

The Good News is Too Good Not to Tell

From the series: I Do Believe

Text: Isaiah 49:6, John 9:5, 25

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

During the season of Lent, it became almost spooky to me each week that I would take up the text and the theme that I had determined in early January, because it seemed as though I might have picked it precisely that week for the situation through which I was living. There was really no connection, humanly speaking, between the text and the theme selected and the situation of my own life, and your life, too. But that is not true during Eastertide, because it was while I was in the middle of the cauldron that I was having to determine the text and the theme for the Eastertide series. And so, this series is reflective of our situation. And the thing that came to me was the fact that, with all of the sound bytes and press coverage, Christ Community and myself personally have been characterized by what we do not believe more often than by what we believe. And that really is quite unfair, because we do believe some things. And so, I thought it would be good for us to hear some of the great affirmations of our faith lifted up in this Eastertide season, and I entitled the series, therefore, *I Do Believe*.

I do believe, certainly as a personal witness, but not simply myself isolated from you. I use the first person pronoun because I want to speak about personal conviction. And finally, all of us have a core of beliefs that we believe passionately with all our heart.

And then, *I do believe*, the emphasis there indicating that belief is held with passion. *I believe. I do believe!*

A personal, passionate conviction of faith - these things that are more than just a body of beliefs to which one can point, to which one assents intellectually. No – out of the core of one's being – these things, these things I passionately believe: last week, that "*The End is Life*." And this week, that the *News of the Grace of God in Jesus Christ Is Too Good Not to Share*.

You see, institutional religion, when it gets regularized, always runs into the problem that there is a certain body of doctrine or belief that defines an institution or a religion. You could write a book about what Christians believe and

you could go through the various creedal statements and so forth. You could write a book about the essence of Judaism or whatever. There does come to be a sort of corpus of belief, a body of belief that is identified with a certain movement or religion. And when that religion gets established and regularized, then it becomes identified with that body of beliefs and it takes people into itself, whether or not there is that personal, passionate conviction.

Now, don't kid me. There are some things that belong to the Christian creed about which you've never been passionate. But, there are other things that you believe so strongly, you'd die for it. We all have that, don't we? It's on the basis, probably, of our nurture or of our experience, but we all have a kind of selective, personal creed to which we passionately confess. And, the problem with institutional religion is that sometimes the defined body of belief no longer connects with human experience. Or, to say it another way, someone has an experience which is undeniable, but it can't be slotted into that body of belief. And so, there comes to be a tension between what one has experienced and knows to be true and what one is supposed to believe or confess because one belongs to this group or to that group. And, this particular message, *The News Is Too Good Not To Share*, comes from the fact that it is claimed (I'll just speak personally) that what I believe cuts the heart out of the evangelical faith. Now, you've read that. You've heard that. "If Dick Rhem is right, then the heart of the evangelical faith is lost."

Well, let's walk around that for a moment. I do not think one making such a statement has thought very deeply about that claim.

What does the claim mean? I take it to mean that, if I have an experience of God – of grace, of peace, of healing, of joy and delight full of hope that has come to me as I have looked to Jesus, and through Jesus have experienced the love of God – as wonderful as that might be, as life-transforming as that might have been for me, there is no reason to share it, to point to its source, to speak of the blessing my life has received, unless such experience comes exclusively through Jesus Christ and no other way; and further, unless those without the blessing of grace through Jesus are eternally lost, there is no reason to proclaim the Gospel of God's grace as it has been manifested in Jesus.

In other words, unless my way is the only way, my truth the only truth, there will be no reason to witness to it, no motivation to tell others.

I doubt those condemning my views have really thought about what they are maintaining. Is not such an attitude suspect; does it not at least hint that I want my claim to grace to be a source of pride: Look at what I have, or, I have the only truth? Not only subtle pride but triumphalism - one of the worst faults of the Christian Church. It is so difficult not to become proud and domineering when one possesses exclusive truth, or power or authority.

No. *The experience of God's grace in Jesus is transforming quite apart from the question of its exclusivity. I maintain The News is Too Good Not to Tell.*

Have we not experienced something of the goodness and the grace of God that we find ourselves spontaneously wanting to share the good news? If you get a bargain, don't you tell everybody about it? If you pull some coup in your life, don't you tell everybody about it? The only good thing I was always told I couldn't share was when I caught a fish. When I was a little kid, I'd go with my Dad and catch a fish. And I'd squeal. He'd say, "Be still. Before long, they'll all be pulling up their anchors and coming over here." Another rule of my father - if you catch it on a cricket, if somebody asks you, tell him it was a worm. Now, when you're fishing, you've got to keep good news to yourself. But, that's about the only area in life. Otherwise, if you've got a good experience, if you have a joy, a delight, if something's turned you on, if it's set your tongue to singing and your feet to dancing, don't you spontaneously tell everybody about it? Don't you want to share it? Isn't the news too good not to share?

Now, I would claim, with personal and passionate conviction, that the grace of God that we have experienced in Jesus Christ is such a wonderful experience and the life and community in the Christian community –

where there is compassion and mercy and love,
where there is embrace,
where there is worship before the majesty and the mystery of God,
where there is this wonderful ethereal experience full of Alleluias and Hallelujahs and all of the wonder of our life together,
where there is that personal solitude in moments of contemplation where I know that I am at peace with God,
where I have experienced the grace of God to such an extent that I know that there is nothing in all of creation that could ever separate me from the love of God,
where I live with my family and my children and my grandchildren;
when I think about all that is mine and all of that which I have received because of the nurture, because of the tradition, that is mine that has shaped me,
when I think of all of that, then I think –

Good Grief! Isn't that news too good not to tell? Of course, I'm going to tell that good news! How can I help but express it?

But, people are funny. This isn't a Protestant or a Catholic problem or a Jewish problem. It's a human problem. It is somehow or other a desire to gain power and to control, to define who is in and who is out, that has been a great disrupter of religious experience down through the centuries. For example, the story of the man born blind. What a marvelous story it is. Remember, now, that the one who put this Gospel together was writing for a specific community just as concretely

as this sermon is prepared for you. This sermon is not for any other congregation. This sermon is for you. This preacher has you on his heart. This preacher has you in his head! This preacher can't say a word without you being the focus.

No different with this fourth Gospel. And now we're in the last decade of the first century, as I mentioned last week. It's been sixty-some years since Jesus died and rose again. The Jesus Jews, the Jews who believed Jesus was the Messiah, are finding it more and more difficult to hold on in faith. They were expecting him to return. Jesus thought it would soon be over. Paul thought it would soon be over. They all thought it would soon be over, and it wasn't soon over. Nothing was happening. Now, about 60 years later, these are Jews who believed Jesus was the Messiah. But, something had happened about 20 years prior; the Temple had been destroyed by Rome. The cultic center of Jerusalem was no more.

What would Judaism of the future look like? Would it be the Jews who believed Jesus was the Messiah who would come to the ascendancy? They were a strong movement. Or, would it be the Rabbis, the teachers of the Law, the scribes, the Pharisees? Well, as a matter of fact, it became that branch of Judaism that consolidated power, that gave to the Judaism of the future its identity, that determined what it was to be a Jew. That group. And what happens in a group like that? Again, it's not a Jewish problem, although this was an intra-Jewish squabble. It's not a Jewish problem; it's a human problem. If I get in control, it feels good. And I like to consolidate my power, and so I like to draw the lines so that I determine who is in and who is out.

And, as the Rabbinic Jewish movement emerged as the ascendant Jewish party, it defined Judaism, and when you define, you define who is in and who is out. Three times in this Gospel the words "put out of the synagogue" are used. Specifically in the lesson I read a moment ago, when the Pharisees come to the parents to verify that this, indeed, was their son and he was, yes, indeed, born blind, they say, "What happened?"

The father was all ready to give the answer and his wife yanked at his sleeve and said, "Don't say anything, already!"

She got him aside and said, "If you acknowledge that Jesus did this, then it's the same as saying that Jesus is the Messiah and if you confess Jesus as the Messiah, we're out of the synagogue, and where do we go for potlucks on Friday night? So, be still, already."

So, he said, "He's of age. Ask him. I should know? I don't know. Ask him."

Of course, they knew, but they weren't stupid. What's going on there? It's obvious what's going on there. They do not confess what they believe because the consequence would be they'd lose the only spiritual home they'd ever known, the synagogue, their observant Jewish status. So, the Pharisees have to go back to the gentleman with whom they had spoken earlier. Earlier he was a little fuzzy about

things. He had said, "I don't know where he's from. His name is Jesus. He put clay on my eyes and I see."

They said that's impossible.

"I don't know, he put clay on my eyes and I see."

Well, what do you think he is?

"Well, he's a prophet."

The Pharisees then go to the parents, but now the parents put them off, and now they're back with him again, and they say, "Tell us now, under oath, give God glory. Under oath, tell us what happened."

He said, "I already told you. You want to hear it again? You want to be his disciple?"

Then they got nasty. The Greek word behind that *revile* is a nasty word. They began to abuse them. Now, they're really angry. They're not looking at this gentleman who now has sight, who had been blind, whose experience cannot fit into their preconceived idea of what is true. They can't step back a moment and, face-to-face with a blind man seeing, they cannot say in the light of that experience, let's go back and read our tradition again. Rather, they get angry because now it's a control problem, it's a power issue, it's who has authority. And so, they revile him and they say, "You follow Jesus, but we follow Moses!"

He just looks at them and says, "I don't know. I only know one thing - I was blind and now I see."

They cast him out. Because when you have a tradition or a set of beliefs, a paradigm of understanding, and then you have concrete human experience, and when you cannot put the two together any longer, and you are in authority and in power supervising the established and received paradigm, the last thing in the world that you will allow is the experience that says your paradigm doesn't work anymore. So, they cast him out.

John's little community of Jews that believed Jesus was the Messiah - they were starting to give up, they were starting to lose faith; Jesus didn't come, and authoritative voices were saying they were wrong. They saw the possibility of being alienated from their spiritual roots and tradition. They were starting to waver. And so, this preacher in the community says "I want to write a story of Jesus for you, because I want you to know that what's happening to you 60 years down the line isn't any different than what happened to Jesus."

If you'll go to John 16, you will find Jesus saying they will put you out of the synagogue. John writes the story of Jesus in light of that little community just as

much as I'm crafting this sermon in light of this community, and John is saying to that community of people who believed that Jesus is the Messiah, "Jesus is the Messiah. I've gathered these things together; I've written this story. I could have gathered other things; I could have put in other details. I put these things together, I painted this picture in order that you might believe that Jesus is the Messiah and, believing, have life in his name! I'm telling you the story of Jesus again because you're about to let it go! You're about to be hammered into submission! Don't you do it! Don't you forget Jesus! This was the Word of God made flesh; this was the embodiment of the love of God in human flesh! This one, this one is the Way! This one is the Truth! This one is the Life! This One is the way to God! Don't you let go of Jesus! Don't you let go of Jesus for anybody! Don't you deny your experience! We were blind and now we see! Jesus is the Light of the world! Now, don't you give up!"

That news was too good not to tell, and I want to say that my favorite meetings in all the year are the three or four or five Elders' Meetings we have around here, because I look into your faces, I've seen most of you come through, one time or another, I've heard your stories, I've seen your tears, I've heard your voice crack. I've seen you throw your head back and laugh. I've heard you tell about the grace of God. I've heard you tell about the love of God that's touched you in this community. I've heard your singing; I've seen your dancing. I have lived with you long enough to know that there is some reality here, *there is some joy here, there is some goodness here, there is some truth here.*

I know this - there's good news here and it's too good not to tell!

There was a time in my experience when I was blind,
but now I see.

There was a time in my experience when my religion was a burden,
but now it's a joy.

There was a time in my life when it weighed me down,
but it has set me free.

There is a grace of God, a wonder of the love of God, there is a
concreteness of a community of compassion –

My God, people, the news is simply too good not to tell!

Do we have a story?

DO WE HAVE A STORY!