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Pentecost 03 –June 26, 2022

“But God Can”

Read: Luke 7: 11 - 17/ Memorize: Luke 7: 16

Luke tells us she was surrounded by a whole crowd but mentions no relatives. The crowd was with her, moving, consoling in a slow procession. Unfortunately, even today, we know that they will soon disappear.

Now the lifeless body of her only son, was being carried out. Only if you have experienced this grief can understand her feelings. The death of a child, no matter their age, upsets the whole orientation of life.

Is it happenstance that Jesus is approaching as the procession is coming out? Luke tells us that Jesus had compassion on her, yet His words don't seem very compassionate: “Do not weep.” Then He does something even more unorthodox. He touches the bier; it stops.

What Jesus says is more astounding: “Young man, I say to you, arise.” The boy sat up and began to talk. And in compassion, He “gave Him back to His mother.”

It was Friedrich Nietzsche who said, “Man is a recurring decimal. You can never work him out on paper. You can divide and divide until your heart is content, but each figure you get from beginning to end, is simply a new beginning.” There is an antithesis to that decimal theory which says that, “Man is a period or an exclamation point. This and nothing more.”

I'm sure it will relieve your mind to know I'm not going to say much more about that. Yet the symbols of decimals, periods and exclamation points can be interesting. They may lead us to a fitting symbol for God, which would be the ampersand. Know what that is? I suspect you have used it many times in your life. Amanda, would you please put it up? Perhaps you never knew it had a name and just called it the “and” symbol, which is what I mostly do.

What intrigues me is that whatever is proclaimed about God must always end with the word “and.” God is always more than we can know or express. No matter how much we know about God, it must always end with an “and.”

In fact, any definition about God must end with an ampersand, allowing for the “furthermore,” for God was, and is, and shall be. That’s what Paul was talking about when he wrote those beautiful words in Romans 8 about nothing can separate us from the love of God.

It might be fair to paraphrase Paul’s words in this way, “I cannot overcome tribulation, distress, persecution, things present or things to come in my life, but God can!” Can there be more wonderful words in the human language or more exciting than these: “But God can!”

What was this woman thinking as she walked out the city gate. She was heading for the cemetery. There is only grief at this moment. Yet, in the next moment she, and all around her, are praising God. Jesus didn’t have to tell her that, “what is impossible with man is possible with God.” Her living son, was living proof of that truth.

But God can! What a marvelous thing to know and believe, especially since our present generation places such a premium on self-help and self-assertion. We think we can determine our security with our wise investments; guarantee our health by exercise and dieting. We can favorably impact our personal appearance with a nip and tuck.

It can sound wonderful until we take counsel of ourselves and realize what we cannot do: we cannot control our lives. How many times have you thought you could, then saw it all fall apart? We cannot do God’s will alone. We know this, because we have tried. We cannot release the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We have difficulty keeping our own spirits high. We cannot do any of these things which count for now and for all eternity, but God can! When we conceive of God as a “period” or an “exclamation point;” that He is this and no more, instead of an “ampersand,” we lose our sense of anxious expectation and believing faith.

Do you remember how Abraham, Zachariah, and Elizabeth responded when they were told they would have a child? Abraham laughed; Zachariah didn’t believe it possible. Apparently, Abraham and Zachariah were not what we would call “possibility thinkers” in their old age.

They were tired and the light was gone out of their eyes. At their age they were more conscious of their limitations, the “periods” than they were of the possibilities. They believed it could not happen. They forgot that it was not their thoughts but God’s action. Do not minimize this thought: God can!

Think about how many people in the Bible, when God calls them to serve Him, have a reason why they can’t do it. God called Jeremiah to be a prophet. Jeremiah said he was too young. How could God commit such an obvious mistake as to place so staggering a responsibility on a youth? And here was God’s response to Jeremiah’s reluctance: “I know you can’t, but I can!”

Perhaps, you’ve experienced it. You hear God calling you to do something but you offer Him reasons why you can’t. We are advancing God’s proclamation in John 18: 27, “What is impossible with people is possible with God.” Isn’t God just saying I know you can’t, but God can? I suspect the widow of Nain, Jeremiah and a whole host of others across the centuries would suggest the same thing.

Here’s one thing we need to consider, God can if we believe God can. The book of Judges records a marvelous story of unreserved faith in the providence of God. Gideon and his army were to engage in battle with the Midianites. At the appointed time, 32,000 Israelites would descend upon their superior forces and pray that their efforts would prevail.

Military tactics say the attacking force normally needs more men than they are attacking. So they prayed their efforts would prevail. It’s not fun going against an adversary, knowing the odds are against you. On the other hand, when you triumph against those odds, it creates heroes.

God was not in search of heroes. He comes to Gideon and tells him he has too many men. Brute strength and military prowess would only serve to obscure God’s hand in the matter. Gideon was told to offer any who were fearful and trembling that they could go home. Apparently 22,000 people felt that way because they went home.

Now the Israelite army was 10,000 against many more. The odds seemed pitifully overwhelming. God came and told Gideon he still had too many soldiers. This is not only a time for an inventory of strength but also one’s belief in what God is able to accomplish. God told Gideon to take the men to the water. The men who lapped water like a dog were to be his army. That number was 300 and God declared, “With the 300 I will deliver you.”

In Judges 7: 12 here's a description of what the Midianite forces looked like: "The armies of Midian, Amalek and the people of the east had settled in the valley like a swarm of locust. Their camels were like grains of sands on the seashore, too many to count!"

So here's God plan: the 300, will carry no weapons and not engage in any hand-to-hand conflict. They would have a trumpet and a jar containing a lighted torch. Does this not sound absurd? A diminished force, armed only with trumpets and jars containing torches. Don't you think at least one soldier may have felt inclined to remind Gideon that Israel was preparing for war, not a midnight parade?

Here's what they were to do: at Gideon's command, the 300 would surround the Midian camp on three sides. At his signal, the trumpets were blown, the jars loudly smashed and each man cried out at the top of his voice, "A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!"

Judges tells us that the Midianites were so astounded that they began fighting with themselves and eventually fled in bewilderment. The battle had gone to the hosts of the Lord. 300 unarmed soldiers cannot rout thousands who are armed, but God can. People cannot prevail against an impossible situation, regardless of the nature of that situation, but God can.

God can, if we will let Him. It is not so much a matter of giving God permission, as it is getting out of God's way. We want to be in front, call the plays, take charge and manage our own affairs. That is not surprising. People have always been that way. With our great knowledge and resources has our attitude grown more prideful about our abilities?

Here's the deal. Whether the sermon concludes with a "period" or an "ampersand" depends upon you. Perhaps, even now, you are thinking about some situation in your life that you wish you had control over but you cannot get it. There is a decision which cannot be resolved. There is something that you want to change for the better, but you cannot.

You say to yourself, I have this need but I cannot continue without resolving it, yet no one can tell the difference, if I don't. But God can! You say, "Pastor, you can't do anything about any of this." That is correct, I cannot. You cannot. But God can! And the good news is that God will, if we believe, and will let Him!

Here's your question: Here's your question: What "I can't" situation will you turn over to God, knowing that "God can?"