

Sermon

June 25, 2023 [Matthew 10:24-39]

In Search of the Gospel

Pastor Dan Peterson

Grace to you and peace, from God the Creator, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, who is the Christ.

Amen.

Martin Luther once defined the Gospel as follows. "For 'Gospel,'" he writes, "is a Greek word and means in Greek a good message, good tidings, good news, a good report, which one sings and tells with gladness," or, as we heard in today's Gospel, one proclaims from the housetops.

As Christians centered on this Gospel, on this good news, that means that we read the Bible a certain way. We look for the Gospel in its pages: the message that, in spite of our faults and imperfections, God loves us recklessly and without abandon. The trouble is, at least regarding our readings for today, there is nothing of the Gospel in them! The Gospel, at the very least, is hard to find. All we have, it would seem, is Law.

Now "Law" is a word that's tricky to define. What does it mean? Ordinarily, it refers to "the rules of society that enable us to live together." The philosopher Thomas Hobbes calls this "our social contract," which is to say, we give up the fulfillment of all our desires for the sake of living with others in peace. That's our social contract, and the rules of that contract are the law. In religion, the ten commandments function the same way: they provide guidelines for people living in community.

The law has a second function however, evident in the tenth commandment. So: what is a tenth commandment?... That's right. "You shall not covet your neighbor's house, your neighbor's wife, your neighbor's property, your neighbor's slaves."

Now that reflects, of course, a very different understanding of people in the ancient world, one where men were at the top of the hierarchy and every person beneath them was considered their property. So, what does it mean, though, to covet? It means to yearn to possess or have something that is typically not yours.

Can you give me some examples of things that people covet? Money – they want money. They covet other people's property as well. Their clothing, maybe their car, maybe their garden next door. Or if you're Rick Springfield and it's the 1980s, you covet "Jessie's girl." All of these things are things that "belong" to others, that one desires, yearns for, craves for oneself. And let's be honest – we're in church right? – Let's be honest. Have you ever coveted or yearned for anything that is not yours? Please raise your hand if you have! Excellent. If you said yes and raised your hand, you are condemned by the Law! The Law has convicted you. It shows how you fall short in this case of God's expectations. It reveals to you, perhaps, as it does to me like a mirror in the morning, your faults and inadequacies. This is what theologians call "the second use of the law."

So, the first is to provide guidelines for people to live in harmony with one another. The second is that the Law shows us our lack. It shows us our faults and imperfections, and should drive us accordingly to the Gospel, where we receive the message of forgiveness and God's grace.

Now you might say to yourself, "This is why I don't like religion. It's too negative. It makes people unnecessarily feel bad about themselves." Think about it. Our broader culture does this to people all the time. The law is written everywhere. How? I think of magazines, which they still have at checkouts, that show us bodies that are perfect, that show us hairstyles that are perfect. That's "the law" insofar as it provides a societal expectation against which, presumably, you and I fall short. So, the law is constantly bombarding us with the message that you are inadequate as you are. If you're an influencer, do you have enough followers? If you posted a video on YouTube, did you have enough likes? If you're on Facebook or Instagram, do people presumably judge you because of *their* successes, which seem to be all over the place? In all instances, the second use of the law here is everywhere, whether online, at the grocery store, or in conversation with your neighbor.

It shows us again why the message of the Gospel, that is to say, the message that you are unconditionally accepted by God, is so important. We need it like water in the desert, to live, to thrive, to flourish, as God, the source of life, intended. But here's the problem, as I said earlier: there seems to be nothing of this Good News or Gospel in our readings today, which in particular, makes my job difficult, because I'm called not only to administer the sacraments, but to preach the Gospel – and I will tell you, before I became pastor of this congregation, I could probably number on both hands, the number of times I heard the Gospel from the pulpit – the *real* Gospel, the message of God's reckless, God's unfathomable, God's fierce love for each of us in this room.

The contrast to that, of course, is today's readings, as I said. Let's take a look at a couple of verses and I'll show you what I mean. Start with verse 27. Jesus here says, "What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops." Is that you? Is that how you share your Christian faith? Are you bold? Are you courageous? Or are you like me, when you're at a coffee shop and you're preparing a sermon and you have a Bible on the table, and you turn the Bible upside down, because you don't want unwanted attention, or people to think of you as those "other" Christians. That's why that shows me how I fall short. I have not proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ from the rooftops...

Again, verse 33 – see how depressing this gets? – Verse 33: "But whoever denies me before others, I will I also deny before my Father in heaven." Have you ever denied Christ? "Oh, I'm not one of those Christians." "Oh, I go to church, but you know, don't really believe much of what I hear."

What about verses 37 to 39? Look at these. "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me." I read those words, and inside it made me cringe. I'm

supposed to love Jesus more than my father or mother? And “whoever loves a son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me?” And “whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me?”

Wow. Imagine if I stopped there. Martin Luther says, “The Law without the Gospel drives people to despair.”

You are not enough. Word of God. Word of death. Thanks be to God.

But – thanks be to God. The good news in the Gospel reading for today *is* there; it’s just tucked away. That is, unless you see a big clue staring at you in today’s bulletin. Can you tell me what it is? Right on the front cover! “You are of more value than many sparrows.” Let’s take a look at the full verse that’s verse 31. “And so do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

This is the Gospel of the Lord. Let that sink in for a moment. You are of value to God.

Now what does this mean? To me, it means that no matter how my culture judges me, no matter how critics condemn me, no matter how I am made to feel inadequate, no matter what Scripture shows, when it comes to how I am at fault, God in Christ totally, recklessly, and without abandon, accepts me right down to my bones. God in Christ totally, recklessly, and without abandon accepts not only me, but you, right down to your bones. What amazing grace, what good news!

And here’s even more good news. If, as in the case of Theodore and Elisabeth through baptism this morning, you die to your old self – which is to say your selfish ways – or if, as Qabalah, which is Jewish mystical tradition, teaches, you think of yourself as nothing, and forget yourself totally, God promises to raise you to new life for others, in and with Christ.

Verse 39: “*Those who find their life will lose it – but here’s the good news – those who lose their life – which is to say their self-centeredness, their ego – for my sake, will find it.*”

Those, in short, who live no longer simply for themselves, but for God and neighbor, are raised to new life. Now, this is why in our service, we began with the hymn “*All Are Welcome.*” This is why our siblings in Christ are marching today in the Pride Parade. This is why we became a Reconciling in Christ congregation and attended the Lavender Graduation at Seattle Pacific University. God values each and every one of us more than we can possibly imagine. Full stop. Full stop. God, in turn, has freed us to love and accept others, just as God has loved and accepted us.

And guess what? Though we may experience failure, rejection, or frustration, God’s grace and love makes us a new creation each and every day, not just the day of our baptism, but each and every day of our lives. That’s right. We can experience the power of renewal by dying to self and rising with Christ each and every day, which explains why Lutheranism, as well as any other grace-centered Christianity, is not simply religion or a doctrine, it’s a way of life. A way of life that looks, instead of to the good of the self, to the common good. The way of life that instead of the self, looks to

the neighbor. The way of life that recognizes there is much more to life than simply living for oneself.

It's true. The Gospel in our Gospel reading for today is hard to find. But with a little work, that message should be clear. I wrote this at a coffee shop. And I remember at that point, in my mind at least, turning that Bible back over.

I'm *proud* of my faith. I'm proud of a faith in a God who recklessly and without abandon loves all people. You are of infinite worth and value to God. You belong. Or, as my favorite theologian Paul Tillich puts it, "You are accepted."

And all God's people said, "Amen."