

February 4, 2024
“Gospel Blessings All Around”
Isaiah 40:25-31 / 1 Corinthians 9:16-23
Pastor Tim

St. Francis of Assisi, as you may well know, was a 13th-century Italian mystic, poet and saint, renowned lover of nature and animals, singer of creation, and patron saint of ecologists.

He famously heard a call from God to “go and repair my church” – a reformer, not a replacer – and so went on to establish the Franciscan religious order, marked by a desire to literally live out the gospel. To live, as he articulated, “according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel.” Taking vows of poverty and simplicity in ministry with the poor. As Jesus did.

He’s known for his “Canticle of Brother Sun and Sister Moon.” He’s known the “Prayer of St. Francis” – “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace: where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.” And so on.

He is known for quotes like, “It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching.” Walking the talk.

And in that same spirit, he’s known for variations of the expression, “Preach the gospel at all times; if necessary, use words.”

If you Google this particular quote you’ll find that there is some controversy surrounding it – mostly, if not entirely as far as I can tell, from conservative Christians claiming that there is no historical record that he said it.

And in any case, because SOMEBODY said it, because it’s out there, they are more concerned that the statement presents a false and dangerous dichotomy – elevating actions and deeds OVER words; living the gospel OVER preaching the gospel.

Fair enough. It IS a false and unnecessary dichotomy. As human beings we necessarily express and project our worldviews, our ways of understanding and being in and engaging the world, BOTH by what we say and what we do. Jesus certainly did.

But these conservative commentators go further in their critique of the statement. To suggest that we preach the gospel at all times and only use words IF necessary is, they say, providing an “excuse” – and I’m quoting one of these commentators now – an “excuse for neglecting our responsibility for personal evangelism.”

The responsibility for personal evangelism, of course, comes from Jesus’ famous post-Resurrection commission to his disciples: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.”

The mission statement of our very own Eastern Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church is inspired by that commission: “... to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”

Now I don’t know about you, but for me – heretical as this may sound – that commission has nothing to do with making Christians. Converting people to Christianity.

Jesus did both preach and model the divine Way of Love. His words and his actions pointed his followers, his disciples, to that Way of Love, to the kingdom of God.

But remember, of course, that Jesus was a Jew. He was not looking to form a new religion, only to reform within his own Jewish tradition – like St. Francis after him within the Roman Catholic Church.

Jesus’ reform focused on lifting up the spirit of the Law above its letter, echoing the prophets in their call to the way of love as justice.

Jesus’ disciples, before they called THEMSELVES Christians, were simply known as followers of “The Way.” So for me, “making disciples” is simply about inviting people into the Way of Love – gathering to experience and practice love, to receive and offer love in mutual relationship. In interconnected, interdependent community. Love as justice.

So whether or not they identify as Christian is irrelevant because, for one, there is not only one way to come to such love. AND two, because the Way of Love is evidenced, ultimately and most importantly, by how we live, NOT by how we identify or what we say or what we believe.

Frederick Buechner puts it this way: "Some think of a Christian is one who necessarily believes certain things. That Jesus was the Son of God, say. Or that Mary was a virgin. Or that the pope is infallible. Or that all other religions are wrong.

"Some think a Christian is one who necessarily does certain things. Such as going to church. Getting baptized. Giving up liquor and tobacco. Reading the Bible. Doing a good deed a day. ...

"He didn't say that it was by believing or doing anything in particular that you could 'come to (God).' He said that it was ... by living, participating in, being caught up by the way of life that he embodied, that was his way. Thus it is possible to be on Christ's way ... without ever having heard of Christ, and for that reason to be on your way to God though maybe you don't even believe in God."

Another site I came across proceeds to examine this statement – whether from St. Francis or not – through the filter of the Bible. Again I'm quoting: "It doesn't matter what I want to be true. It doesn't matter what I think or feel is true. What matters is what the Bible says is objectively true both in word and pattern."

What the Bible says.

The Bible, of course, says a lot of things. And like all works of literature – even one I do believe is inspired by God, "God-breathed" as the letter to 1st Timothy suggests, though not written by God – it is open to our interpretation. We cannot help but read and understand it through the unique lens of what we think and feel is true, through the lens of our own reason and experience. Our own social location. On and on.

This is the wisdom of John Wesley, he who, too, began as a reformer within the Church of England but went on to establish the Methodist Church. This is the wisdom of what

became known as the “Wesleyan quadrilateral” – the four-sided approach to belief and practice drawing on the four pillars of scripture, tradition, reason and experience.

But with all of that, for me, “what the Bible says” is ultimately Christian-speak for elevating orthodoxy over orthopraxy – “right” belief over “right” practice.

Again, the Gospel in one word is love. Love. Love. It is not about what you believe. It is about how you live into and out of that love.

We know that Jesus summed up the Biblical witness with two commandments: “LOVE God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength” and “LOVE your neighbor as yourself.”

“On these two commandments,” he claimed, “hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

Love. Love. Love.

It is not about what we believe. It’s about how we love.

This morning we hear from Paul in his letter to the church in Corinth, a church he himself planted.

Like some of you, I know, I have a love-hate – or at least dislike – relationship with Paul. At the end of the day, I fully acknowledge that I would not be standing here, we would not be gathered here, if it weren’t for Paul and faithful followers like him through the generations. Who did, in fact, proclaim the gospel – or at least their understanding of it – and spread the good news about Jesus and his Way of Love.

But I often find myself wondering if the Christian charge, writ large, is following the Gospel of Paul rather than the Gospel of Jesus.

In the context of our reading, Paul is making a case for compensation. He’s busy preaching and proclaiming the gospel, what he sees as an obligation laid on him, and he wants – likely needs – to get paid for his efforts. An original missionary. You can’t blame him. He’s trying to support himself, make a living. It’s a hard way to live.

In making the gospel “free of charge,” that is, available to all, he forgoes his “rights in the gospel” to be “free with respect to all.” And instead makes himself a servant to all so that, he says, he “might win more of them.” Win more of them.

Now here's one instance, one of many if I'm being honest, where Paul loses me in my understanding of what it means to follow Jesus.

I grew up with that language, that paradigm, of winning and losing souls for Jesus.

I went to a week-long Christian camp in high school where, on one of the days, we had to fan out, two by two of course, into the local area and practice our “personal evangelism” by going door to door to people's homes.

Asking complete strangers if they knew Jesus or not, if they were saved or not – and if not, talking to complete strangers about Jesus, handing out tracts, hoping to “win” some souls.

I hated it. It never made sense to me as a practical strategy, and it never made sense to me theologically. It had nothing to do with love, and everything to do with trying to convince people to believe certain things about Jesus. Again, orthodoxy over orthopraxy.

We talked to strangers about what amounted to conditional love, and did absolutely nothing to model unconditional love. It was not about them, it was about us. Proving our faithfulness to Jesus' great commission.

I never did anything like that again, and I never will. That is not what Jesus asks of us. That is not what love looks like. That is not what love requires.

But Paul, nonetheless, goes on in describing his tireless, self-sacrificial commitment to the gospel: “To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. (NOTE here that Paul was, in fact, actually a Jew himself.) To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I

became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some."

Now you could probably argue that what Paul meant here has something to do with meeting people where they are, making an earnest attempt to understand where they're coming from.

That's not a bad thing. But let's be clear, becoming all things to all people, even trying to do that, is a TERRIBLE – not to mention, IMPOSSIBLE – way to live! We cannot possibly be all things to all people, much as we might try – and much as most of us probably did try starting in, say, middle school.

Being all things to all people has nothing to do with the good news of the gospel.

Gospel love invites us to live from the deepest, most authentic places within ourselves. To be our God-given selves, and in so doing, to put ourselves in the best position to both receive and offer God's love. To be loved and to love. To love our neighbors AS we love ourselves, which means we have to LOVE ourselves in order to LOVE our neighbors. In relationship. In community.

The gospel as I know and understand it, the Gospel of Jesus, not the Gospel of Paul, as I mean to preach and proclaim it and as I struggle to live it, is not about winners and losers. It's not about saved and unsaved. It's not about believers and non-believers. All that is nothing more than orthodoxy. Believing the right things.

It's not about that. AT ALL. It's about love.

Paul says "I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings." I take issue with how he does it, but I'm with him in our call to do everything for the sake of the gospel.

To preach and proclaim and live out the gospel at all times. IF the gospel is understood as love. Love as Jesus taught and embodied it. Love as God is.

Everything for the sake of love. Everything we say AND do, the WAY we live our lives, measured not by what we believe, but by the standard of unconditional divine love, AGAPE love. However imperfectly we live up to that standard.

To do so, Jesus reminds us again and again, necessarily means that we will share in its blessings. Gospel blessings all around.

May it be so.