

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Mark 15:42-47

Sermon Title: "No Fear in Being Exceptional" (Traveling through Mark's Gospel)

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The Bible is full of exceptional characters. There are individuals who stand out for their devotion to God, and they become examples for us as we follow Christ. Joseph of Arimathea is one of those exceptional people.

He holds a prominent position on the highest Jewish council in Jerusalem. That high council was known as the Sanhedrin on which political and religious leaders sat. If you were Jewish and held an important office such as the leader of the Pharisees or a high priest of the temple, most likely you would be serving the Sanhedrin. So Joseph of Arimathea serves this prominent council as a member, but this is not why he is exceptional in the Bible. In fact, we are not told why he is on the Sanhedrin. Why was he chosen? Apparently the members of the Sanhedrin saw something in Joseph to add him to their roster, but the Gospel of Mark never tells us for what reason he is serving. Being on the Sanhedrin does not make him exceptional in Mark's Gospel. What he does after Jesus dies on the cross makes him exceptional.

We are told that Joseph was looking for the coming of God's kingdom. He believed that the Messiah would usher in the kingdom of God, and when Jesus came on the scene he believed his waiting was over. "The kingdom of God is at hand," Jesus says in the first chapter of Mark, and Joseph trusted every word. He might have followed Jesus every step of his ministry. He might have seen him from time to time and/or heard reports about his miracles. When Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem, the excitement in Joseph's heart must have grown and swelled to the point of overtaking his thoughts and emotions. He is here – Jesus is in the city, and great things are going to happen.

But then, Jesus was arrested and sent before the highest council of Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. Jesus was sent to the Sanhedrin that one night. People testified falsely against him, and spat on him, and beat him for saying all the great things he said. Joseph was there. He was on the council as one of its judges against Jesus. While his fellow council members were giving the thumbs-down to Jesus, condemning him to death, Joseph chose to abstain from voting. In Luke's Gospel, it says that Joseph, "a council member, a good and just man," would not consent to their decision.¹

¹ Cf. Luke 23:50-51.

Joseph was looking to Jesus as the Messiah who was still ushering in the kingdom of God. He couldn't go against that. He couldn't ignore his hopes and dreams. He would not turn down his thumb to Jesus, although it was the popular thing to do.

Jesus is crucified. He is taken from the cross. And Joseph of Arimathea shows up once more. He requests from Pontius Pilate the body of Jesus, who offers it to him. Joseph takes the lifeless form of his hopes and dreams to his own tomb for burial.

Joseph is exceptional for several reasons. He never let go of his hope in that God would come and save his people from sin. Although he sat on a council of Jewish leaders and saw the corruption that overtook a number of them, he never lost the idea that God would come to clean things up. He would come to overturn peoples' hearts and minds, and mold them to be God's own heart and mind. And when the Son of God died on a cross, Joseph moves forward to honor Christ's ministry and Christ himself by placing him in his own tomb. Joseph threatens his own standing in the Sanhedrin by attending to Jesus' body. He proves to be a follower of Jesus and could be subject to the same trail as Jesus went through under the Sanhedrin. Joseph, too, could be condemned to

death. But he doesn't care. He bravely asks for Jesus' body, and he bravely place it in a tomb with all the honor and love he can muster.

Sometimes we have to do something that nobody else is doing. We have to step out of our comfort zones and be the person who does the opposite of what is popular. We don't do these things in order for people to notice us. We do them for the love we have for God. We do them to honor and respect our God.

The NFL is starting up, and already we have heard reports about football players having run-ins with the police. Players are arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol or domestic violence toward a girlfriend or wife. A cornerback for the Detroit Lions was arrested twice in one month, the first being a DUI and the second being pulling out a handgun during an altercation. Young men gain a lot of money and fame from playing football, and they don't know how to handle it all. They allow it all to go to their heads, and they end up doing stupid things.

But then you have somebody like Tim Tebow who knows who he is. People might joke about doing a Tebow after scoring a touchdown, but he seems to know what not to do in his free time. He is out there serving others with the talents the Lord has given him.

There is a website for the Tim Tebow Foundation, and its mission statement says, “God has given to Tim to fulfill the Foundation’s mission of bringing Faith, Hope, and Love to those needing a brighter day in their darkest hour of need.”² The Foundation supports an organization that makes the dreams come true for children with life-threatening illnesses, another organization that gives God’s word and medical aid to children in third-world countries, and even an orphanage in the Philippines that receives money and resources. We will not find Tebow at the nightclub or beating up somebody, as seems to be the most common thing other athletes might do. He is exceptional for how he loves and respects God.

I drive down the highway, and I see a big blue sign on the side of the road, telling me which eating establishments I can visit if I take the next exit. I see a sign for McDonald’s, Open 24 Hours. There is a little moon and sun next to the 24 Hours. I see a sign for Wendy’s, Krystal, Taco Bell, even Moe’s. And then I see a sign for Chick-Fil-A with the words Closed Sundays. I am driving down the highway on a Sunday, returning home from worship. I am hungry for lunch, and need something to eat. Most likely I

² www.timtebowfoundation.org.

would go to Chick-Fil-A from all the choices I have. But I can't, because they are not open on Sundays. If you are like me, sometimes you wish Chick-Fil-A would be open on just one Sunday, so you could have one of their delicious sandwiches.

Yet, there is a statement that Chick-Fil-A is making, despite how we feel about it. Back in 1946, Truett Cathy decided to stay closed on Sunday, when all the other stores were open on Sunday, for spiritual and practical reasons.³ The spiritual comes from the Ten Commandments: rest on the Sabbath day. But the spiritual reason moves smoothly into the practical reason, and it is this: all operators and employees of Chick-Fil-A should rest with family and friends. They should have one day to be with loved ones to go off and worship and to do other activities that would help those bonds of love become stronger. Many fast-food restaurants will squeeze every buck they can get out of us, so they will stay open on Sundays and even for 24 hours if necessary. One fast-food restaurant chooses to go against what is normal in business, and that is their recipe for success.⁴

We could tell many more stories of exceptional people whom everybody knows. There are big named

³ www.chick-fil-a.com/Company/Highlights-Sunday.

⁴ Ibid.

people and organizations that are doing just as Joseph of Arimathea once did: stepping away from what is popular, what is acceptable by all, and serving the Lord in different and unique ways.

As I was doing research last week for this sermon, I came across a website that reminded me that not all the exceptional people for God have to be well-known. Not all of them have to be great in the sight of all. It's kind of like those Nike commercials we have seen during the Olympics. They say, "[Greatness] is not in one special place, and it is not in one special person." I loved watching the one commercial with an overweight boy running down a solitary country road. His clothes are soaked in sweat and he is gasping for breathing, but he keeps chugging along. He will never win a race of any kind, but he will make it down that road with flying colors.

I found an article that said at the top, "God uses ordinary people to do extraordinary things."⁵ Anybody can say, "God, I am available to You and I submit and surrender to Your will for my life," and see amazing things happen. There is a story about a little girl who was standing near a small church crying. The pastor walked by and asked what was the matter, and the girl sobbed that there was no room in the Sunday School

⁵ <http://christianinspirational.org/god-uses-ordinary-people-to-do-extraordinary-things/>

class for her. The pastor noticed how dirty the girl looked. Her clothes were tattered and soiled, and the pastor figured that she had been told not to come to Sunday School, or even to church, because of her unpleasing state. The pastor went against what may have been acceptable, and marched her back into that Sunday School class, and gave her the chance to hear about God.

Two years later the little girl died, and the pastor was called to make arrangements for her body. He discovered she owned a purse, and in it were 57 cents and a note, saying that she hoped the money could be used to build a bigger church for more kids to come and hear about God. It might not be what the members of the church wanted, but he spoke with the deacon about creating a capital campaign to build a bigger church. 57 cents turned into a larger church, and the membership grew, and more people learned about God and became disciples themselves.

We are exceptional when we do things God wants us to do. We are exceptional, when we talk to that one kid on the school bus that nobody else wants to talk to. We are exceptional, when we stand up for somebody that everybody else wants to knock down. We are exceptional, when we are the voice of reason in the group saying, "We shouldn't do this, because if we

do we will regret it.” We are exceptional, when we spend our time and effort helping somebody, when we would rather do something else.

“The power of God is unlimited. God is not limited in any way by [our] education, economic status, race or social standing.”⁶ We don’t have to be a member of a council like the Sanhedrin or a great athlete or a powerful businessperson to be exceptional for God. The Josephs of Arimathea, the Tim Tebows, and the Chick-Fil-As may serve as examples to us, but we too can step out of our comfort zones and be examples for others. We may tap in to the power of God, and do things acceptable or unacceptable by others, just as long as it is acceptable by God, and carried out his will.

Sometimes it takes great courage to step out of our comfort zones, but God doesn’t leave us out to dry when we do. God gives us the peace to step forward. He whispers in our hearts, telling us we are doing the right thing. And as we take something on, it doesn’t mean we won’t become scared and wish to stop. God continually whispers to us, continually offers us his peace, continually fortifies our courage. When we are criticized by others, God tells us not to listen. If it is

⁶ Ibid.

his will, we can endure the criticism. We might be blamed for being wrong and for being a nuisance. As long as it is God's will we carry out, we become holy irritants that shake up what is normally acceptable.

Our actions cause others to think differently, hopefully to think about God more decisively. Hopefully their attitudes would change, and they would step away from what is normal to others, and they may become exceptional in God's sight.