

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
Eighth Sunday after Epiphany- February 27, 2000

Scripture lessons- Psalm 71:5-8 & Mark 4:26-34

PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST, Part III- "Living in the Gospel"

God is . . . what? Maybe a stern taskmaster bent on keeping us in line? Maybe a severe judge offended by our wrongs and out to punish us hard?

God is . . . a distant, almighty power who likes knocking us around at whim? Or an arbitrary rule maker who enjoys testing our obedience, time and again?

To these common enough portrayals of God we say, "No, no, no, and no." God is none of these things. God is . . . love. That's the gospel of Jesus Christ that the Haslett Community Church is gathered to proclaim.

God loves us even when we don't believe it. But as we reflected last week, when we believe it, it changes us. We gain new freedom for honesty as sinner saints. We enjoy the deep bond of fellowship that this freedom brings. Both of these gospel gifts help make us new.

What else can we say about "living in the gospel"? In the classic phrase of St. Paul, it's a life of "faith, hope, and love".

Faith comes first. It means saying YES to God's love. YES, we believe with our minds that God loves us and YES we trust in our hearts God's love for us.

The YES of faith does not exclude doubt. It freely and honestly acknowledges doubt and faced with it still says YES. The YES of faith is an act of courage in the midst of doubt. It's a willingness to risk our YES even with doubt.

Our faith doesn't make God love us. It simply opens us to God's love. It opens our minds, our hearts, and our whole lives to embrace God's love, the love that always is there.

And what of hope? Living in gospel hope means embracing the future of God's love. It means living in the vital expectation that God's love never will end and that finally God's love will prevail.

This isn't at all the same as optimism. It's not the same as expecting that God will always make things go as we would like.

Jesus lived in gospel hope. He would have liked very much not to have to die as he did. He prayed for it, to no avail. On the cross he felt abandoned by God. Yet his dying words were, "Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit." In the resurrection his hope in God was vindicated.

In our lives when things go well, it's easy enough to believe that God loves us. It's when things go badly that we realize how much we have to live in hope. We live in hope because things always are going badly for someone. Always it's painfully obvious that everything is not yet as it should be.

So Gospel hope turns us to the future. In it we see our lives and the life of all creation as part of a much bigger, still unfolding story. In hope our expectation is sustained that in the End God's love will make all things well.

Ten years ago this next week, the spring thaw in the Sierra National Forest in California revealed something gone terribly wrong, something not at all as it should have been.

On March 1, 1990 Jean and Ken Chaney were driving in the park and headed down a road that they didn't know was little used. They skidded off into a huge snowbank.

Jean was 68 years old, Ken 75. They realized that their physical limits were going to make it impossible for them to get out of the car and back to the road. A storm hit that soon became a blizzard. Ken and Jean could only sit tight and wait. Maybe someone would come down the road, see them, and give help.

As their wait lengthened they began to keep a diary. Writing by the fading glimmer of their glove compartment light, the Chaney's started to understand the gravity of their situation. "We

began to realize,” they wrote, “that we were on a road that isn’t maintained during the winter. Truly a miracle if anyone comes by. . . We have no idea what lies ahead. . . here we are completely and utterly in God’s hand.

The next line they wrote was, “What better place to be.”

During the next week they ate Roloids, a stick of gum, and two restaurant jelly packets. They drank from frost scraped off the inside of the car windows. Their diary revealed that they passed the time singing hymns, reminding themselves of all the Bible verses they could remember, and praying.

On March 18th Jean Chaney wrote, “Dad went to the Lord at 7:30 this evening. . . It was so peaceful I didn’t even know he left. The last thing I heard him say was “Thank the Lord.’ I think I’ll be with him soon . . .”

The Chaney’s car was found on May 1st. They had lived their last days and then died in gospel faith and hope.

What of love? In I Corinthians 13, Paul says that when the End comes there no longer will be need for faith and hope. Then, as God knows us now, we will know God. Faith will give way to knowledge and hope will be completely fulfilled.

Love, however, will remain. The love of God in which we begin now is the same love whose endless riches we’ll share fully in the age to come. The need for and enjoyment of it never will end.

Yet we still live in this age. If we live in the gospel love of God now, what does it mean? Maybe loving God now means being in church on Sundays, saying prayers, and doing good deeds. Maybe it means feeling a certain kind of transcendent joy or ecstasy. Maybe it means studying the Bible in depth or knowing theology well. All of these can be real expressions of life now in God’s love, but at best they’re only part of the story.

Life now in the love of God does not basically consist in a set of specifically religious actions, feelings or knowledge. At the most basic level it’s instead an awareness of and a turning towards God in ALL things.

God’s love is present to us always, everywhere. To live now in God’s love is to deepen our bond with this primal fact. God’s love surrounds us when we wake and sleep, work and play. When we’re good or bad, fail or succeed. For as long as we live and whenever we die. To become partners with this love in every situation is what it means to grow now in God’s love.

Usually Jesus tried to teach about this by telling stories. In today’s gospel lesson we read, “With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it.”

Usually through stories we can best hear about how to join with God’s love because stories are supple. Stories have lots of room in them for detail, nuance, and imagination.

This fits because the particular shape of our bond with God’s love often needs to change. It needs to change in response to the details and nuances of the situations we face. It needs to change along with the kind of loving imagination that specific circumstances require.

The Parable of the Crabby Boss and the Christian Employee. The Parable of the Kids Who Won’t Clean Up Their Rooms and the Parents Who Want to Ground Them for Life. The Parable of the Cliquish School and the Students Who Always Get Left Out. The Parable of the Type-A Go-Getter Who Now Is Chronically Ill.

The shifting circumstances of our lives demand that we tell stories like these. How can we live them out as gospel partners in God’s love?

United Church of Christ minister Andrew Young tells this contemporary gospel parable that he saw initiated in the life of Nelson Mandela. Mandela had been imprisoned for years by the white South African government for opposing its apartheid policies of racial segregation. He finally was released in 1990. Four years later when apartheid had been dismantled and South Africa held its first democratic elections, Nelson Mandela became president of the country.

In 1996 Mandela invited Andrew Young to be one of his guests as South Africa hosted the Rugby World Cup tournament. Rugby always has been and still is a white man's game. The South African team was entirely white even though the South Africa is 80% black.

As the time for the tournament approached, a strong and heated debate broke out about the South African team symbol. Traditionally it was an image of a "springbok", a kind of gazelle native to South Africa. Most white Afrikaners said, "Our symbol must be the springbok. It's been the symbol of every rugby team we've ever had." To which most black South Africans said, "Yes, and it therefore reminds us of our country's racist past. We want it changed!" Feelings about it ran hot and high on both sides.

A few days before the tournament's opening game, Nelson Mandela decided to visit the South African team. After the visit, he called a press conference. He came to it wearing a South African rugby jersey and athletic cap with the springbok on it. He pointed out that until the 1994 elections most blacks in South Africa had rooted against the white South African team with its springbok emblem. "But, he said, "regardless of the past, these are our boys now. They may all be white, but they're our boys, and we must get behind them and support them in this tournament."

The next day, the coach of the rugby team sent word for his players to come to practice in suits and ties. Instead of heading to the practice field, he took the team to Robben Island. He took them to the prison where Nelson Mandela had spent nearly three decades of his life behind bars. The coach brought every player on the team into Mandela's cell.

He said, "Nelson Mandela was kept here for 27 years because of the racist policies of our government. We Afrikaners tolerated his imprisonment for all those years, but now he has backed us publicly. We cannot let him down."

The tournament began and the South African team, springbok symbol and all, played WAY over their heads. They made it into the finals against perennial rugby powerhouse, New Zealand. It was like Central Michigan against Florida State in football. And yet, at the end of regulation time, the game was tied.

President Mandela was in the stands, again wearing the South African springbok jersey. In the timeout before the overtime period he brought a black South African children's choir out of the stands and onto the field. They sang an old African miners' song which to them is sort of like "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" was to the slaves in this country. Within minutes, 65,000 people in the stadium, black and white, were singing this song. Andrew Young said, "I don't know anything about rugby, and I didn't understand the words of the song, but there were tears in my eyes. They were rolling down my cheeks."

The Springboks took the field and were unstoppable. They won the World Rugby Championship. That night whites and blacks danced together in the streets of South Africa.

In the midst of a volatile, difficult situation Nelson Mandela turned to where God was present. With loving imagination he lived out the first lines of this gospel parable and God, with the people of South Africa, wrote out the rest.

It's like Jesus told it in his first parable from today's gospel reading. A farmer planted his fields and left them to time and the rains. The crop sprouted and grew, shooting up, flowering, setting seed. Then the farmer gathered the harvest.

A life of faith, hope, and love is like that. We make our contribution to it, we join in partnership with it, but ultimately the power is of God who gives the growth. God's love works in and through us, in and through all things. In time, the fruits of divine love grow and we get to reap the harvest. Such is the joy of "living in the gospel". Amen.

Kurt Kirchoff