry in these verses is a word that can mean either *forgiveness or release*
- The biblical concept of forgiveness is being released from a debt
- *The ministry of Jesus is all about releasing people – liberating people – from their sin and guilt and bondage and captivity and oppression*
- His preaching ministry – healing ministry – and deliverance ministry – all brought the redemptive power of the Kingdom to God into the lives of those in bondage to sin, disease, and demonic powers
- *The term used for captives means prisoners of war – literally those captured at the point of a spear*
- This is a picture of humanity as prisoners of war under the oppressive tyranny of sin, death and Satan
- **In Jesus Christ the Kingdom of God invaded Satan’s domain to overthrow the rule of Satan and to set captives free**
- *Jesus came to bind the strong man – Satan – and to unlock his prison-house and release his captives*

Colossians 1:13 - 14 (NIV) ¹³For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

- *Jesus came to release us from our sins and to release us from Satan’s power*
- Not only are prisoners of war being released by Jesus’ ministry – but also the downtrodden and oppressed
- *The word means to break into pieces – and can refer to the broken-hearted and those who are broken in body, soul and mind*
- **Jesus’ mission was to mend broken hearts and broken lives and broken relationships – and to set people free from the oppression of their brokenness**

- Who were the special objects of Jesus' compassion and redemptive ministry?
- *The poor, the broken-hearted, prisoners of sin and spiritual bondage, the sick, the blind, the disabled, the demonized, those being oppressed by powers of darkness, those suffering most acutely the brokenness of this fallen world under the dominion of sin, death and Satan*
- To use Diane Langberg's words – his was a regressive ministry – a ministry that goes back for those who are lost and weak and needy and lonely and unloved
- ***He who was rich went back for the poor // He who was whole went back for the broken // He who was Freedom itself went back for the captive // He who was the Light of the World went back for the blind // He who was Strength and Power went back for the weak and bruised // He who was Love went back for the lonely and unloved***
- Upon whom did Jesus focus his ministry?
- *Tax collectors // Lepers // the crippled and lame and blind // a woman caught in adultery // a sinful woman anointing his feet // a 5-time loser living with a man who was not her husband*
- **Jesus went after the very people who were most despised and shunned by the religious people of his day**
- *He descended to earth in the flesh in order to retrieve the lost and the unwanted and the left behind and the forgotten and the helpless and oppressed*

III. THE BODY OF CHRIST'S MISSION TO JOIN CHRIST IN HIS RETRIEVING

- ***Jesus Christ is the Incarnation of God – and we are the body of Christ***
- *During his earthly life, Jesus Christ was the visible representation of the invisible God – now Jesus is ascended to heaven and no longer visible in this world – but we are the visible body of Christ – just as Jesus was the embodiment of the Father's heart and character, so we are called to be the embodiment of Jesus Christ in the world*
- *What is God the Father like? **Look at the Son – God in a human body***
- *What is Jesus Christ like? **Look at the church – the body of Christ***
- *When you understand the meaning of the Incarnation – an invisible God being represented and revealed in human flesh – then you can appreciate what a high calling it is to be the body of Christ – the visible representatives of the ascended Christ*

- *Incarnational living as the body of Christ means manifesting the heart and character of Christ through our words and deeds just as Jesus manifested the heart and character of the Father through his words and deeds*
- *We are called to relate to the sinful and needy and broken people of the world in our day as Jesus related to the sinful and needy and broken people in his day*
- *Translating the heart of Jesus into action so that people look at the body of Christ and see the likeness of Jesus – that is our calling as the body of Christ*

- **Churches that practice Incarnational Living and Ministry as the Body of Christ reflect the heart of Jesus for those on the margins of society – orphans // widows // prisoners // refugees // immigrants // the homeless // the poor // the hungry // the sick // the disabled // the oppressed // the persecuted // sex slaves // nursing home residents // children of prisoners // children of illegal immigrants**
- **The principle of Incarnational Descending and Retrieving shows us that the way for churches to expand the Kingdom is not by ascending – not by striving for bigger and better – *but rather by descending* – by fleshing out the love and grace and compassion of Jesus among the have-nots and down-and-outers**

- This is counter-intuitive and counter-cultural – even for most Christians and most churches
- *What kinds of people are most welcome and sought after in most churches like ours?*
- People who are spiritually strong // materially successful // intelligent and attractive and talented and personable
- *People who already have their lives together and are growing in spiritual maturity and are ready to contribute as good givers and faithful workers in the church*
- People who can help churches become more successful

- Of course, Jesus loves people who are strong and successful – *he loved the rich young ruler, for example* – but few who are strong and successful are willing to pay the price of following Jesus on the Way of the Cross – *the way of voluntary self-denial and downward mobility and humble self-sacrifice governed by love*

- **Those who bear Jesus’ name and want to reflect his likeness and carry on his ministry must reach out to the same people Jesus reached out to – must seek to retrieve the same people Jesus came to retrieve**
- *To be filled with the fullness of Christ as the body of Christ is to live as Jesus lived and to reach out to those whom Jesus reached: namely – the poor, the lost, the hungry, the weak, the needy, the lonely, the unloved, the bruised and broken*

- You have all heard of “*No Child Left Behind*”
- Talk with any classroom teacher or school administrator and you will hear a litany of shortcomings and criticisms of that program
- *But who can deny the reality that our society has been leaving many children behind – especially those living in inner cities and oppressive poverty – who have been receiving vastly inferior educations compared to what privileged kids in the affluent Chicago suburbs are receiving*
- *Though flawed in the specifics of implementation and evaluation – the concept is a noble ideal*
- **Regressive ministry means going back for those left behind – going back for what Jesus called “the least of these”**
- *Just so his disciples would not miss the point of what it means for those who bear Jesus’ name to reflect his heart and character and likeness – Jesus spelled it out for us in Matthew 25 – identifying himself so closely with those living on the margins of society that he said that to serve them is to serve HIM*

Matthew 25:34 - 40 (NIV) ³⁴“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ ³⁷“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ ⁴⁰“The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’”

- *When we are doing this kind of ministry – we are functioning as the body of Christ – reflecting the heart and character and priorities of Jesus through our words and deeds*
- **We are acting as the hands and feet of Christ when we serve those to whom Christ directed his ministry**
- *But there is also a sense in which they are Christ to us – when we look into the faces of the poor and hungry and needy and homeless and lonely and imprisoned and unwanted of society – we are looking into the face of Jesus*
- **Whatever you did for one of the least of these – you did for me**
- *Who are “the least of these” in our world today? The left behind? The forgotten? The unwanted? The bruised and broken? Those on the margins?*

- A partial list would include orphans // nursing home residents // the homeless // children of prisoners // refugees // the persecuted // single women with unwanted pregnancies // victims of trafficking and forced prostitution and slave labor // AIDS victims and AIDS orphans //
- *You can add your own to the list*
- I'd like to highlight one other group:
 - *Almost every day I receive some political mailings or see political ads denouncing this particular group*
 - It is open season on them – anyone can say anything they want about this group without fear of being chastised or called into account
 - *It is permitted to talk about them and treat them as less than human because they've got it coming – after all – they're here illegally*
 - Prejudice is most dangerous when it feels perfectly justified to treat certain people as less than human – whether Jews or blacks or gays or Muslims or evangelical Christians – *or illegal immigrants and their children*
- Every year churches like ours send mission teams to places like Reynosa, Mexico
- *We bring mobile medical clinics and health care to impoverished neighborhoods*
- Many of us have been to a flooded landfill where hundreds and thousands of people live – literally putting up shacks in a garbage dump
- *We play games and do VBS and show the Jesus film to the children living there*
- We come back showing slides and sharing how moved we were by their plight and how much we love those children and would wish a better life for them
- *But woe to any child whose parents try to cross the Rio Grande into our country without proper documents*
- Then those kids are transformed from adorable objects of our compassion to despicable objects of our contempt and fear
- *The kinds of children and families that we know from Reynosa are the very people who are being villainized as Public Enemy Number One in the USA by many Iowans and by many Presidential Candidates courting our vote*
- The question for those of us who bear the name of Jesus is: *do the values expressed in those ads reflect the heart and values of our Incarnate Lord?*
- Do we see in the tone and emphasis of those ads the same mind and attitude and humility and compassion that was in Christ Jesus, who took the form of a servant in His incarnation and devoted his ministry to retrieving the lost and the weak and the poor and the needy and the unwanted?

- **Our calling as the body of Christ is not to preserve the American way of life for affluent Americans – our calling as the body of Christ is to bring the Gospel to all nations and ethnic groups, and to reflect the heart and likeness of Jesus and to join Him in His ministry of retrieving the lost and broken and unwanted peoples of the world**
- When we think of people who are weak, vulnerable, needy and unwanted in our society today – *children of illegal immigrants must be considered to be near the top of the list – and therefore near to the heart of Jesus*

IV. THE STATUE OF LIBERTY AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

- *“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me.”*
- **Those words – inscribed on the Statue of Liberty – would fit well over the entrance gate into the kingdom of heaven**
- *The genius of America is that it has incorporated this Kingdom value into the very fabric of our national identity*
- Why would any nation want to welcome the poor, the oppressed, the homeless, the refugees, the wretched refuse of other nations into its borders?
- *Because nothing engenders loyalty and devotion and hard work and patriotism like the experience of grace and the hope of a new beginning and a new life in a land of freedom and opportunity*
- **Indeed – that’s exactly how the Kingdom of God operates – people suffering under the oppressive tyranny of sin, death and Satan being given a new life and a new destiny by Jesus Christ**
- *Nothing produces loyalty and devotion to the King like a life-changing experience of His grace*
- As Jesus explained to Simon the Pharisee in justifying his acceptance of the immoral woman’s anointing of his feet with her tears:

Luke 7:47 ⁴⁷I tell you, her sins—and they are many—have been forgiven, so she has shown me much love. But a person who is forgiven little shows only little love.”

- The Pharisees and religious leaders thought they were the gatekeepers of the kingdom – entitled to choose who could enter and who was to be excluded
- *The strong // the successful // the pious // the morally upright – were in*
- *The weak // the poor // the law-breakers // the sinners and Gentiles – were out*

- **But Jesus turned that theology upside down on its head – declaring that the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame, Gentiles, tax collectors and other sinners would enter the kingdom before the self-righteous would – if they got in at all**
- *Blessed are the poor in spirit – for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*
- *“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me.”*
- *The kingdom of God belongs to such as these – Jesus came to seek and to save such as these*

- ***The Incarnational Ministry of Jesus is regressive in nature – going back to retrieve those left behind – going back for the lost // the weak // the vulnerable // the needy // the broken // the lonely // the forgotten // the unwanted***
- *Those who are shunned and held in low esteem by the rest of society – those who are not sought after by churches that do not understand Kingdom values and do not understand Incarnational Descending and Retrieving*
- ***For the last will be first – and the first will be last***

- How about you?
- *Do you know what it is to feel lost or weak or vulnerable or needy or lonely or unloved?*
- *Have you ever known what it is to be poor or hungry or homeless or oppressed or captive to sin or evil?*
- *Are you humble and poor in spirit enough to acknowledge that you desperately need God and His grace and mercy?*
- **There is a place in the kingdom of heaven for you**
- *Come just as you are*
- *No need to clean yourself up first – Jesus will clean you up with the cleansing power of his blood shed for your sins on the Cross*
- *No need to try to make yourself into a new and better person first*
- *When you invite Jesus into your heart – he will change you from the inside out*
- *In just a minute I will lead you in a prayer that you can pray to receive Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord*

V. ONE SUGGESTED RESPONSE: James 1:27

- Many of you are already believers -- for you the invitation is to join Jesus in His ministry of Incarnational Retrieving

- *He is alive and active in the world today by the Presence and Power of the Spirit in his body, the church*
- **Our calling is NOT to do ministry for Christ – our calling is to share in and participate in the ongoing ministry of the living Christ in the world today**
- *In fact, our ministry will be fruitful and redemptive and life-giving only to the degree that it is Christ acting through us – **because only the ministry of Jesus is redemptive***
- There are many different valid responses to this calling to join Jesus in His outreach ministry – many different kinds of people who need retrieving
- *Many of you are already participating with Christ in some kind of retrieving ministry*
- But we're going to conclude today's service by focusing on one possible response that I believe many of you will want to become involved in

James 1:27 (NIV) ²⁷Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

- *As you will see in the upcoming DVD – God is calling many Christians and churches to get involved in ministry to orphans*
- Orphans – both here in Scott County – and also in places such as Moldova – are certainly among those who are weak and vulnerable and needy and lonely and unloved – *and therefore near to the heart of Jesus*
- **Orphans ministry is therefore one way that our church could powerfully reflect the likeness of Jesus and participate in his redemptive ministry in the world today**
- First I'm going to lead in a prayer of salvation
- *Then we're going to show 8 minutes of the DVD*
- When the DVD is over – our service will be over – you may then remain seated if you want to pray or you may go to the altar or you may leave quietly – but please remain quiet while in the sanctuary or ROCK Center for a few minutes so that others can respond to what God is saying to them

Prayer of Salvation
Orphans Ministry DVD