

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
Seventh Sunday after Epiphany- February 20, 2000

Scripture lessons: Psalm 62:5-9 & John 8:31-32

PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST, Part II- "Gifts the Gospel Gives"

In the founding covenant of our church we declare that we are gathered to "proclaim the gospel of Christ". Last week in this sermon time we pondered the question, "What is the gospel?"

Ernest Hemingway once told a story about a father who went to Madrid and placed an ad in the biggest newspaper. It read, PACO, MEET ME AT THE HOTEL MONTANA, NOON WEDNESDAY. ALL IS FORGIVEN. PAPA. The next day 800 Pacos showed up at the Hotel Montana.

It's the same with us. We come in hope. We hope that in spite of everything- in spite of our own failures and misdeeds, in spite of the world's senselessness and evil- that still somehow things can be made right.

The gospel of Christ comes to us and says YES. In spite of everything- YES. "Welcome home," God says. "Come to the table," says Jesus. A new ring is given for our finger, the best robe for our shoulders, fresh sandals for our feet. The fatted calf is killed, the musicians cut loose, the guests start to dance.

The house is full because every Paco has been welcomed home. We get to our feet and join the dance. A sister takes our hand on one side, a brother joins us on the other. A great circle forms around God in the center.

God, whose love for us shines so brightly, so warmly, so beautifully that it takes our breath away. God, whose love is so strong and sure, that it will make all things well. This is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It's the greatest good news and one of the best things about it is that it's true even when we don't believe it.

Sometimes Christians talk and act as if God's love is true only for those who believe the right way. Only for those, for example, who profess the proper creeds and doctrines, who interpret Scripture in the correct manner, who acknowledge approved moral codes and standards of propriety, who undergo officially prescribed sets of religious experience, who maintain membership in one, true church.

Creeds, Scripture, morals, religious experience, church membership- all of these are important. At their best they're meant and are able to help us embrace God's love. But the fact of God's love doesn't depend one whit upon any of them. God loves us, period. Nothing we believe or disbelieve ever changes that.

How we believe, however, does change us. When we truly believe the gospel, that is, when we embrace in the depths of our hearts the gift of God's love for us, it makes us new people. It brings other gifts into our lives that transform us.

The first gift the gospel gives is honesty. How's that?

The gospel assures us that God loves us no matter what. As we take this to heart, we are set free. "You will know the truth," Jesus said, "and the truth will make you free."

God loves us as we are. That's the truth. Therefore, we are free. Free to be honest. Free to acknowledge ourselves exactly as we are.

We have no need to pretend anymore that we're better than we really are. And we have no need to pretend that we're worse than we really are.

We can look at "the real us", the us God really loves, the us that is both horribly blemished and wonderfully beautiful.

But granted, this can be a tricky business on both sides. It can be tempting to see ourselves as worse than we really are, to concentrate almost exclusively on our failings and our sin. In the

church of my childhood and youth, a congregation of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, we began every worship service with a hymn. We followed it immediately with a confession of sins that usually went like this:

“O almighty God, merciful Father, I, a poor, miserable sinner, confess unto Thee all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended Thee and justly deserved Thy temporal and eternal punishment. But I am heartily sorry for them and sincerely repent of them, and I pray Thee of Thy boundless mercy and for the sake of the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of Thy beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to be gracious and merciful to me, a poor sinful being.”

Over the years in the kind of atmosphere sustained by this repeated confession I too often fell into the temptation to see myself as worse than I really was. So much so that it became a big reason why eventually I left the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

In time I happily was led into the United Church of Christ, our denomination that includes many churches like our own that take a much softer approach to the confession of sins. Some of our churches even leave it completely out of worship as a matter of principle. In doing so, they seek to make up for the many years during which they believe that the Christian Church as a whole has laid far too much emphasis on sin.

But this approach also has its dangers. With it we can easily fall into the temptation to see ourselves as better than we really are.

One of the parishioners at my former church in Rhode Island grew up in a Congregational Church that had no confession of sins in worship. He complained to me about the fact that our UCC church in Providence included a confession each week. He told me this sometimes made it hypocritical for him to take part in it. There were some weeks in his life when he simply did not sin. On those Sundays he had nothing at all to confess.

I tried gently to persuade him that his definition and awareness of sin were probably too narrow. It's likely he frequently was tempted to see himself as better than he really was.

Will Willimon is Dean of the Chapel at Duke University. He tells of a conversation he recently had with a Duke medical student who was serving his residency at the University's Medical Center.

The student told him, “Working here in the Medical Center, I give thanks to God every day that I'm a Lutheran.”

“Why does working here make you glad you're a Lutheran?” Willimon asked.

“Well, I'm not just a Lutheran. I'm a Missouri-Synod Lutheran,” the student replied. “And one thing Missouri Synod Lutherans are real big on is sin. From the time you're baptized you're told ‘You're sinful.’”

“So how does that help you in your work here?”

“Well, each morning when I walk to the Medical Center I see it spread out so gloriously before me. I say to myself, ‘A lot of good is going to be done here today. But a lot of bad will also be done, some of it in the name of good. While we're busy helping people, healing, doing good, we'll also be doing some bad.’ My prayer is, ‘Lord, help us.’”

“And you're thankful for all that?” Willimon said.

“Yes, I'm thankful. Because I meet a lot of people here who aren't Lutherans. It seems they live with the burden of thinking they always have to get everything right. They seem to think every case has to turn out a success, that everyone must get well. They seem to think that if that doesn't happen somebody's got to get blamed for it. But because I'm a Lutheran I can let go of all that. I know God calls me to do my very best, but it's not up to me to make everything turn out right. That's up to God.”

This medical student, I think, Missouri Synod Lutheran and all, has taken deeply to heart the blessed gift of gospel honesty. The truth of God's unconditional love has made him free. He's free to acknowledge both good and bad in the work he does. He's free NOT to pretend that he

always gets things right. He's free NOT to play the blame game when things go wrong. He's free to trust that God can work with the good and bad in everyone, work with all of us as we really are, and still finally make things come out right.

This gift of freedom brings such enormous relief. With it we no longer have to waste energy keeping up appearances. In gospel freedom we can instead see ourselves and everyone else as mixed up in both good and bad, as sisters and brothers who all are both sinners and saints. The bond of genuine fellowship that this creates is another of the great gifts the gospel gives.

These days people flock to Alcoholics' Anonymous and other groups that are committed to practicing the Twelve-Steps. Why is that?

Is there any other place where can you see more clearly at work the extraordinary gifts that the gospel gives? The Twelve Steps flow out of trust in the truth of God's unconditional love. They flow out of the freedom this brings to be boldly and amazingly honest. They flow out of the frank recognition that every person is both sinner and saint. And out of the bond of genuine fellowship created by all of this Alcoholics Anonymous has become the kind of loving place that's hard to find almost anywhere else.

Brennan Manning is a Christian writer and a member of Alcoholics' Anonymous. He tells this story from one night at his AA group

"The meeting opened with the Serenity Prayer followed by a moment of silence. The prologue to Alcoholics Anonymous was read from the Big Book by Harry, followed by the Twelve Steps of the program from Michelle. That night, Jack was the appointed leader. "The theme I'd like to talk about tonight is gratitude," he said, "but if anyone wants to talk about something else, let's hear it."

Phil's hand shot up.

'As you all know, last week I went up to Pennsylvania to visit family and missed the meeting. You also know I've been sober for seven years. Last Monday I got drunk and stayed drunk for five days.'

The only sound in the room was the drip of the Mr. Coffee in the corner.

Phil continued, 'You all know this program's buzz word, H.A.L.T.' 'Don't let your-self get hungry, angry, lonely, or tired or you'll be very vulnerable to that first drink. Well, angry, lonely, and tired got to me. I unplugged the jug and that was it.'"

Phil's voice started to choke. He lowered his head. Around the room eyes teared up. Soft sobs became the only sound.

Finally, someone else spoke. "The same thing happened to me, Phil, but I stayed drunk for a year."

Then another voice, "Thank God, you're back."

"Phil, it took a lot of guts to come back so soon."

"I'm proud of you."

"Phil, I never made it even close to seven years."

"Relapse spells relief," said a substance abuse counselor who was working with the group. "Let's get together tomorrow, Phil, and figure out what you needed relief from and why."

After the meeting ended, Phil stood up. He felt hands on his shoulders, others on his face. Then kisses on his eyes, forehead, neck, and cheek. Finally Denise said, "You old ragamuffin, let's go. I'm treating you to a Taste Freeze."

Of this group, Brennan Manning says, "Nobody fools anybody else."

They're all there because they know they've made big messes in their lives. They also know that's not the only or last word about them. They know there's God's goodness in them and that by honestly facing both the bad and the good, the pieces of their lives can be put back together.

Each meeting is full of laughter and seriousness. Some members are wealthy, others middle class or poor. Some smoke, others don't. Some have graduate degrees, others haven't finished high school.

Manning writes that each time they meet, "The high and mighty descend and the lowly arise." The love of God brings them together.

Such are the gifts the gospel gives. God's boundless love, freedom for the honesty of sinner saints, the bond of fellowship this freedom brings. These same gifts have been given to us.

Always may we embrace them more fully. Let's share them freely with each other and with everyone else. This is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Kurt Kirchoff