

DO NOT BE ASHAMED OF THE GOSPEL

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Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Romans 1:7-17

Fifteen years ago, on May 16, 1985, I officially began my ministry with you in this place. Tomorrow, May 15, 2000, I will officially conclude that ministry as your pastor. What to say in this, my last sermon, on this last Sunday? Although it is also Mother's Day, I've decided a sermon is not needed to honor that occasion. Although it has been an unfulfilled fantasy of mine to preach a sermon consisting entirely of hilarious jokes about religion, I've decided not to do that either. I'll have to save my burgeoning file of terrific unused jokes for another occasion. So what can I say on this last opportunity to have you as a captive audience? The problem is not that I don't have anything to say, but that there are too many things to say – and that it seems I have said virtually all of them before.

These past years have been rich and wonderful in many ways. I have often recalled to myself what I told the search committee when asked why I was interested in the pastorate of this church. I said something to the effect that I wanted to see churches like this one survive and flourish. I hope no one leaves here this morning without knowing that in many ways I feel I have fulfilled that calling, and in some ways I feel I have failed. I hope no one leaves here this morning without understanding that in important ways it remains to be seen whether I have succeeded or failed. It depends, of course, on where you go from here.

When I spoke of “churches like this one” back fifteen years ago, and when I speak of it today, I should say that I am not speaking of this church exactly as it is or ever was. I am speaking of what I have understood this church to be at its best. At its worst, this church--like any other church--is nothing to write home about. I don't mean to be insulting, simply honest. Churches, like people and hair, have their bad days, and this church has been going through some rather bad days. But this church at its best is something else. At its best this church has sought to be, and still is, a church where honesty and integrity are valued above conformity and dogma, where relationships are more important than agendas, where articulate, thoughtful witness to the Christian gospel is highly cherished, where active social concern and involvement are regarded as essential expressions of congregational ministry and mission, where every person is valued as a unique and precious human being regardless of credentials, bank account, or social position. In truth, this church has never quite lived up to all these aspirations, but the aspirations are real.

This is a church whose members have been in the forefront in this community in addressing issues of poverty, child care, and pre-school education, of which the most visible legacy is Monroe County United Ministries. It is a church that has cared about homelessness and hunger, as our commitments to the One Great Hour of Sharing, Habitat for Humanity, and Bread for the World

attest. It is a church that has tried to be informed about, and act in friendship toward, our international neighbors in places like Posoltega, Nicaragua. It is a church with a long-standing commitment to peacemaking. It is a church whose ministers and leaders have been active in the civil rights movement of the 1960s, prophetic opponents of the Viet Nam War in the 1970s, advocates for greater gender equality in the 1980s, critics of the Gulf War in the 1990s, and committed in the current struggle to make a more hospitable place within our society and the church for gay and lesbians persons. It is a church that has opened its doors to the community for all kinds of meetings, programs, and events that exist to serve our neighbors and meet certain of the needs of people who may never come to our services of worship. It is also a church that has nurtured a number of youth and young adults who have subsequently entered the ministry of the Presbyterian Church as Ministers of Word and Sacrament: Ted Miller, Dean McDonald, Steve Braden, Mike Riggins, Bill Meyer, Debbie Grohman, and Wendy VanderZee are the most recent of whom I am aware--the last four of these having been ordained here during the past 15 years.

It is the sort of church where all these sorts of things can happen that I have wanted to serve and help to survive and flourish. None of what I have just recounted could have happened without the tremendous resources of energy and spirit that reside among the members of this congregation. I was fortunate enough to be at the right place and the right time, to be a partner with you in this ministry. At the same time, as many of you know, there is more I had hoped would be possible here that has not come to pass. There are competing visions of ministry in this church. There are competing understandings of how to move forward toward whatever visions claim us.

For my primary text this morning I chose a portion of the beginning of Paul's letter to the Christians at Rome. Here am I, trying to make a farewell sermon to a congregation, some of whose members I have known for over 15 years. There is Paul, expressing his longing to come to a church he has never seen, most of whose members he has never met. But we share a common passion--that the gospel be proclaimed. In verse 15 Paul speaks of his eagerness "to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome." He then goes on to say, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith . . . For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith" [vss. 16, 17].

This is one of those passages that has played a critical role in Christian thinking, especially since the Reformation. Unfortunately, the meaning is not entirely clear. What is this "righteousness of God" of which Paul speaks? It is God's justice. It is God's faithfulness. It is a way of saying that God stands by us, and for us, and seeks to make things right with us. So the kernel of what Paul is saying here may be that the gospel reveals to us a God who is this kind of righteous God--a just and faithful God who stands by us, and for us, and with us. And it seems as if Paul is saying that this revelation, or this knowledge of God, comes to us through the faith that is engendered by the gospel. And he is also saying that this knowledge of God further strengthens us in our faith. The gospel is a word of proclamation or encouragement or good news that opens us to the discovery that God is for us, not against us [cf. 8:31], and in that discovery our faith is deepened and strengthened that we may truly live. In this is our salvation.

It has long been my conviction that if you know this much about God, that is all you really need to know about God. The really fundamental question about God is not how to define God, or how to explain God, or how to express with theological precision the nature of God. Those may be important questions for theology to address. But so far as faith is concerned, the basic question is one of God's disposition toward us. Here Paul answers that question in terms of God's justice or faithfulness. Later on in this letter he will also answer in terms of God's love--a love from which, he says, nothing in all creation can separate us in Christ Jesus our Lord [8:39]. The gospel, according to Paul in this letter to the Romans, is the good news in Jesus Christ. This good news so assures us of God's goodness that we are enabled to live in trusting faith toward God.

Sometimes it astounds me how simple the message of the Christian gospel really is: "God loves you." That's it. God is not out to get you. God does not relish the opportunity to catch you in some act for which you must be punished. God does not play the "gotcha" game, as we human beings so often do, pointing the finger at another in order to justify ourselves. God calls us to account, to be sure, but then God justifies us by standing by us and for us and with us, by being there in the Spirit to act for us [cf. 8:27], by loving us through every possible circumstance [8:38-39].

So why does Paul speak of "not being ashamed" of this gospel? What is there to be ashamed of? Well, think about Paul, as we know him from his letters and the book of Acts. There were lots of things in Paul's life for which he could have been ashamed. He was hardly the most congenial of human beings, and he had made life miserable for others in the past. He must have been ashamed of himself--but he was not ashamed of the gospel. Perhaps he was also thinking about the way the gospel had been revealed and confirmed. One could hardly proclaim the gospel without mentioning that terribly shameful crucifixion, in which God's love was somehow manifest through the sufferings of Jesus. Christians are persons who may feel some shame in their identification with Jesus on the cross. Or perhaps Paul was thinking that the only really good argument for the gospel was the argument from experience. After all, he himself had been persuaded, not by sophisticated arguments or ingenious speculations, but by being struck down on the road to Damascus in the course of pursuing his intended victims, then finding forgiveness and grace to start his life anew. Perhaps Paul was thinking that the gospel of God's justice and faithfulness and love sounds a bit too flabby, too magnanimous, or too bleeding hearted. In the rough and tumble world of human affairs greater respect tends to be accorded those who insist upon a kind of mental and moral toughness that draws the line on who is in and who is out, who counts and who does not matter.

But Paul declares that he is not ashamed of this gospel about a magnanimous God whose justice can always be counted on but can only be measured by love. He is not ashamed of this gospel that was made known in personal and historical experience--his own experience on the Damascus road, and the historical experience of the crucifixion. He is not ashamed of this gospel that brought about his repentance, causing him to repudiate his former persecution of the Christians, make a 180 degree turn, and become an ambassador for Christ.

One of the major challenges facing Christians today is not to be ashamed of the gospel. We see how badly the gospel is often abused, how poorly it is often presented, with what pride and hypocrisy it is frequently proclaimed. But the fault does not lie in the gospel. When we speak of the gospel, however, we are bound to be asked by our contemporaries, which gospel? There are so many brands of Christianity, and so many versions of the gospel these days!

Does it help to note that in the New Testament alone there are already several versions of the gospel? We have the Gospels according to Matthew, according to Mark, according to Luke, and according to John. We also have the gospel according to Paul and the gospel according to other New Testament writers as well. Then we have the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Peter, and other presentations of the gospel that never found their way into the New Testament canon. There was no single statement of the gospel that seemed to satisfy all of the early Christians, and there is no single statement that satisfies us all today. And behind if not above and beyond all these various interpretations of the gospel lies the gospel of Jesus himself, the gospel of the kingdom or reign of God.

We live in a time of religious and cultural pluralism, perhaps not as different from the time of Jesus as we often assume. It has been my aspiration to proclaim the gospel in a manner that takes into account all the various interpretations and presentations that have been handed down to us, but that brings us as close as we may hope to come to the gospel as it was embodied and proclaimed in Jesus himself. That is why I take seriously the work of New Testament scholarship, including the Jesus Seminar. Those who believe that such scholarship takes Jesus away from us are, in my judgment, perilously wrong. If we simply adopt the various tenets and teachings of the Church as they have been accumulated, refined, and transmuted over the centuries we are bound to lose touch with some of the most creative, incisive, challenging, and life-giving dimensions of Jesus' message. We need to keep going back to the scriptures, and back to the Jesus whose witness is proclaimed in those scriptures. At the same time we must recognize that Christian faith emerges, not when we crack open the Bible or some text of scripture, but when in our encounter with the Jesus of authentic Christian witness we are "cracked open" by his gospel, making us vulnerable to a contemporary and living faith.

It is evident from Paul's letters that he must have been constantly confronted with challenges to his understanding of the gospel. In the letter we call II Corinthians he chides those in the church who have come under the influence of other teachers: "For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you submit to it readily enough," he complains sarcastically [11:4]. As Paul sees it, they are clearly being led astray. The same sort of thing must have happened in Galatia. Paul begins his letter to the Galatians with a searing indictment: "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel--not that there is a different gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel

contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!” [1:6-9].

Paul invokes damnation upon those who proclaim a gospel different from what he proclaimed. Poor Paul. He had brought the churches in Corinth and Galatia into existence, only to see them take up teachings and practices that confounded the gospel as he had proclaimed it to them. I dare not be so presumptuous as Paul. I have not always gotten the gospel completely right, and it is hardly my place to invoke curses upon those who get it wrong. Nonetheless, when I encounter the prevailing winds in our churches, I identify with Paul in much that concerns him. We have seen a decisive turn toward legalism in our own denomination in recent years. We have seen a heightened interest in forms of ritual and liturgy, and a decline in ministries of social transformation. We have seen faith reduced to belief, and belief to doctrines and creeds, when faith is more rightly to be understood as commitment and trust. We have seen the proclamation of a gospel that seems better suited to people inside than outside the church, to people who are straight rather than gay, to people who are materially secure rather than people who are on the edges and margins of our society. I am generalizing, of course, but I believe that what I am saying is generally true, and it does not speak well for us. It is not reason to be ashamed of the gospel, but it is reason to be ashamed of what is happening in our churches.

It would be too easy and too simple to blame this situation upon those conservative elements that are calling us back to our roots or those who feel that we have abandoned our tradition. Calls for renewal in the Church today are generally calls to reclaim or recapture something precious from the past. Those who call for renewal have rightly recognized that many Christians do not know their history. They do not know their Bible. They do not know enough about theology to be able to discern the wheat from the chaff. The problem is that such things are not the actual substance of the Christian faith. Christian faith is a matter of believing and trusting in the God of Jesus Christ, a God of justice and love.

Scripture and tradition and history and theology become very important, however, when differences and disagreements arise over the meanings of divine justice and love. In times of uncertainty and change, those who know what they believe and why are likely to prevail over those who do not, regardless of who is in the right. In my experience many of those Christians who know best that God is a God of compassionate justice and inclusive and commanding love are suffering from a lack of informed conviction and courage. They cannot give an adequate account of their faith. It has been my hope that in this congregation it might be otherwise.

It seems to me that God’s justice and love, as we see them through the eyes of Jesus, call for a life of humility and compassion and courage. In the first place, I suspect there is a whole lot about God that we don’t know. In the second place, what we do know is that God loves us all, and therefore we are to love us all. And in the third place, this is very hard to do, especially in a church that seems bent on drawing too many distinctions and divisions and a world that takes it for granted some people are more equal than others.

Do not be ashamed of the gospel. The gospel gets easier to live by, the more seriously you

consider the alternatives. Countless times in my life my impulse has been to think and act in ways that hardly resemble the example or teaching of Jesus. But when I have had time seriously to consider the alternatives, it has been much easier to practice what I preach. It is like the choice that Moses puts before the people of Israel at the end of the book of Deuteronomy, before they are to enter the Promised Land. “See,” he says, “I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess” [30:15-18]. That is not so difficult a choice, is it? Life or death, prosperity or adversity. Who would not choose life?

No less is at stake today with respect to the gospel. The gospel is good news. It is good news about God. It is good news regarding the possibilities for life in community with others under the reign of God. It is good news that calls us to account for all our pride of place and station, for all our efforts to impose upon others conditions that might exclude them from the table of fellowship within the household of God’s children. It is good news that we ignore or reject to our peril. It is good news that has been revealed and confirmed for us in Jesus the Christ. When this church – First Presbyterian Church, Bloomington, Indiana – is at its best, no one will have reason to be ashamed. The gospel will be confirmed in you, and it will be good news to all who have eyes to see or ears to hear. AMEN.