

Just the Facts, Ma'am
2/7/10 5th of Epiphany

A couple Christmases ago, my kids found a book that they immediately got for their dad: *The Gospel According to the Andy Griffith Show*. Their dad has been a big fan of the TV character Andy of Mayberry. I remember reading *The Gospel According to Peanuts* a while back; looking at how Charlie Brown & his friends in the Charles Schultz comic strip portrayed Christianity's teachings. Lately I've seen a *The Gospel According to the Simpsons* book, which I haven't read, because the premise seemed rather odd – and anyway, the show never drew me in.

As Christians, we talk about the gospel of Jesus Christ all the time. But what is it? Our Confirmation Class has been talking about what a Christian is, and in preparing for that and cogitating about that, I've been doing some reflecting on just what the gospel that we proclaim really is – what we proclaim with our words and with our lives and our actions. The word “gospel” actually means Good News – we Christians have heard good news and responded to good news with our whole being. So what is this good news? What do we have to say to the world God loves that is heard as good news?

It's pretty well-known that the denominations we call “Main Line,” like ours, have been steadily declining in overall membership for the past 40 years or so, after a high point following World War 2. Lots of sermons and even whole books have addressed this, with various solutions and thoughts and proposals for changes. For a lot of folks, church has simply become irrelevant to their lives, and Sunday mornings are a time for going to Starbucks, wearing slouchy clothes, and taking leisurely walks with the family. Somehow they don't seem to hear good news in our message, I guess.

If we look at the way church is portrayed in the media – and its believers and its preachers - we can see why it's not attractive. The church doesn't get a lot of good press; on the other hand, our human faults are seen as great targets for anger, disillusionment, disagreement, and more. Lots of folks see Christian piety as a “holier than thou” kind of moralistic set of rules; they portray Christian faith and hope as a rather Pollyanna-ish naivety; they hear the TV preachers as judgmental – and on top of that hear the scandal stories that make us sound like hypocrites. They see us appear shallow sometimes when we emphasize more what people dress like or talk like, or when we embrace more middle-class cultural ideals than anything

distinctively Christian. They don't seem to see or hear the work churches do in addressing the hurts of people; or the support of each other in community; or the deep reflection in prayer; or the way lives can be transformed by God's grace. Folks don't seem to realize the impact of Christian values on our national life that people from around the world want to be a part of. And it's ironic to me that while less and less people attend worship at churches, the country calls on churches to pick up the slack in care for those poor and unfortunate folks who are hungry, homeless and alone.

Another things that fights against our good news is that, to many folks its not new and shiny enough – its been around, its what older generations did - been there / done that. It is unfortunately true that its often easier to be intrigued with something that sounds foreign and new and novel rather than to turn to the good old church we all know stories about, and may have become disillusioned with, and we take for granted that we know all about it already. Yet when people are seeking, when their spirit gets restless and hungry for meaning and relevance and purpose – they are actually looking for God. And the Good News in Christianity is deep enough to spend a lifetime learning.

So let's get down to the kernel of the good news – just the facts – the bare bones of the gospel. What's the good news, and why is it good? And what does it say to our generation, our culture?

Jesus uses the term - He comes preaching the good news; and the good news Jesus says is, "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news." A few weeks ago we read that Jesus came to the synagogue and read words from Isaiah about the blind seeing, the lame walking and the oppressed going free – and then proclaimed, "This day is the prophecy fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus' good news is that the Kingdom of God is here, in him, in his teachings, in his works, in his very being. It's happening, he says, it's here, the time is now. The kingdom you've been yearning and waiting for? Its here in me - I am the way. He says this, and uses the term "good news" in his ministry years prior to his death and resurrection. The good news is God with us, Immanuel. The good news IS Jesus, in all that he does and is and says. He tells us, all of us, to take this good news to the world and make disciples.

As I read over the many passages where Paul writes about the good news, or the gospel, he seems to be referring to a set of understandings or teachings about Jesus – that he was God with us, that he taught the truth of God; and that he died and was raised by God to new life. Our passage today sets out a very simple outline of the gospel: “³*For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures,* ⁴*and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures...*” It seems that, for Paul, Jesus’ death and resurrection validates what he taught, and gradually become what he says most often. To Paul, the gospel was promised by God beforehand in the Jewish Scriptures, and concerns God’s Son who came in flesh in the line of David but was shown to be God’s Son in the power of the resurrection. (Romans 1: 1-6) This gospel has the power of God for salvation to those who have faith in it – and it reveals God’s righteousness. (Romans 1:16) In Galatians, he talks about how he has so identified with Christ that Christ’s death and new life are now his death and new life. (Galatians 2:19-21) He says that the gospel was preached to even Abraham, for Abraham believed God – and it counted as his righteousness. Galatians 3:3) In Ephesians he calls this gospel a mystery. (Ephesians 6) He calls this gospel a “hope” in Colossians (Colossians 1:5-6), and a “good treasure” in his 2nd letter to Timothy. (2 Timothy 1:14) Again, he succinctly summarizes the gospel later in that letter, saying, “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendent of David – that is my gospel...” (2 Timothy 2:8)

Well, that’s my theologizing& Scripture search for the day. Remember, though, that even before his death and resurrection, Jesus proclaimed the gospel as himself. JESUS is the gospel, the good news. Paul and others emphasized his resurrection as proof that he was indeed the Son of God, and that his message was true. It used to puzzle me, that if the gospel had to do with the cross and the resurrection, then how could Jesus proclaim the good news before he died? Its because he himself IS the good news, and the fact that he is made alive again, and is alive today, just furthers it.

So how is this good news for folks in 21st century America, and why should they listen?

It is still very good news that God is here with us and cares about us. We are not lost in space on the 3rd rock from the sun. We are not lost in existential despair. We are not merely preprogrammed, nature-driven beings. We are not just consumers who support the GNP.

Rather, the good news is that we are made for a purpose, we were made in God's image; we were made for relationship with God, who seeks us and finds us and calls us beloved. The good news is that God has reached out to us again in Jesus the Christ, helping open our eyes to the way God intended creation to be, and how to live in harmony with our purpose. The good news is that there is mystery in what our eyes see around us; God is in what we see around us; God is actively working in the world to restore us and bring us to maturity. The good news is that God is a God of Life, and God of the Living – and death isn't the end of the story; new life always wins. And God wants to offer that to us as well, so we can be with God where God is.

People are hungry for the message of God that we are learning through our Scriptures and prayers, as we walk on our own path with God. People look to other religious traditions for inspiration that there is something beyond the despair of modern life, because they've not been hearing it clearly from us. People look to other religious traditions for spiritual disciplines and practices that will deepen their insight and living – because somehow they're not hearing that in how we present Christianity. People throng to other religious traditions for an understanding of life from human nature through cosmic meaning – which somehow they've not heard in our message. People throng to other religious traditions to work in the world in meaningful ways, which somehow they don't see us doing. People look to other religious traditions to explain why there is suffering, and how to overcome that suffering, because somehow the words we use aren't communicating that well.

Everything, and I mean everything that people look to other religious traditions for IS there in the gospel called Christianity, part of the deep truth Jesus spoke about God. Why it's not being heard and/or seen is something that needs to be pondered. Maybe we haven't entirely realized the treasure the gospel is; maybe we haven't mined deeply enough in our own gospel teachings; maybe we take it all for granted, or hold it too lightly, or don't live it fully, or function too much on spiritual cruise control. I don't have the answers yet, although I'm thinking a lot about it these days.

Our prayer today is that we will see the beauty and simplicity of the gospel message, determine to live it in our lives, examine how we present the gospel, and not let old habits block the message entrusted to us that can save the world.

AMEN.