

In the second round of this year's NCAA March Madness tournament, Texas A&M faced Northern Iowa on a Sunday night in Oklahoma City. The game did not go well - by the end of the game, with about a minute to go, A&M was down 12 points. Freshman player Admon Gilder, Jr. was playing and his parents had driven up from Dallas to see the game. They both had to work Monday morning, so with a minute to go and no hope, they left, hoping to beat some of the traffic.

Then, a miracle happened (and you all know how long a minute lasts in basketball, so here is the final minute of the game with all the timeouts removed!) [\[VIDEO\]](#)

A&M went on to win in double-overtime, securing a place in college basketball history. That player who scored the final layup to tie the game? That was Admon Gilder, Jr., whose parents had left (along with a number of A&M fans).

Admon saved the day, and his parents weren't there to see it. Because they'd given up hope.

Anyone who loves sports knows this feeling. You shut off the TV, or leave the stadium, or flip the radio station in disgust because your team let you down *again*. Of *course* they blow it, that's what they do, etc. etc. etc. Comebacks are rare (and a comeback like the Aggies pulled off is unprecedented. Miraculous, one might say).

When there's no hope, when it's clear you're on the losing side, it's easier to give up.

That sense of hopelessness is more and more common in our culture. Maybe it's the big picture - the constant fear we're taught to live in as a culture, the lack of inspiring leaders (even our superheroes are fighting each other this year), or an economy that never seems to recover. A lot of times it's personal - broken relationships, the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, an endless string of letdowns and failures.

Hopelessness can settle down on us, leaving us with a creeping certainty that we're on the losing team (that there may *be* no winning team), that tomorrow *isn't* going to be better than today, that what's before us is an endless string of depressing sameness.

That hopelessness brings a lot of folks into church buildings like this one, hoping that maybe religion has some answers. Religion makes some bold claims, after all, about new life, hope, power and victory. But the life Jesus calls us to is risky. A life of meekness, not violence. A life of love rather than fear. A life lived for others rather than protecting ourselves. It costs us to follow Jesus. And if we're not sure his way truly leads to life, we end up like Gilder's parents, sinking into hopelessness, leaving before the game is over.

But the Gilders never would have left if they knew how the game was going to end. It wouldn't matter how badly A&M was down, how poorly their son performed in the first three quarters. If they had somehow known what was in store, they'd have been there till the final buzzer.

Of course they would have.

The same is true for us. We do, in fact, know how the game of Life is going to end. We know whether love or fear wins out, whether life or death rules the day. And this knowledge frees us to live bold, authentic, vulnerable lives of faith.

I know some of you derailed right there, when I equated faith with risk and vulnerability. For many of us, faith has never been about risk, but about safety. Faith has never been about vulnerability and authenticity but "building walls to protect ourselves - from the evils of the world and the flames of hell. But what happens when we build walls is that we end up pretending, hiding. We end up not being ourselves and instead conforming and falling in line. We fake it even though we never seem to make it."

But this sort of faith is grounded in fear. It's the same kind of hopelessness we see everywhere else in our culture, a faith that's given up on the power of God to transform. A faith that's lost sight of the fact that we're on the winning team and has gone home early.

We're in a series called Identity Crisis that is exploring exactly this tension - between death and life, between the old world that crucified Jesus and the new world God raised him into. In this series, we're asking the questions, "Who is Jesus, and what does that mean for us?" We've been in two books - the Gospel of John (a book about Jesus) and the book of Revelation (a book about what Jesus means for us).

[Scripture Slide 1] So if you have a Bible, turn with me to Revelation 21. This is the very end of the book, and a vision of how God brings about the end of human history. The whole book has been about the tension between God and the sinful, rebellious world, with us caught in the middle. This book was written to a group of Churches for whom the game looked bleak. They were down about a million points with less than a minute to go and it seemed impossible to them that there was even a .001% chance they could win. Many of them had given up, were abandoning God and the way of faith in Jesus.

The whole book has been a Revelation of what's really going on in the game, so to speak. At this point in the book, God has defeated the powers of the world through Jesus' death and resurrection, and now, finally Heaven and Earth are becoming one again. The greatest comeback in history is in the books, and now it's time to celebrate. Let's read together, beginning in 22:10 (and I'm going to skip some of the description of the city. Basically you need to know it's a giant cube, like 1,400 mi on each side.)

He took me in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and he showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God and sparkled like a precious stone—like jasper as clear as crystal...

So this giant, beautiful cube descends from Heaven to Earth. That sounds really weird to us, but any Jewish reader would've been elated. Because up to this point, Heaven and Earth have been separate. In the beginning, God gave us two trees - the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. God told us to choose life and we chose rebellion. Since that moment, God has withdrawn from Earth for our own protection. The only overlap between Heaven and Earth was in the Temple, and God's physical presence on Earth was in the very center of the Temple, in a place called the Holy of Holies. Want to guess what shape the Holy of Holies was?

It was a cube. So now, the Holy City is descending from Heaven except it's the Holy of Holies, God's physical presence, more vast, more beautiful than anything anyone could've imagined. This is what Heaven and Earth reunited means: the end of evil and injustice, and God living with us once again. Let's read on:

I saw no temple in the city, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. And the city has no need of sun or moon, for the glory of God illuminates the city, and the Lamb is its light. The nations will walk in its light, and the kings of the world will enter the city in all their glory. Its gates will never be closed at the end of day because there is no night there. And all the nations will bring their glory and honor into the city. Nothing evil will be allowed to enter, nor anyone who practices shameful idolatry and dishonesty—but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

Then the angel showed me a river with the water of life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. It flowed down the center of the main street. On each side of the river grew a tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, with a fresh crop each month. The leaves were used for medicine to heal the nations.

No longer will there be a curse upon anything. For the throne of God and of the Lamb will be there, and his servants will worship him. And they will see his face, and his name will be written on their foreheads. And there will be no night there—no need for lamps or sun—for the Lord God will shine on them. And they will reign forever and ever. -- Revelation 21:10-11, 22-22:5

No Temple of course - it's no longer needed. The gates will never be closed - the city is always open, always receiving the nations of the world. And the Tree of Life has returned, growing alongside the River of Life that flows from the One seated on the Throne and the Lamb - God and Jesus, the Father and the Son.

This river is an image borrowed from John's gospel - here the Revelator is using it as an image for the Holy Spirit (who according to an ancient creed of the Church precedes "from the Father and the Son").

So here is the end of the game: God wins, Heaven and Earth become one and the people of God live with God in a world where they are always open to the outside, where the nations of

the world bring their glory in to find healing and life that flows from the very source of life, the Holy Trinity.

If this is how the game ends, do you think any of those churches would've given up, abandoned God's side, no matter how bleak it got, no matter how much they suffered? Of course not. Which is the point. God gives us this powerful vision of the End of All Things so we know exactly where the world is headed, what's in store.

So how does this vision free us? How does it engage our hopelessness? How does this vision speak to our broken relationships, the injustices we face on a daily basis, or our struggles with personal sin? What does it mean for our identity to flow from hope rather than fear?

[Scripture Slide 2] Turn back to John 5. This is early in John's story of Jesus, but Jesus has already declared that the Temple in Jerusalem (the one with the Holy of Holies) is obsolete because his body is the new Temple - the site where Heaven and Earth overlap. But we're about to witness Jesus perform a sign - what John calls Jesus' miracles. For John, these signs all point to something about who Jesus is, and in this case, Jesus heals on the Sabbath (a big no no for the religious leaders of Jesus' day). As usual, Jesus ignores conventions to do what needs to be done. Let's read together:

Afterward Jesus returned to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish holy days. Inside the city, near the Sheep Gate, was the pool of Bethesda, with five covered porches. Crowds of sick people—blind, lame, or paralyzed—lay on the porches. One of the men lying there had been sick for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him and knew he had been ill for a long time, he asked him, “Would you like to get well?”

“I can’t, sir,” the sick man said, “for I have no one to put me into the pool when the water bubbles up. Someone else always gets there ahead of me.”

Jesus told him, “Stand up, pick up your mat, and walk!” Instantly, the man was healed! He rolled up his sleeping mat and began walking! But this miracle happened on the Sabbath. -- John 5:1-9

[Is there an image that could be left up during this next part?] Jesus comes to a pool surrounded by the sick. Apparently, every now and again, the waters would bubble, and whoever got into the pool first got healed. You can imagine, can't you, the masses of broken people crowded around the pool, anxiously searching for the smallest sign of bubbles so they could be first in.

Jesus picks out this one man and asks him a dumb question, "Would you like to get well?" Are you kidding, Jesus? Would he like to get well? This man has been lying there sick for *thirty-eight years*. Of course he wants to get well! Right?

Except... this man seems to have given up. Maybe that's why Jesus singled him out in the first place. Maybe everyone else is crowded around the pool, and he's just lying there on his mat. So Jesus asks, Don't you want to get well? Why aren't you struggling toward the pool?

And the man tells Jesus he's sort of given up. He has no one (where are his friends, his family?). And he's too sick to make it into the pool first. Someone else always gets there ahead of him.

How many years do you think it took for him to give up? Did he have people helping him, initially? People who sat with him every day for... a week? A month? A year? Five years? Did he give up hope in the tenth year? The twentieth? The thirtieth? How long before he was just laying in his misery, by that stagnate pool of water while the other broken people around him pressed in hoping for a few bubbles?

Might Jesus be asking us the same question - Do you want to be healed?

Of course we do, Jesus! What a foolish question!

And yet... how many of us jump from broken relationship to broken relationship, expecting that if we just keep doing the same thing a little longer, maybe this time it will be different, that maybe this time those dead patterns of using and being used will show some signs of life, a few bubbles?

How many of us hate our jobs, and yet for all our complaining, we go in day after day after day and do the same thing, expecting maybe if we just try a little harder or hold out a little longer there'll be a miracle, a few bubbles, some life instead of death?

How many of us are tired of that same habit we can't seem to break, that poisons our families, our lives, but we keep laying it in, hoping that maybe today something magical will change, we'll see some bubbles and *this time* it will be different?

We're all broken people, crowded around a pool of stagnant water, all desperately hoping for a few bubbles so we can rush to be first in.

The problem with that is we can't afford to be generous, to be vulnerable. I can't worry about your problems when I have to take care of mine. I can't let *you* be the first one in the pool.

Could it be that we're missing Jesus, coming up behind us, quietly offering us a better way?

What if a pool of stagnate spirituality, dead water that bubbles with healing life only occasionally wasn't as good as it gets? What if instead of this dead pool there was a river of life, flowing endlessly from the source of life-giving love? What if there was so much love and life in this river

that it brought healing to everyone who drank from it, so that *they* became conduits of this living water as well?

We wouldn't fight and claw and scratch to protect ourselves, look out for our own interests. We'd be free to be bold, to risk generously. To love abundantly.

And of course this is exactly what the Revelation promises. That the Spirit is that river of live pouring into us.

So if that's true, why don't we experience that now? What's keeping us from this river of life?

[This whole process can be illustrated] It's not that we don't have access to that water. God gave us the gift of the Spirit when Jesus was raised from the dead. Jesus' promise to make us into fountains of living water has already been fulfilled.

The problem is those walls we build up to protect ourselves, walls that define our identity. Walls that protect us From judgment, from harm, from people seeing the *real* us. When we build up walls, when we keep the world at arm's length, we damn up the Spirit's work in our lives, turning God's life-giving love into stagnate pools of dead spirituality.

We think the answer is to get more water, so we go to Church. We pray and sing and give money and read scripture. We take and take and take in as much of God as we can. And nothing changes.

Because the problem isn't that we don't have enough water. God gives us more than we could possibly ever need, and God doesn't ration.

The problem is the water has nowhere to go, because of the walls we've built. We're like the Dead Sea, taking in an endless stream of water, but becoming saltier and deader with every passing day. We look at our dead spirituality, desperately hoping for a few bubbles, and God says, in my holy city, there are no walls. The gates are always open. My people will be open, vulnerable so they can welcome the nations of the world. My love is a river flowing always onward and outward. You want life? Punch some holes in your wall. Let the Spirit's work in your life begin to flow out into the world. That stagnate pool will be transformed into the power of the Spirit flowing out of you into the world to bring healing and life wherever you go.

But it requires vulnerability. It requires risk. It requires you to take a chance.

Do you want to be healed?

How can you risk this week? What does it look like for you to punch some holes in the walls you've built up around yourself?

[Illustrate] My friend Anne Marie Miller offers a practice called "Giving the Gift of Going Second". It's always scary to go first in confessing, in being authentic and vulnerable. Always. But when someone else says, "You know what I struggle with...?" it's easy for others to chime in and say, "Oh wow, me too!"

This week, when you meet with your C-Group, offer your group the gift of going second. Share a place God is challenging you, a way God is working in you. A fear you're having a hard time letting go of.

If you're not part of a C-Group, you can do this with a trusted friend. Offer them the gift of going second.

It's scary. But friends, that fear has trapped us behind walls that quench the Spirit's life-giving work in us. We cannot be the Church pictured at the end of Revelation, the Church that offers healing to the nations, the Church whose doors are never closed, a Church through whom the life-giving waters of the Spirit flow to a world dying of thirst.

As long as we live in fear, safe behind our walls, we're missing out on the great victory God has already won in Jesus' resurrection. We've left the game early, before the greatest comeback in history.

Let's be a people who risks. A people who is crazy generous. A people's whose identity is outrageously loving. Offensively hopeful. A people who lives with the confidence that *we are on the winning team*. No matter how dark the night, we can participate in the life of the Spirit.

Communion SetUp

[Communion Slide] One has gone before us in living in risk and vulnerability, indeed vulnerability unto death. And the night he was betrayed, he took bread and broke it and told us that this was his body, vulnerably broken for us. Then he took the cup and told us this was his blood, riskily poured out on our behalf. In doing so, he opened the flow of God's life to us. He did not build walls to protect himself, or keep God's grace for a select few. He died for us all. As we partake, we are formed by Christ's sacrifice, and his open, giving love becomes our identity as well, God's Holy Spirit flows through us to invite the world around us into God's healing.