

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ  
Sixth Sunday after Epiphany- February 13, 2000

Scripture lessons: Psalm 145:8-17 & I John 4:16

PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST, Part I-“What Is the Gospel?”

I vividly remember about how during my teenage years my parents started to talk to me about “Life”- Life with a capital “L”. Not often but always in unusually earnest tones they would speak with me about what “Life” was like and about what I needed to learn about “Life”.

This morning I ask us, as individuals and as a church, “What have we learned about ‘Life’?”

How about this? Sometimes it seems that “Life” has little aim or purpose to it. We grow older and it becomes clear that we who are alive also are dying. Time passes faster, years roll by more quickly. Energy, strength, and ambition weaken. Our bodies can’t do what they used to do.

We watch the obituaries more closely. We attend more wakes and funerals. It becomes less easy to forget that one day we, too, will die. Loved ones, friends, and countless strangers live with us and die before us. Soon enough, we’ll follow them into the grave. What’s the point of it all?

Especially when we consider that there’s so much in between our births and our deaths that’s hard to make sense of and cope with.

In the wider world airplanes crash, children get cut up in vicious civil wars, terrorists take hostages, natural disasters rage on.

In our personal lives, a downpour comes along and ruins our long-awaited holiday, a nasty flu bug hits us just as we’re getting ready to throw a big, fine party. Our child is born with serious disability. Another loved one becomes gravely ill and dies too soon or lives too long.

A wrong number wakes us up in the middle of the night. Our virtually new car keeps breaking down and we can’t find a reliable mechanic. Our family life fills up with tension and hurt, a long-time friend betrays us, our neighbors remain strangers. Why do we have so many difficulties, large and small?

Maybe it’s because “Life” doesn’t much care about us. Maybe everything in our lives, good, bad and in-between, really is just the random result of a bunch of blind, impersonal subatomic particles endlessly and senselessly knocking each other around. More than a few philosophers and scientists have said, “That’s the way it is.”

Is it? Deepest down, what’s going on with “Life”?

It’s not the kind of thing we usually like to think about. Normally we prefer simply to go about our business, coping as best we can with whatever “Life” throws at us. But that doesn’t make the question go away.

Is “Life” ultimately indifferent to us? We’re born, live, die and that’s all there is to it?

Is it all just a crazy tale of come and go blues?

We hope not. We want there to be much more to it than that. Personally speaking, I can’t let go of this desire for Something More even when I’m afraid it’s the worst sort of wishful thinking. I bet it’s the same for everyone, even for those of us who never think about it.

Occasionally, I believe, we get real glimpses of Something More. Powerful experiences of wonder open the door for us. In wonder we begin to sense that Something More really is there.

We wonder with the physicist who’s struck by the thought that whatever brought the universe into being seems to have known a lot of complex mathematical formulas long before we did.

We wonder with the astronomer who’s dazzled by the sheer enormity of outer space, light year upon light year upon light year.

We wonder with the chemist who’s awed by the discovery that inner space is filled with a dizzying array of particles so small that if the atom were the size of the Milky Way, these particles would be smaller than the earth.

We wonder with the anthropologist who's rocked by the realization that if the age of the earth were one year, humankind appeared on it only four hours before midnight on December 31<sup>st</sup>, and civilization appeared a mere half-second before the stroke of that midnight.

We wonder with these students of 'Life' and begin to sense that Something More really is going on.

We gaze into a starry night's sky or peer into a pure stream rushing through the forest. We see brilliance in the sunrise and sunset or smell sweetness in the return of spring. We are made still by going back to the place where we grew up and are moved to understand better how we've become who we are. We're delighted by gifts of true love shared and pained by unjust hurts inflicted on the innocent.

We experience all these things and we wonder why.

Why such a universe built upon intricate and beautiful mathematics? Why such an awesome expanse of space, outer and inner? Why such vast stretches of time with the emergence of humanity and the growth of civilization? Why the sky, the stream, the sun, the seasons?

Why my life? Why the delight of love and the pain of injustice?

Why all of these things? Because there is Something More.

In wonder we begin to glimpse that this Something More is NOT indifferent to us. Instead it hints at the promise of great purpose for us and for all things.

But loads of senselessness and evil remain. What are we to make of it all? Deepest down, what is going on with "Life"?

In struggling wonder we human beings start to think and talk about God. By wrestling with God we try to come to terms both with this awesome Something More and with the hard facts of unrelenting senselessness.

Maybe this Something More is kindly disposed toward us, yet often forgetful. That's how ancient Egyptians saw God. Maybe this Something More is crotchety and testy with human beings, easily offended and quick to strike back whenever crossed. That's how ancient Babylonians saw God. Maybe this Something More created everything, but then lost interest and left it all to run on its own. Some ancient Greeks saw God that way.

Ancient Hebrews, however, saw God differently from all of these. At Mt. Sinai they met Something More as One who had made a covenant with their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This God, whom they felt as the Creator and Lord of all things, had freed them from slavery in Egypt, brought them to Sinai, and now entered into a special covenant with them as the Chosen People.

This God passionately loved them and kept on loving them no matter what. Senseless evil sometimes afflicted them. Sometimes they became wildly unfaithful in their devotion to God. But through it all, God's love for them remained strong and sure. That was their bedrock faith.

In time a son of this Hebrew faith, Jesus of Nazareth, appeared and spoke more of the nature of this God's love. He told a story about a man who hires laborers to work in his vineyard. The first ones hired agree on the wage they'll receive for the whole day's work.

Later in the day the owner goes out and hires more workers. These work only in the afternoon. Some of them work only the very last hour.

At the end of the day the employer brings all the workers together and pays everyone the same. Those who worked all day grumble about it. The owner asks, "What's the problem? I paid you what we agreed on. Why begrudge my generosity to others?"

Jesus said God's love is like that. It's crazy generous. It's for everyone and it'll make you angry if you're only interested in tit for tat.

Jesus told another story about a father who had two sons. The younger one, who eventually would inherit one third of the estate, asks for his share early. The father gives it to him.

According to the expectations of Jesus' time and place (and our own), this younger son was supposed to use his share to set himself up in "Life", so that he wouldn't be a drain on his family and might in time even enhance its wealth and prestige.

Instead he takes his inheritance into a far country and indulges himself in loose living. He goes way too far and ends up desperately poor. He lives with pigs.

Finally, he swallows his pride and decides to go back to his father. He intends to ask if he can be taken back simply as a hired hand. He prepares his "I'm sorry" speech and heads for home.

Before he gets there his father sees him in the distance. The old man doesn't wait at the house to receive his son with offended dignity. He doesn't wait to hear the confession of how awful the young man's behaved. He doesn't talk with the boy about making amends or doing penance.

Instead he acts like a lunatic. He runs far down the road to greet his son, hugs and kisses him long and hard. The young man starts in on his repentance speech, but the father cuts him off.

He's too busy calling out to his servants, "Quick. Get my son a new robe, the best one. Put a ring on his finger. Bring him fresh sandals. Kill the fatted calf. It's time to celebrate. Let's celebrate, everyone! This son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found!"

Jesus says God is this lunatic father. God is the one who's crazy in love with his children even when they've wasted his gifts and lost their way.

In the covenant of the Haslett Community Church we state that "We are gathered. . .to proclaim the gospel of Christ." Friends, this is it. This is the gospel. God loves us. God loves us wildly, passionately, crazily. God loves us so generously we can't even imagine it.

Deepest down, what's going on with "Life"? Is there Something More beyond all the senselessness and hardship that's so easy to see? The gospel of Christ says yes, there is Much, Much More.

According to Jesus, deepest down "Life" is a love affair, a wondrous affair of God's own heart initiated and carried on by the God who is love, the God whose love knows no bounds, the God whose gracious purpose for us and for all things has only started to unfold.

This is hard to believe, sometimes almost impossible to believe. How can we square it with senselessness all around?

We can't. We can't square it. In the face of what we can't square we're just lunatic enough to go along with Jesus.

In the depths of wonder a door opens to us that gives us a glimpse of Something More. Then comes Jesus. He speaks and lives with the authority of One who's been through the door and who knows what and Who is beyond it better than we do. With him we're willing to push our intuition of a gracious Something More to its farthest limit and beyond. With Jesus we're ready to believe this gospel madness that God is in love with us.

In return we can only live this same love. Live in return with a passionate, wild, generous, crazy, lunatic love for God and for all those God loves.

Which means, of course, like the owner of the vineyard we do away with tit for tat. It means that like the father of the wayward son we do away with love only for those who have their act together, whom we like, who treat us well. It means instead that our love reaches out to all.

As the people of the Haslett Community Church what is it that we have learned about "Life"? We've learned that at its heart "Life" is all about the gospel. "Life" is about the astonishing good news that in spite of all evidence to the contrary, God is in love with us.

This mad and holy truth makes us happy and full of joy. It makes us want sing, dance, shout, celebrate, do whatever it takes to share this joy with the world.

It inspires us with love for truth, passion for righteousness, enthusiasm for service. It makes us seek in every way to be a power for the building of God's Kingdom.

God has created this church through this good news. Let us proclaim it for all we're worth. Amen.

Kurt Kirchoff