

## “Get Real”

*Telford Work, Westmont College  
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Let me take a poll. How many of you made New Year’s resolutions? If you did, put your hand up. ... Now *keep* you hand up if you’ve kept up with that resolution.

Let me remind you that it’s only February. And many of you didn’t raise your hand in the first place. I take that to mean that your lives are either perfect, or you don’t have a lot of confidence in New Year’s resolutions.

I talked with a student last semester about what topics we need to address in chapel. The answers are probably not too surprising to you: Alcohol and drug abuse, eating disorders, sex, cheating – the problems that afflict students in all high schools and colleges, even Christian ones.

These are all appropriate topics for a chapel talk. But let’s not pretend that half an hour of the most powerful rhetoric imaginable would stop even one of these problems. You probably don’t believe it. In fact, if you do, I want to convince you otherwise.

See, I could preach a dynamite chapel talk on eating disorders. I could highlight the prevalence of the problem on campus. I could teach you the long-term and even short-term consequences of anorexia or bulimia. I could tell you a horror story, then a story with a happy ending, and show you how Jesus made the difference. I could wrap it all up in vivid biblical images. I could say that Adam and Eve eat to please themselves, not to please God, and they end up ashamed of their bodies and afraid of their creator. But then I could show that Jesus is ‘food indeed,’ food that takes away our pride and our shame and brings us back to the table to eat and drink together at an eternal, divinely hosted banquet.

All this would have *some* effect. I deeply appreciated Emily’s comments last time. But how much of an effect would my words, or hers, have *by themselves*? And how long would it last? And what then, when people break their resolutions and slip back into their old habits? Another chapel talk, but cranked up another notch?

What are we missing?

Well, some may say, maybe we just don’t have enough faith. That habit that’s dogging you is just going to *keep* dogging you until you muster enough faith to release God’s power over it. Until then, keep on believing, or *trying to believe*. And try not to think about whether Calvinists are right about predestination.

Or maybe the old fashioned approach doesn't work anymore. Maybe preaching *used to be* enough to cure the old problems, but ours are just too intractable. Bibles and sermons are for a simpler age, with simpler problems. This may not be a popular *public* opinion here at Westmont, but I bet there are some skeptics among us who quietly doubt that the Word has the power that everyone around here says it does.

Or maybe it's not a matter of believing harder, but working harder! Or maybe it's a matter of having the wrong motives for what you ask for! Or maybe your being healed doesn't fit into God's plan! Or ... or ....

These are cruel answers to people who are suffering. I'm sure some of them are accurate – I mean, who has enough faith, besides the odd centurion? Yet these diagnoses still fall far short of a cure.

So let's go back to the first Christian century for some context on today's campus issues. Diseases of practically every kind were incurable. The psychological aspects of many problems had not been identified. Wealth and poverty were even more obscene than they are today. Married and family life was often oppressive and abusive. Infant mortality was just a given. Natural disasters – famines, for instance – were just as catastrophic as they are today, and there were no relief agencies to fly in emergency supplies. Reigns of terror were often the rule in politics.

How do our problems compare? There *was* alcoholism, but wine was less alcoholic, and people were too poor to afford much of it. There was premarital sex, but the need for families to “marry well” to stay above water financially meant that sex wasn't recreational like it is in our culture. Sex was subsistence – whether by progeny, marriage, or prostitution. The big eating disorder was *starvation*. Cheating in school was undoubtedly a problem, but few people ever *went* to school, and it was much harder to plagiarize through the Internet.

So some of our problems are worse; some are better; some are just different. But they seem no less intractable.

So, What Would Jesus Do? Would he deliver an elegant sermon against these problems? Would he look around, or wait around, or people with enough faith to get the job done? Would he sing some choruses? Would he do new signs and wonders? Multiply carbohydrates and proteins? Overturn the desks of plagiarists? Turn wine back into water?

Well even if he did, all these things would still only be sideshows. Their effectiveness would rest on another, more basic thing that Jesus Would Do. He would point us to *his community*, as the place where real healing happens.

If Jesus were our chapel speaker today, he would invite us into the Kingdom of God. With words and deeds, he would show us *that* life together where people don't have to be violated or intoxicated or starved half to death to be accepted.

Being healed is not just a matter of thinking or understanding or resolving to do this or that. It's a matter of entering the Kingdom. All the thinking and understanding and resolving and even believing in the world is in vain outside that Kingdom.

What complicates things *for me today* is that Westmont is related to the Kingdom of God in a special way. Westmont does play a part in that Kingdom; but the kingdom Jesus would show us isn't *realized* at Westmont College. This campus is not the Kingdom of God on earth, no matter how perfect the weather, or how rich the chapel worship, or how plentiful the dorm Bible studies. Only one place can plausibly call itself the Kingdom of God on earth: The Church of Jesus Christ.

This is why the only way I could *really* address any one of our problems on campus, let alone all of them, is by pointing you to another place.

Let me illustrate, with somebody else's illustration. [This](#) is the icon of the crucifixion in Gruenewald's Isenheim altarpiece. It is one of the Church's most powerful, most famous, most grotesque images. I'm going to leave it up. If your mind wanders, you don't have to stare at Bob Wennberg's picture of C.S. Lewis. You can meditate on *that*.

I want to draw your attention to the raggedy man off to one side. That's John the Baptist. In the Gospels, he is long gone by the time Jesus dies; but he reappears in this icon, literally, to make a point. The words around him say, "he must increase, but I must decrease."

My role today – in fact, Westmont's role every day – is like that of John the Baptist. As a faculty member, my job is to *decrease*. I want to become less important to you as you grow up. Not by making you sell back your books and forget everything about my courses and chapel talks, but by successfully pointing you to another community, into which you can enter – or re-enter – *and continue to grow in healing and in service*.

Okay, my analogy isn't perfect. John lived in the wilderness and ate bugs. You live in Montecito and don't even have to cook for yourselves. This is more like the John the Baptist Country Club. Just try not to let the discrepancies get in the way as I go on.

John the Baptist is a transitional figure. On the one hand, he is an agent of Israel's renewal and preparation, "making ready for the Lord a people prepared." John's father Zechariah prays a remarkable prayer over his newborn son:

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God, when the day shall dawn upon us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet in the way of peace (Luke 1:76-79).

Jesus started as a disciple of John the Baptist. Matthew even suggests that Jesus got his "Kingdom of heaven" language *from* John! John's community was a remarkable bunch of people. And like John's circle of disciples, Westmont is a wonderful and formative place. You can grow immensely here. You can forge lifelong friendships. You can learn love and skills for a career and life of learning that might last forever.

Yet once Jesus is baptized and off on his own mission, John's role is basically over. To continue belonging to his community is to be out of step with the times. John keeps fasting, but Jesus eats and drinks. In Acts, to be John's disciple is no guarantee of a role in Jesus' Kingdom. For the salvation Zechariah foresaw and John preached, you have to *go* to where that salvation *is*.

In the same way, college will massively and permanently change those of you who are students; but it is still just a season – a very *short* season. Soon your Westmont experience is going to end, and you will face the task of using it wisely. And if you hang onto your past instead of facing your future, well, you need to get a life.

You will soon leave behind term papers and shared bathrooms and incredible tuition and power failures. You'll also leave behind the classes and suite mates and Bible studies and compulsory chapels that constantly remind you that Jesus is Lord. You'll enter a world where Jesus is still Lord, but Jesus is no longer in your face. Your tender green shoots of discipleship will soon face the weeds of the world's worries and obsessions and idols.

If you're not keeping your New Year's resolutions now, how are you going to do it then?

Here's how – the same way you can do it now: By becoming a part of the only community in the world that has the power and the mission to realize the Kingdom of God.

Take another look at our icon. Where are we in that picture? We're just the audience; we're nowhere! ... *unless* ... unless we're drinking that cup down there at the bottom. If we're drinking that blood of the new covenant, we're part of the picture. We're players in the drama.

See how highlighting the role of the Church does not trivialize the work of a place like Westmont? The opposite is true. John the Baptist is important in all four gospels. He's essential both in ushering in the Kingdom, and in pointing people to the King. Similarly, what Westmont does is important, and I think we do it very well. There are all kinds of resources here for people with problems, and crises, and seemingly unconquerable habits. I'm glad to be investing so much of my life here; in fact I'm honored, and humbled, and intimidated. But let's not forget about what Westmont *doesn't* do – what we can't do, because only the Church can do it.

Only a local church, marked off *as such* by baptism and maintained *as such* by communion, can offer lasting accountability and mutual responsibility. Only there does the Holy Spirit build a group of people, who may have nothing in common besides their love of Jesus and their need for healing, into his very body.

You never graduate from a church. You don't have to leave if you can't come up with tuition. You never grow out of either needing or providing its blessings. You never “move on,” except into another church.

Last chapel, Emily remarked that salvation is a “process.” That's absolutely right. And commitment to a local church is the core of that present process.

For years I didn't get this. As a new Christian, I would hear people appeal to “Jesus” as the solution to every problem, every dilemma, every legitimate need. And they were right – Jesus *is* that. I accepted those claims; but they just sat there in my head, because I never bothered to get involved in the body *where* God offers all that wonderful grace. I thought that deliverance came through catching sermons and talk shows on TV and radio, or just by working things out myself, or through reading books from Christian bookstores (by the way, in the 80's, Christian bookstores actually *sold books*, not just T-shirts *about books*). How was I supposed to know that staying out of church would put a ceiling on my spiritual growth? The books, and the televangelists, and my own individualism, usually just commended “Jesus” to me. Many of them

would warn me that Jesus, *not church*, was the answer to my problems; Christian faith, *not religion*, would save.

Then one day my girlfriend snapped at me, “If you’re such a Christian, why don’t you go to church?” I knew she was right; or at least I couldn’t think of a very good reason why she was wrong. So I started going. And I started growing. And getting *more* involved, and establishing relationships, and realizing I had gifts *to give*, and discovering ways to give them.

If I had not done this, there is *no way* I would be here today. I’d still be stuck at a plateau, wondering why God wasn’t answering my prayers. Or else I would have given up the praying altogether, and decided that Christians are fooling themselves.

Sure, I had to endure some mediocre preaching, irritating personalities, unappealing music, and policies I didn’t always agree with. And people had to endure some of *me* too. Furthermore, I eventually drifted out of my first church and eventually into a church in which I could be a lot more fruitful. (Not that I stopped being either irritated or irritating!)

Yet *not* to have endured all these things would have *killed* my life as a Christian.

I’m not just speaking to students. It’s even easier for faculty and staff to fall into this trap, to think that Westmont is our Christian community. We’re *not* just here for four years. We have friendships, commitments, and memories that go back decades. Yet even for us, Westmont isn’t our ultimate community. Only a local church can be that place.

Let’s go back to those common problems: Substance abuse, inappropriate sex, eating disorders, cheating. All of these are destructive not just because they are dangerous acts, but because they become even more dangerous *habits*. Very hard-to-break, personally destructive, socially alienating habits. Such habits are not broken by magnificent chapel talks. They’re not broken by powerful lectures and assigned readings and course assignments. The Holy Spirit gives us different resources to heal us of these: The spiritual gifts of local communities of disciples, of *friends* in the truest sense, who gather together to give and receive those gifts according to the Word they preach to each other, and the sacraments they practice together – who commit themselves to each other not for fifteen weeks or even four years at a time, but for the duration. These are the little colonies where *Jesus gets real*.

I know college makes church involvement awkward. You’re here for a few weeks, then you’re somewhere else. You don’t know where you’ll be a few years from now. You’re maturing

spiritually and changing in all kinds of ways. You're encountering and entertaining ideas and practices that might not be welcome at your church, and you aren't always sure what you believe.

I think these things cut you some slack for the time being. But they also make a real church relationship *that much more important*, as a blessing that helps you stay right-side-up when your world seems like it's upside-down.

Look again at our icon. Ever feel like the folks on the left? That's Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the disciple "whom Jesus loved." They are experiencing pain that goes beyond most of our abilities to comprehend. No, make that *all* of our abilities to comprehend. Ever feel a little like that? Powerless? Hopeless? Foolish? Desperate? Guilty?

Jesus doesn't preach a sermon to them with his dying breaths. He doesn't tell them that he, in the abstract, is the answer to their problems. (Hey, at this point, he *is* their problems!) Instead, he gives them *community*, in the form of *each other*. "Behold your son!" he says. "Behold your mother!" And from that hour, John says, the disciple takes her to his own home. It is *there*, in a fellowship that apparently lasts a lifetime, that he will remain with them both. It is over that little communion of saints that he bows his head and gives over his Spirit.

I can point you there. I can give you a whiff of that cup of wine down in the corner. But I can't do much more than that. Not in chapel or class, anyway. My job is to make you ready to go follow Jesus. That is, *our* job is to make *each other* ready: A people prepared, thirsty for that chalice, hungry for a lifelong embrace of other needy disciples, ready to stand under that giant cross and enjoy its protection. The Kingdom is at hand. It's *right there*. Are you ready not just to be visitors or guests or newcomers or juniors or seniors or faculty or staff, but to be fellow citizens?

The best way to respond to this chapel talk is something you can't do here in Murchison Gym, or even on campus. So let's stand for the benediction, and I will hope your response *follows* it.

"May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints" (1 Thess. 3:12-13).