



-- Please turn with me to Luke 8:1-3

Exercise is all the rage nowadays, isn't it? As I drive through Louisville, I keep noticing that a lot of big, empty buildings—such as abandoned Wal-Marts—are now becoming gigantic fitness centers. And on Friday, while I was getting my hair cut, Adam told me that he was planning to run four (or was it six) miles over his lunch break! Whew... The last time I ran six miles... Oh... Wait a minute... I have never run six miles... Well, that's ok, I'm not so sure jogging really helps me anyway. I mean, the last time I gave jogging a try, I was huffin' and puffin' so hard by the time I got from my house to Dairy Queen that I could hardly eat my Butterfinger Blizzard. It's just not worth it!

No, in all sincerity, some measure of exercise is good and necessary and something that our bodies really need in order for us to remain healthy and alert. (Plug for our women's aerobics program.)

But it is not just our physical bodies that require exercise, for if we are in Christ, then we belong to a body much greater than our own. In Christ, we are members of the church of Jesus Christ, or as the Apostle Paul describes it, the "Body of Christ." Speaking of the church in Romans 12:4-5, Paul writes, "*Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.*" And speaking of the exercise to which we are called together as members of that Body, he says in Ephesians 4:16, "*Under his*

direction, the whole body is fitted together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.”

Thus, a helpful understanding of the local church can be seen in the title of this message. In essence, as a church of Jesus Christ, we are a body of believers who are exercising our faith together. But, then, the question comes, “How do we do that?” That is, “What does this exercise look like?” And in response, we return to our journey through the book of Luke.

-- Read Luke 8:1-3

-- Pray

Look with me now at verse one, and as we read it understand that what we have here is not a specific event within the ministry of Jesus, but rather a general summary of His day to day activity. It says, “*After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God.*” And this is not the first such summary of Jesus’ activity that Luke provides. Notice how similar this summary in chapter eight is to the one we have previously examined in chapter 4, where in verse 43 Jesus summarizes His purpose by declaring, “*I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.*”

In both examples, we see that it was the relentless, tireless activity of our Lord to take the Good News He came to bring to those who had not yet heard it. In fact, as we examine Christ’s life and ministry on earth, we can justifiably conclude that salvation is His favorite subject. Whether it be in the form of His sermons (such as the Sermon on the Mount) or His parables (such as the Parable of the Sower, which follows our text today) or His simple conversations with others (such as the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4), when we hear Jesus speaking through the pages of Scripture, He is very usually talking about salvation. And these two summaries highlight the fact that the primary purpose of Christ’s ministry was to proclaim the good news of salvation.

If, then, the Gospel—which means “Good News”—was at the very heart of Christ’s ministry, then surely it must be at the very heart of ours as well. In short, this summary reminds us that true ministry finds its center point in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Just as Jesus establishes in Luke 4:43, when he asserts, “*I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent,*” so Paul echoes in 1 Corinthians 2:2, saying, “*For I resolved to*

know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” The New Testament is emphatic about this point: If we are crucified in Christ, then we should be captivated by the Gospel.

Most of you probably know who James Carville is; he is a famous democratic campaign strategist who worked closely with former president Bill Clinton. And if there is anything that you know about him, it is likely that you are familiar with his extremely concise formula for winning presidential elections. He says this: “It’s the economy, Stupid!” During the 1992 presidential campaign, in which when George Bush Senior was considered unbeatable because of foreign policy achievements such as the end of the Cold War and the Persian Gulf War, Carville advised Clinton to make the election all about the economy, and the rest is history. One could also argue that the same strategy worked quite well for President Obama in this past election.

Now, whether or not that is a noble platform for winning elections is debatable, but Carville’s phrase, “It’s the economy, Stupid!” does highlight a supremely noble and necessary slogan for any church of Jesus Christ, which is this: “It’s the Gospel, people!” I have dropped the “Stupid,” because that is just not nice... but, nonetheless, this phrase reminds us that if we are going to be successful in exercising our faith together, then we absolutely must keep the main thing the main thing. That is, the message that Jesus Christ came to proclaim must be the message that we preach. Because the Gospel is the perfect culmination of all revelation, it must be the proclamation of all that we do, all that we say, and all that we are. In short, if it doesn’t point to the Gospel, then it probably doesn’t belong in the church, because the activity of the Body of Christ must be an exercise in the Gospel.

And that brings us to **the Big Idea** of this morning’s message, which is this: **As we exercise true faith together, we proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ.** In other words, the practice of the church should paint a picture of the Gospel. This picture of the Gospel is the picture we see painted through the body of believers mentioned in our text this morning, and it gives us at least four vignettes, the first of which is this:

1.) The Body of Christ is an exercise in diversity.

With that in mind, please read with me now our text again:

Luke 8:1-3 – *After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Cuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.*

Let's take a minute and consider the mixture of people represented in these three verses, for it is an unexpectedly diverse combination to be sure. First are "the twelve," who are a study in diversity all of themselves. Among these fishermen and other simple men of society, there is also a tax collector, named Matthew, who worked for the Roman government, and a zealot, named Simon, who despised the Roman government.

In addition to these twelve men, there is a diversity of women. And the two women specifically listed here seem to have been mentioned by name in order to make this very point. About Mary Magdalene, we learn that she was once possessed by not just one or even two but by seven demons. Clearly, Christ had rescued her from a dark and terrible past. Then, about Joanna, we learn that she was the wife of Chuza, who was the personal manager of Herod's household. Surely, then, Joanna was well-to-do and one of the more privileged women of her day. Thus, it is truly amazing that both Mary Magdalene, with her dark past, and Joanna, the lady of the court, are travelling together as one body of believers.

The body of Christ, you see, is an exercise in diversity, and—hear this—our diversity has something important to say about the Gospel, which is this:

Our diversity proclaims the supreme scope of the Gospel.

Our gracious Lord has not come for just the rich or the poor, for just men or women, for just Caucasians or Hispanics, for just young or old. No, the salvation offered through the Gospel of Jesus Christ is for all. As Paul says in Galatians 3:26-29:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Therefore, by God's grace and guidance, we are called to take the Gospel to all types of people in all types of places because, through it, God is calling to Himself anyone anywhere who will believe in His Son. You see, as the body of Christ, we ought to be an exercise in diversity because the Gospel by which we have been saved is given for all.

Having said that, let me ask you: Do you and I really like diversity, or are we more inclined to shy away from it? Now, please understand here that I am not talking about diversity of doctrine. God's Word alone is our rule for faith and practice. But do we really rejoice in the idea that God is making us into a body of believers who come from different backgrounds and have different personalities? Are you excited about the fact that this congregation is a collection of people with a vast assortment of personal preferences? Or are you convinced that your preferences ought to be everybody else's as well?

Let us rejoice in our diversity, for in it the supreme scope of the Gospel is proclaimed.

The second truth that we see revealed in our text for today is that...

2.) The Body of Christ is an exercise in unity.

Listen, diversity in the church is of no great worth by itself. Even if we had every ethnicity on earth with every personal preference imaginable represented in our church, but yet we were all bickering with each other, demanding our own way, and going in a thousand different directions, we would certainly not bring glory to God. In fact, in that case we would look just like the world (if not worse) and we would bring only reproach upon the name of the Savior we claim to serve. No, diversity is no good all by itself. Rather, our diversity in Christ is made complete by our unity in Christ.

Therefore, as we consider the diversity in verses 1-3, we are blessed to see not just diversity, but, more importantly, unity. Though Matthew and Simon were at one time bitter enemies, and though Joanna and Mary Magdalene seem to have come from such dramatically different backgrounds, they are all presented here as those who are united with one purpose. We see them exercising their faith together by pursuing one common goal and sharing one common bond. They are united together by their love for Jesus Christ and the work of His kingdom.

In the same way, we too must be united in the midst of our diversity because—hear this—our unity declares another important truth about the Gospel, which is this:

Our unity proclaims the supreme sway of the Gospel.

By that, I mean that our unity as the Body of Christ amidst the vast diversity of life declares the power of the Gospel to sway hearts from selfishness to selflessness, from me to us, from mine to ours, from many to one. It reveals that true unity is possible only through the redemption that comes only through the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Truly, then, unity is one of the most powerful testimonies to the world that Jesus Christ really does change people. Barclay says it like this, “It is one of the supreme achievements of our Lord that he enables even the most diverse people to live together without in the least losing their own personalities or qualities.” You see, unity isn’t about losing our personalities; it’s about gaining a common purpose. It’s not about forcing everybody to be exactly the same; it’s filling everybody with the same supreme love for Christ. It’s not about everybody doing the same thing, but it is about everybody going the same way. And all of that is only possible in Christ.

And because our unity—or lack thereof—makes such a powerful statement about the Gospel to a watching world, God is adamant that we be unified. Listen to this warning from Titus 3:10-11: “*Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.*” Clearly, God insists on unity and hates divisiveness. Knowing that, we should each ask ourselves what we are doing to promote our unity with one another in Christ and what we are doing that might be divisive, because any hint of divisiveness diminishes our testimony to the Good News of our great Lord.

Let us hear the call of the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 4:2-3, where he urges, “*Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.*” Let us obey this call and labor in the Lord to make this church an exercise in unity, always remembering that true unity in Christ proclaims the unique power of the Gospel, for only through the His redemptive power can we who are so diverse be made one. 1 Corinthians 12:12 puts it like this, “*The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ.*”

Third, as we proclaim the Gospel by exercising our faith together, we must understand that...

3.) The Body of Christ is an exercise in humility.

Again, consider what we know from these verses about those who were travelling and ministering with Christ. There were “the twelve” (verse 1) and “some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases” (verse 2). By any measure of that day, this was certainly not a star-studded crew. There were no Pharisees, Sadducees, or chief priests. None of them were synagogue rulers or rabbis or anybody terribly influential.

On the contrary, the truth is quite the opposite. The twelve were so ordinary, in fact, that most scholars cannot establish any human rationale as to why Jesus would have chosen them at all. What is even more amazing is the presence of women in His company. In that day, women were so unfairly disregarded that that they were not even considered worthy to learn from men, let alone become devoted disciples.

But, yet, here they all are, recorded in Scripture forever among the first followers of Christ. For His own glory, and not theirs, Jesus took these apparent nobodies, called them to Himself, and blessed them with the matchless privilege to be His disciples and to do the work of His kingdom. And in our Lord’s choice of them, we see that the Body of Christ truly is an exercise in humility. And this humility in which we are called to walk declares something very important about the Gospel message that we proclaim, which is this:

Our humility proclaims the supreme significance of the Gospel.

It shows that the church is not about us, but all about Christ. It declares that all power and glory are due to Him and not to us. It proclaims that it is we who need the Gospel and not the Gospel who needs us. Christ is supreme and we are His servants. If we would authentically declare the Gospel to a dying world, then we must present it with hearts that are fully bathed in humility before our sovereign God and King.

Therefore, if you or I ever come to the place where we believe that we are so gifted or so talented or so brilliant or so important that the church cannot possibly succeed without us, then we have understood neither the call of Christ nor the

significance of the Gospel. On the other hand, this perspective also reminds us that the church is about much more than the just the people in the foreground. Indeed, there is a place of vital importance for all of us. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:27, “*All of you together are Christ's body, and each one of you is a separate and necessary part of it.*”

We see a great example of this principle in our text today, for although we hear about Joanna in only two places—here and in Luke 24, where Luke lists her as a witness to Jesus’ resurrection—we can be sure that Luke does not mention her flippantly. Indeed, given the fact that her husband was such a wealthy man and that she is mentioned here as a faithful financial giver, we can infer that God greatly used her behind-the-scenes giving for His great glory. And although she may not appear on very many pages of Scripture, the effect of her giving surely does.

That thought leads us to our final point this morning, which is this:

4.) The Body of Christ is an exercise in charity.

To close, look with me at the last part of verse 3, where Luke records, “*These women were helping to support them out of their own means.*” You see, being a member of the Body of Christ is not just about activity, it is also about generosity. That is, Christ calls us not only to go, but also to give. To be sure, as we progress through the book of Luke, we will see clearly that the manner in which we use our finances says a lot about what we really think about the Gospel. But, in short...

Our charity proclaims the supreme sacrifice of the Gospel.

Just as Christ gave up everything for us, so we must understand that everything we have belongs to Him. Jesus says it most succinctly in Matthew 10:8, where he declares, “*Freely you have received, freely give.*” // Our giving, you see, says a lot about our view of the Gospel. If the only sacrifices we are willing to make are small ones, might they communicate the message that the sacrifice our Lord made was small as well? However, if we freely and generously give to the work of the Body of Christ, do we not much better communicate the true nature of the sacrifice our Savior has made for us? What, then, does our giving say about our opinions of the sacrifice Christ made on the cross?

You see, everything we do, everything we say, and everything we are as the body of Christ ought to point to the Gospel by which we have been saved. Thus, we cherish human diversity because it points to the supreme scope of the Gospel,

and we strive for unity with one another because it demonstrates Christ's supreme sway over our souls. We demand humility because it proclaims the supreme significance of the Gospel message and charity because tells of the supreme sacrifice Christ made for all who will believe. Let us, then, exercise our faith together so that the Gospel will be proclaimed and the lost may be saved..