

THE MESSAGE IN TWO HANDS

Grasping the Gospel

Joyful Witness (Part 2)

Text: Romans 1:8-17

Grasping the Gospel

We are thinking this month about what it means to be a joyful witness to the grace and mercy of God reaching out to the people of this world. Next week and the week after, we're going to get very practical about this and look at the specific "HOW TO's of sharing our faith with our friends. This morning, however, I want to make sure that we really get what we are seeking to give away to others. The Apostle Paul once wrote: "**I am not ashamed of the GOSPEL, because it is the power of God for the SALVATION of everyone who believes**" (Rom 1:16). If you and I are going to live with a similar conviction, it's crucial that we really grasp what this "gospel" is and in what sense it really is the key to the "salvation" all of us need.

Years ago, the German theologian, Karl Barth, told a group of his students that if they wanted to have a significant impact on the lives of others, they should take a newspaper in one hand, a Bible in the other, and help people interpret the former in light of the latter.¹ To be effective witnesses, Barth said, we need to have a good grasp of both the "daily news" and the "divine news." In fact, the more acquainted we are with the *daily* news, the easier it becomes to see why the *divine* news is *so very good*. So, let's start there today.

The Daily News

Scan the daily news and you will be reminded that life today is a complicated affair. There are times when all seems right with this world -- moments when it appears like we're addressing our problems, making progress as a people, and shaping a planet we can pass on with pride. And then there are those times when all the positive press does not make up, somehow, for the persistent *issues* that define too much of this life.

The Core Issue. Every day we meet people who, for all of their strengths, seem to be operating from a fundamental lack within. Even the most talented and celebrated people we encounter still so often exhibit a level of grasping and dodging, preening and positioning, that betrays a problem at their core. It is as if something is missing at the center of people -- a source of unimpeachable identity and security from which they've gotten separated or, perhaps, never really knew.

The Character Issue. Without a whole and healthy center, people become unhealthy in all kinds of other ways. We hear another report about a parent, teacher, or religious figure violating a sacred trust. We groan over the corporate or political leaders who

abused their position, so that others now pay. We see excess and vanity routinely paraded as the right of celebrity. We encounter people who eat too often, work too little, or demand too much. We learn of another marriage dissolving, another role model fallen, another wanton act of brutality or terror. Is there a solution to this, we wonder?

The Truth Issue. For many people today, truth is also up for grabs. While we accept the idea that there are certain dependable truths that govern the physical world, people increasingly disbelieve that there are truths with similar authority to govern the spiritual or moral life of this universe. "If so-and-so was *born* into such-and-such faith or moral code, then why would you try to convert them?" "If this belief or behavior *works* for me, then who are you to say that I am wrong?" "Does it really matter what someone thinks about God as long as they are *sincere* about it?" It seems like a charitable way to handle human differences. But, if this is so, by what right do we challenge the systematic oppression of the poor or women in certain societies? On what basis do we judge people who strap bombs to their bodies since, without question, they are *very* sincere? Is there anywhere a set of principles from which emerges a life that is consistently healthier than that generated by others in the marketplace of ideas?

The Change Issue. The national and world news today is also colored by problems that seem so intractable that many people despair of anything really changing. In many inner cities, school systems are under-resourced and educational outcomes atrocious. A stunning percentage of homes are parented by single moms or by the gangs that have taken in largely fatherless children, creating a relentless cycle of crime and incarceration. Millions die of disease for which solutions exist or are aborted before they take a first breath. A scandalous number of the elderly and mentally-ill languish in institutions never seeing a visitor. Staggering volumes of people buy products they do not need with money they do not have to impress people they do not like. The landfills grow larger while the rainforests grow smaller. Governments are gridlocked by special interests while citizens struggle to think beyond their own parochial interests. Where can we find the perspective and power to change these conditions?

The Mortality Issue. As if all these scenarios were not dark enough, lingering over human life is the ultimate shadow. Sooner or later, the people with whom we've laughed and learned will die. The obituary pages of our newspapers are crammed with micro-print, vainly trying to tell the tale of individuals whose actual imprint on others was so large the entire paper wouldn't be sufficient to do justice to the story. And, one day, it will be *your* name there or *mine* on a tombstone someplace, sidled up next to two dates, an entire lifetime reduced to an intervening dash. Is this all there is?

The Love Issue. It would be bearable, perhaps, to think that this life is all there is if the journey here were largely filled with love. Yet in the stories of children forgotten or abforused, in the tales of marriages or business partnerships torn asunder, in the record

of politicians and pundits shredding others without civility, we see the face of a world where love is too little. How could it become otherwise? Can it?

The Divine News

Beloved, the answer to that question and all the others raised by people disturbed by the news today is "YES!" The message that you and I are called to joyfully proclaim that there is an answer to the daily news. **"For God so loved [this] world,"** wrote the Apostle, **"that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son... to condemn the world, but to save the world through him"** (John 3:16-17). This is the divine news we must take in our hand and heart and proclaim with joy.

There are six crucial dimensions to the SALVATION God offers that it is immensely important we understand so that we can share them with others; and the first and most important piece of the news is this: We can get reunited with God. In Jesus Christ, the God of grace and mercy I described last week came to restore the relationship humanity once had with him and to fill the hole in our soul with himself. **"For God was in Christ,"** writes Paul, **"reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. And he gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation"** (2 Cor 5:19 NLT).

This wonderful message is the core of the gospel and the answer to the Core Issue of human life. The theological word for it is "JUSTIFICATION," and it means that we can "get right" with God. No one needs to go around anxiously living from an empty or corrupted center. Any of us can ask God to come in, wash away our sin, and he will reunite us with himself. God will become the divine center of our life, giving us an identity, security, and stability possible in no other way.

Witnesses also share with people the good news that once they have welcomed God into their core, he will begin to address their *Character Issues*. The power of God actually makes it possible for us to overcome our character flaws. Jesus said, **"I have come that you may have life, and have it more abundantly"** (John 10:10) than you are stuck with right now. If you will "remain in me and I in you," I will fill you with a **"love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control"** like mine (John 15:5; Gal 5:22-23). The theological word for this process of transformation is "SANCTIFICATION," or being "made holy."

A further element of the gospel is that we no longer need to live in confusion when it comes to the *Truth Issue*. Jesus says that you can set your course in life by reliable Truth. **"I am the way, the truth and the life,"** said Jesus. **"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free"** (John 14:6; 8:31). Christ's witnesses proclaim the good news that there are, in fact, absolutely dependable principles by which to build a healthier life and

society than we now have. The biblical word for this process is "DISCIPLESHIP" and it comes from a root word which means "to learn." In God's Word we learn truth that teaches us how to overcome temptation, resolve conflicts, communicate with others, manage money, raise children, lead people, and live wisely and well in scores of other spheres of life. In a world that is struggling for direction in all of these areas, this ought to strike us as *very* good news.

The gospel message is also good news for everyone concerned about the *Change Issue*: Our message is that you can participate in the renewal of this world. On the day that Christ ascended into heaven, the first disciples were filled with weighty concerns over the condition of their world. But the angels who spoke to them reminded them that this Jesus they'd seen go into heaven was going to come back one day (Acts 1:6-11). When he comes the second time, the Bible declares, Christ will make **"everything new."** **"There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things [will have] passed away"** (Rev 21:1-5).

The theological word for this renewal of the whole creation is "REDEMPTION." God will take this wilderness in which we live and make it a garden once again (Rev 22:1-6). Because we have confidence in this ultimate outcome, however, it does not mean we just shrug our shoulders at the current problems and wait. On the contrary, Jesus charged his disciples with being witnesses to this coming reality by participating in his redemptive work among people now (Matt 5:13-16). Your job as a witness is to be salt and light in this world and to invite others to come participate in that great mission.

The gospel is also spectacularly good news for all of us who shake with sadness or quake with fear in the face of the *Mortality Issue*. **"I am the RESURRECTION and the life,"** said Jesus. **"Whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies"** (John 11:25). The promise of Jesus is that if you put your hand into his hand in this life, you don't need to be afraid of dying or grieve the death of fellow believers, **"as those who are without hope"** (1 Thess 4:13-18). For Christ assures us that, on the last day, he will resurrect his followers to a staggering new life. **"In the twinkling of an eye... the dead will be raised imperishable,"** the Bible says (1 Cor 15:42-56). God will give us an entirely new kind of body, no longer subject to decay, clothed with immortality. As witnesses we joyfully share this promise with others: You can enjoy life beyond the grave.

But the message of the Bible is good news in one more amazing sense. Not only will we be given glorious new bodies on the day of resurrection; we will also be given entirely transformed hearts. The Apostle Paul bears witness to this when he says, **"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us... For those Christ justified, he also glorified."** (Rom 8:18, 30). The Apostle John fills out this picture when he says, **"For we know that when [Christ] appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is"** (1 John 3:2). This is the doctrine of GLORIFICATION.

God's nature, you see, is perfect love (1 Cor 13; 1 John 4:8). Those whose lives are rooted and established in God grow in this love while they are on earth (Eph 3:14-19). One day, however, we will stand with Jesus face-to-face and forevermore. We will behold the full glory of his perfect love and, like a great magnet imputing its properties to a lesser metal drawn close, Christ's character will become fully ours. **"We shall be like him."** You will be a gloriously loving being, caught up in the eternal splendor of an unbroken love relationship with God and all who inhabit his kingdom. Tell people this good news: Come to Christ and you can love with the greatest love of all.

News You Can Use

Do you see why Paul wasn't ashamed of the GOSPEL? Paul saw that it was the only real hope for SALVATION from all the issues that have plagued the creation since the beginning of human history (Col 1:15-23). The question I want to ask you in closing today is: Who do you know who needs this hope? Who might be richly blessed to know that they can... **G**et reunited with God? **O**vercome their character flaws? **S**et their course by reliable truth? **P**articipate in the renewal of this world? **E**njoy life beyond the grave? And **L**ove with the greatest love of all?

This is the GOSPEL -- the grand vision you and I are called to share with anyone who asks the reason for the hope that we have. Far from being embarrassed or anxious about it, we are *joyful* about witnessing to this message. Why? Because the GOSPEL is the *very good news* that some people you know, who are weary of living within the daily news, are more ready than you realize to begin to hear from you.

¹ "Theologians: Barth in Retirement," *Time Magazine*, May 31, 1963.