

**What's Your Gospel?**  
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Have you noticed that we have trouble lifting up prayers of joy together sometimes? That surprises me. As Christians, good news is really what we are all about. The literal meaning of gospel is good news. When we read from the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke or John, we read *their* understanding of the good news of Christ's life and ministry. The good news of his teaching and healing; the good news of his resurrection reminding us all that love has the last word over hate, systems of domination, and even death itself.

As Christians we are called to embrace and live into Christ's story, and to transform our lives through it. We are called to recognize our own stories within Christ's story as well. The joy of that process is meant to be the bedrock for our everyday lives, and to illuminate even the shadowed regions of our souls.

Yet there are those times—and they are fairly regular—when it is time to pray our joys; our happiness; our frivolous good news—and instead, we remain mum. Now, please do not mishear me. I am not wagging a finger at everyone else, because I notice this in myself, too. And it surprises me that it can be so hard for all of us to lift up good news.

Now, it is true that good news seems hard to come by sometimes. Here we are recovering from a recession and many of us have had financial or job losses from that. That's not good news. Our country is involved in military activities in faraway countries that place the lives of young women and men, some of whom we know at risk. That's not good news. And our country seems to be polarizing more and more around politics, which means less and less seems to get accomplished. That's not good news either. In addition to all the drama throughout our country there is another challenge to believing in good news, and in particular the good news of the gospel.

When Jerry Falwell did things like proclaim that the American Civil Liberties Union, People for the American Way, pagans, abortionists, feminists, gays and lesbians helped to bring about the horrible events of 9/11 through God's wrath for simply living their lives in different ways—and he proclaimed it as a Christian, that's a challenge to the good news of the Gospel. As if Jesus judges differences as wrong and sinful rather than inviting all sorts of people into his ministry of reconciliation. When Pope Benedict XVI calls attempting to ordain women a “grave crime”—the same category as clergy sexual abuse—that's a challenge to the good news of the Gospel.

As if women being given equal power with men is the same thing as men abusing power. When Terry Jones calls himself a Christian pastor and then tries to rally people to burn the Qu'ran as a work of the Devil, that's a challenge to the good news of the Gospel. As if God were to be known in only one way in the world, rather than gifting humanity with many ways to experience the Holy.

There are many voices in the world claiming to be Christian and challenging the good news of the Gospel, as we have been moved to know it. And they are often the voices which are heard by people who are outside of the church, or felt they had to leave it because of the things they hear proclaimed in Christ's name. Things which contradict God's love and acceptance of human beings. And that is a problem. Every Christian is called to proclaim the faith. Not simply to practice it alone. Not simply to share it with a group on Sundays. But also to bring the message out into the world. And that can be...well...terrifying.

There are many obstacles to doing evangelism. First and foremost is fear. We may be afraid to seem pushy. We may not want to impose our views on other people. We live in a religiously plural world where non-belief is also common, after all. And we may not want to come across as the Robertsons, Falwells and Joneses of the faith. Which is ironic, of course, because our lack of action means that people with those sorts of views get the most press time, and effectively define what it is to be Christian for people outside the faith. How can we let that happen?

Another fear that many people have about spreading the good news of Jesus Christ, is that they may not know what to say, or how to say it. This can be true even when we hear the often rapturous letters of Paul simply and eloquently defining his own gospel. In today's letter, which Paul wrote to Timothy while he was imprisoned and awaiting trial toward the end of his life, he writes: "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David—*that is my gospel...*" In one swift sentence Paul ties together the resurrection of Jesus and his relationship to David. He offers something new—the resurrection—bound to something ancient—the genealogy of Jesus which roots him to a distant past and the Jewish tradition. There are both wings and roots here—wings bearing new things to revel in, and roots to what has gone before.

But Paul, being Paul, doesn't stop there, and to be fair, there is more to unpack. He reminds his coworker and disciple Timothy about the Christian basics. He says that, "If we have died with him, we will also live with him, if we endure, we will also reign with him..." In other words, the more we invite Jesus into our lives, the more he transforms them, and we participate in God's glory, even through and beyond death.

Paul cautions Timothy that we must remember to proclaim Christ's name, because—"if we deny him, he will also deny us." Proclaiming and sharing in Christ's name means speaking the values that we find in the Gospel as well as giving Jesus due credit for our work. After all, as Christians we bear his name and mission.

And then Paul says the thing I find the most remarkable: "if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself." This comment reveals something about Christ's essential nature, which is part of why I am fired up about getting us to proclaim the good news. Because by remaining faithful to the even to the faithless, Jesus demonstrates the compassionate love at the core of God, which is not simply good news, but the *best news of all*. God remains faithful even when we stumble. Even when we fall away, Jesus will love us and welcome us back. When our faith falls short, God keeps calling us to stretch it out.

Even more so, when we make mistakes and realize it, we can always repent. Jerry Falwell actually apologized after making his remarks—not as thoroughly as he may have, but he made some effort to make amends. The Pope has been on a tour which has involved some fence mending about his latest stances, and has faced protests for it. And even Terry Jones backed down from his Qu'ran burning plans. None of these were complete reversals of their positions which seem so out of line to me, but at least some attempts were made.

So, there is no good reason to be afraid of proclaiming the Gospel. We should not fear being unable to say the right words. God will remain faithful even as we falter. And God will keep cheering us on to try again, because faithfulness is God's nature. And God is faithful to all humanity.

I think God wants us all to be more like the people who proclaim their faith loudly, even when we disagree with what they say. Silence seems to me to be a worse sin than imperfect expression of God. Because God's good news *needs* to be talked about in the world. As human beings, we are going to get much of it wrong by virtue of our own limitations and biases. And that certainly goes for me, too! And that is why it is vitally important for us each to speak our own gospel, and to lift up the good news of Jesus Christ from our own experiences.

Each of us has a perspective that adds to the total picture of God. We are richer for sharing our visions, even when they clash. Here again, Paul offers wisdom: "Remind them of this, and warn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening." Friends, I have done some word wrangling today, as I do every week I suppose. The lesson from Paul is not to get hung up there. Not just to say different takes on the gospel, but to proclaim positively our own good news of Jesus Christ. So, the question for each of you today is this: *what is your gospel?*

You hear me preach every Sunday. How would you do it? As Protestants we proclaim a faith in the ministry of all believers. Pastors are not designated Christians for communities, but one Christian among many. So, everyone should be able to express their own gospel of Jesus. That is the goal of Paul coaching Timothy in the gospel in today's reading.

It is also one of my deep hopes for us as a church; that we are each able to name our love of Jesus and proclaim his good news. Not just to each other, but to friends, and maybe even strangers someday. We need the clarity, and the world needs the good news!

I know I have challenged some of you lately by asking you express yourselves in worship. And I know exactly how challenging that feels, I promise. Every week I shake through at least some of the service. But on the off chance that someone has a brief sentence or two to share about their own gospel, I welcome you to do so now. What is your gospel, what is your good news of Jesus Christ?

As memory serves, responses included, but were not limited to:

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you...

God loves us...

The order in the universe is a sign of God's care and love...

There is hope...

If you shared on Sunday and you would like to make sure is heard by the community, add it in, written in **bold type**, and then "reply all" to the e-mail ministry. If you were unable to join us last Sunday, and have something to share now, please feel invited to follow the same procedure.

## **2 Timothy 2:8-15**

8Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David—that is my gospel, 9for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained. 10Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. 11The saying is sure: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; 12if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he will also deny us; 13if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.

14Remind them of this, and warn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening. 15Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.