

January 26, 2014

The National Presbyterian Church

Great Ends of the Church: "Just Have to Tell You"

Acts 4:1-4, 13-20, 1 Corinthians 14:23-25, John 13:34-35

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In our sermons through January and February, we're thinking together about Christian faith in its corporate sense. Christian faith, not just as a matter of an individual encounter between one person and God – though it should be that, and I hope that you've had such an encounter – but Christian faith as a corporate experience: one in which we sense we are being called together, to live out our faith together, as a community, as a church, before the presence of the living God.

If I were to think of it in Olympic Games terms, Christian faith is not so much like the luge heading down that narrow path by itself, but more like the four man bobsled – we're in it together. It's not so much like figure skating, it's more like ice hockey: sometimes it's beautiful, sometimes it's not so beautiful, but it's always corporate, a team sport. Each player needs the others.

We, too, need each other. And this is important to say, because spirituality and faith these days are so often seen and understood in highly individualistic terms. The general approach is that *what I believe is my own business, not yours. You believe what you want, I'll believe what I want, leave me alone.* So we're highly individualistic, the whole of the Western world. And this has led in recent years to a remarkable decline in attendance and membership of many churches here in the United States and Europe. Not everywhere in the world, but in many places, especially in the West.

So there is this growth in society of individualism, and at the same time, people have forgotten that when Jesus began his work and his ministry his intent was not merely to bring individuals to God though he did (he called them by name; he says about you and me in Luke 12:7 that God knows the very number of hairs on our head), but that God came, Jesus came, to bring people together, to form a group of disciples, to form a church.

This was not just a good idea from those who came after him but it was his idea from the very beginning. And the early disciples picked up on this and began to visualize the church not merely as a human organization but as the "body of Christ" – the visible presence of Christ on earth when Christ-in-the-flesh was no longer present. Not just "me" as an individual witness to Christ (true as that is) but "us," together – like a finger attached to a hand or a wrist or an arm or a shoulder or the body – all connected together, no one part working well or at all unless intimately tied in with another, and then intimately tied in with Jesus himself.

So this is the image of the church from Jesus and the early church. Not an added extra but what Jesus taught, the early church believed, and that we've inherited. Christianity: not just as an individual activity but as a community activity together.

This is what we're thinking of in these months, and doing so with the help of a statement that comes from our Presbyterian heritage that is called *The Six Great Ends of the Church*.

1. The Proclamation of the Gospel for the Salvation of Humankind
2. The Shelter, Nurture, and Spiritual Fellowship of the Children of God
3. The Maintenance of Divine Worship
4. The Preservation of the Truth
5. The Promotion of Social Righteousness, and
6. The Exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the World.

These statements are in our Presbyterian constitution, although in some ways there's nothing particularly Presbyterian about them. Different branches of the church would agree with these six great ends or principles or purposes of the church. So we'll be looking at these one by one, and affirming that God is interested in *my* life, *your* life and *our* life together, and here are six great purposes for us to pursue.

Last week we began looking at the first of these and we're doing so again this week. The first great end or great purpose of the church is this: *The proclamation of the Gospel for the salvation of humankind*. This is our business together. Not just alone but together. The proclamation of the Gospel for the salvation of humankind. That's quite a mouthful to say; and it's quite a mouthful to understand. We unpacked the statement a little last Sunday – but if I were to summarize briefly what's involved, I would put it like this

1. That we have good news to share, that's what the Gospel is. It simply means good news. We have been given a story, good news; that we are to proclaim that we are to share.
2. And it is for humankind: it's for everyone. It's not just for us, not just for you and me. It's for absolutely everyone. It is for humankind
3. And it's about salvation. In its broadest terms "salvation" is a term which indicates that we are in desperate need of help, and we cannot help ourselves unless somebody who is stronger and wiser than we are comes to our help. We're in need of help. We cannot help ourselves unless someone comes to us to help us.
4. And we are proclaiming this message of good news – that there is such a person who can provide such help that we desperately need and it's not just for me or you, it's for absolutely everyone.

The proclamation of the Gospel for the salvation of humankind. This is our commission, but we would be mistaken to think that we are the only ones entrusted with such a commission.

You see, in this world around us there are all kinds of gospels being proclaimed. In this world around us there are all kinds of salvations which are being promised by all kinds of people who are proclaiming with all their heart and soul and mind and strength, sometimes in sacrificial

ways and sometimes at great expense, their version of good news which will bless the lives of people who are in need.

If you don't believe me then all you need to do is to tune into the television next Sunday! Next Sunday for the Super Bowl. The Super Bowl is not just about football. It's far more than that, isn't it? It's about the halftime show. But not just about the halftime show, it's about the ads, the products – and the price that people will pay for just a few seconds to get their version of “good news” blaring to all of humankind (or, at least, a goodly proportion of humankind, who'll be tuning in). Good news, which promises something that will connect with your life, needy as it is, and provide something for it which will change your life for the good.

There are all kinds of products out there, all kinds of ideologies out there, all kinds of relationships out there, that people are promising you and me – eager to proclaim their gospel for the salvation of humankind. And we have been called to join the fray.

Sometimes, we may say, “I don't want to get involved in that kind of thing!” But we must. We've been called to. We must be a part of this discourse. These voices in the world around us are adamant that their good news is exactly what humankind needs. But we too have been entrusted with such a message. In our case, the message, our gospel, isn't new. It's not as if we've discovered anything. Rather, we've been entrusted with something that's been passed on to us from generation to generation, that has benefitted lives for centuries, that we have been called to see as “such good news that we cannot keep from talking about it.” But what is this gospel that we've been given that is such good news? Well I can only phrase my answer in the terms of the way I received it, in terms of why, for me, this is good news, the best news of all.

This good news is first of all not about me though it involves me. It is about God. It is about God made known in Jesus of Nazareth. God who is a creator, a redeemer and a reconciler: the God made known in Jesus of Nazareth. Who God is, and what God has done is good news. It's good news for my life, first of all because it gives me significance in a world in which human significance seems to be shrinking rapidly. The more I learn about the universe, the more I find myself becoming really small. The vaster the universe becomes, the more mysterious, the more we appear to be merely specks of cosmic dust: here today gone tomorrow – temporal flesh and blood seems to be all that there is.

But the good news is that *this is not all that there is*. The good news is that there is a God who is a creator who made us on purpose, who knows us by name. We are not here by accident and we are not insignificant. Indeed we were made in God's image and we have been given the power of choice to make which makes our lives even more significant.

The more the universe seems to be mechanistic, the more it seems that our significance and the choices we make fade away. BUT God says to us “I know who you are. I made you on purpose and you can make choices that are real and so significant that one day I'll hold you to account for those choices! (Which would be enormously BAD news, not good news, were it not for the fact that this God, who is our creator, is also our redeemer.)

A creator God: this is good news. A redeeming God: this is good news, too. When I mess up this God does not seek to condemn me but to clean up the mess – to retrieve what is lost, to restore what is broken. This is the God revealed to us through Jesus Christ who enters this world to show us that God does not give up on us, but that when we move away from God, God keeps moving towards us. Indeed God is willing to enter this world in flesh and blood, to humiliate himself, to go even to the point of death on a cross to seek us out. This is how much he loves us and how much he longs to clean up the mess that we've made. There is no mess that you or I have made that God will not touch and heal. And he not only wants to do this to redeem us but to reconcile us to himself.

A creator, a redeemer, and a reconciler! One of the great problems in our world today is loneliness. Indeed, it's at epidemic proportions. People in the midst of great crowds still say that they feel all alone and isolated. The good news is that the creating redeeming God is a reconciling God who says "I love you and I want to be with you. I want you in my house and in my home; I want you to live your life not alone but together with others, and with me, forever. What a powerful and gracious invitation. We have a place with God and with others forever.

I don't know if you know of C.S. Lewis's definition of heaven and, in particular, hell (in his book, the *Great Divorce*)? It doesn't have to do with fire and brimstone. It has to do with relationships. Hell is where we always get what we want. So much so that we drift apart from anyone and everyone else, until we do our own thing all the time, in absolute isolation from others.

What a strange thing it is that many people these days will pay a great deal of money to be isolated from others? Well C.S. Lewis says if you carry that to an extreme this is hell! Whereas heaven is the power of God to draw us together to God, to reconcile us to God and to reconcile us to each other, so that we live in a joyful, fulfilling community, where we have a home forever and ever, that we do not want to leave.

Heaven is like Thanksgiving Day that works out well!

Hell is like Thanksgiving Day that *does not* work out well. Where the family gathers and oh all that old stuff keeps coming up forever and forever, and you say I want to go home. I want to leave this place. This is not my home.

But Thanksgiving Day that works out well says "*I'm home. I'm home. I don't want this to end. This is miraculous. The love that is here, the stories that are to be told, it's endless. It's going on and on and yet it seems to take only a moment, a second. I don't want it to end its miraculous.*" To which God would say it is. Indeed this is salvation. This is good news. This is what God wants. The creating, redeeming and reconciling God and we've been entrusted with this good news. Welcomed by God in such a way as this.

Of course, not everybody thinks that this creation, redemption, reconciliation bit is good news. Not everybody receives it and says "Wow, that's what I've been waiting to hear." There are many people out there who say I don't want this good news for one reason or another.

There are people who reject this good news for what we might call **rational reasons**. Some of you have read Richard Dawkins' works, such as *The God Delusion*. Dawkins thinks that those who believe in God are deluded, that they are intellectually not respectable. How can they stand in the middle of our modern world and take their stand with intellectual integrity. So, for rational reasons they say "No, not going to believe that stuff."

And then there are others who listen to the message and say oh it's all wonderful but for **emotional reasons** they cannot give themselves to the message. "I like it but..."

Some of you may remember the name Paul Little. Paul Little used to work with students on various campuses as a Christian leader and teacher. On one occasion apparently he was giving a talk to students, some of whom were Christian and some of whom were not. And the students were listening intently to what Paul Little said. In fact, he watched one young man, whom he knew wasn't a Christian, listening very intently and after the talk was over he went to him and struck up a conversation and asked some questions.

Did what I said resonate with you? The young man said "yes."

Do you have any questions about what I said? The young man said "no."

Anything you want me to probe further? He said "No, I don't think so."

So Paul Little asked, "Do you believe what I said?" "Yes" he said, "I think I do."

And then Paul Little said, "So, are you going to commit yourself to what I've said about God, about Jesus Christ?"

The young man turned to him and said "No, no I'm not going to do that."

And Paul Little was confused, and asked "Why not?"

The student replied poignantly, and truthfully by saying, "Well, it would mess up my life!"

And Paul Little knew that the student had understood it well! He'd got it right, emotionally: the good news would mess up his life (his behavior, his friendships, his priorities) – before, eventually, sorting it out in a wonderful way.

If God indeed is a creator, if God is a redeeming God and a reconciling God, and actually makes contact with and touches our lives, then this encounter is inevitably going to change everything. At first there will be a powerful sense of losing our autonomy; though that sense is the necessary prelude to regaining it down the road. There's a possibility that our friends will laugh at us and say, "What are you doing, living your life for this God whom you cannot see? Is this some kind of a joke?" Quite correctly there's an emotional quality to the way in which we hear the Gospel, and some people simply cannot give themselves emotionally to believe what otherwise, rationally, they like and wish to be true.

And then are some who for what we might call very **practical reasons** hear this word and dismiss it. Some of you may know the name John Diamond. He was a British journalist, writing for the London Times. He died about 12 years ago of cancer, having he shared his story publicly in the press, very openly, very graciously in the press. And there were some who responded to his columns by writing to him and sharing with him the Gospel of salvation for his life, the

message of Jesus. Two months before his death, in one of his columns he reflected on the Christians who had written to him. This is what he wrote:

There is no level at which these Christians and I can engage. They tell me about their spiritual product as if I might not have come across it before. As if in 47 years of living in a Christian country I might not yet have stumbled upon the concept of Christ as Redeemer.

They don't seem to understand that I can't force myself to believe what I don't believe, which is the point at which agnostics usually say "I only wish I could believe!" And I used to say that myself. [DR: But here's the most poignant thing he says] But I've discovered that it's not true . . . *I used to say that myself but I've discovered that it's not true.* You see I'm happy not believing; and that's what they don't seem to understand."

If I were to paraphrase what John Diamond was saying, it would be something like this:

For rational reasons I really don't believe their Gospel. But even if I did believe it, I don't need it. I have a certain salvation – a sense of well being and purpose that I've defined for myself. It's all that I need for my life. Even in the face of death, it's still all that I need. Thank you very much but "no thanks."

We live in this world in which there is good news out there, and just as with any product that anybody produces where some embrace one product and not another, there are some who embrace this gospel of ours, and there are many who do not – *whether for rational reasons or for emotional reasons or for practical reasons* – or for whatever reasons they choose. And it's in this world, this type of world that we have been called to "Proclaim the Gospel for the salvation of humankind." In a world of many gospels, and of many salvations, and of many excuses and of man reasons not to believe.

So how are we going to do this? How are we going to proclaim this message at least to gain an audience so that somebody might believe, listen and respond? Well I have no final or ultimate answer for this. In a sense as a Presbyterian I would say much of it is in God's hands. But I would like to leave you with three thoughts to keep in mind.

The first is this: and this is especially addressed to us as Presbyterians! Someone, someone in the Christian church has to proclaim the Gospel in a way that is as intellectually satisfying as possible to those who are cultural despisers of religion. And that I think that is a significant part of our calling as Presbyterians. Somebody has to be out there who takes-on those who dismiss the Gospel for rational reasons. I'm deeply grateful for people like C.S. Lewis and Tim Keller and John Stott who have done this and there are many, many others. Deeply grateful for those who in the name of God have used their minds for the glory of God to proclaim the Gospel. And it is part of our calling as a church to do this together, our calling, to proclaim the Gospel in a way that is as intellectually satisfying as possible. That's the first thing.

The second thing is this: we also need to be as media savvy as possible. If Presbyterians tend to be good at being intellectually satisfying, unfortunately we tend to be pretty bad at being

media savvy. In fact many of us wish that the whole media thing would go away. I sometimes in my more cynical moments say, “You know before the 21st Century ends we as Presbyterians should rush as quickly as possible into the 20th Century! There are people out there who have their version of a gospel and their version of salvation who are using the media in powerful, powerful ways to impact the lives of others – and the good news *they* have is not nearly as good as the good news that *we* have!

Some of you may have read the Washington Post this past week. On Thursday (March 23, 2014) there was an article about a young woman by the name of Grace Heldig. Grace Heldig decided about five years ago to make videos of herself, because she believed that her life was good news. She made videos of herself, which are now on YouTube; and Grace Heldig is seen by two million people on a regular basis, mainly young women, who look to her as if she is a big sister, their guide leading them forward with good news of salvation for their lives. Very simple. Very savvy. The word is out.

We need to do this more than we do and we must not let all of that proclamation be left to someone else. There may be questions about how we do that. There always are. There may be questions about how we make the Gospel intellectually respectable. There always are. But the third thought is I suppose the thought which for me is the most important, and in which in some sense ties this together. . .

None of our intellectual savviness, and none of our media savviness, means anything unless in the third place we let it be known that we, as a community, are servants of the Savior who has been a servant to us. We have to use the media; we have to use the intellect. But what the world will listen to more than anything else is a community of people who, quite simply love each other, and also love their neighbors. There’s nothing radical, or expensive about this, but yet this community witness is truly profound.

Graham Tomlin (in his book *The Provocative Church*) tells two stories about the simple impact of a loving, serving community which turned heads and gained the Gospel a hearing. The first of his stories comes from 1700 years ago in Egypt and it has to do with a man by the name of Pachomius.

Pachomius led a movement of monasticism in the early days of the church, in a time in which things were really dark, and through which the Gospel was preserved. But he didn’t grow up as a Christian. In his early life he was conscripted into the Egyptian army and taken to a place, a mix between a barracks and a prison where new recruits were kept before they really entered the army. It was in this dark place that he was visited by people who brought him food and drink. Their action confused him. He turned to them and asked, “Who are you? Why should you be bothered with me? You have no obligation to me and yet you come to care for me.” And they replied to him, “*We are followers of Jesus. He told us to do this, to go to those who are in prison, to feed the hungry, and to quench the thirst of those who are thirsty, and so we come.*”

And he was so intrigued that he laid aside whatever intellectual reasons he might have had, or emotional reasons he might have had, and gave himself to the Savior who was the focal point of their lives. He heard the Gospel, *embodied in the community*, and responded to it.

Tomlin also writes about another incident, which brings this right up to date. From our own day and age he speaks about a church in a small town in Malaysia and this is what he writes:

“A church in a small town in Malaysia was growing. The town was not a major center. Social services were not as efficient as they might have been. In the heat of a tropical country open gutters outside the church smelled badly, especially when garbage accumulated and the town council was slow to clear it. As church members arrived on Sunday, the smell would sometimes be overpowering. Repeated phone calls to the council got no response. So the church decided to clear the gutters themselves. Then someone pointed out that this was not just a problem for the church. It was a problem for the whole town. So one Saturday they got the whole church to turn out in dirty clothes, armed with brushes and boots and they set to clearing as many of the town’s gutters as they could. Townspeople were amazed that finally the drains were being cleared. But then they realized it wasn’t by the town council. Naturally they asked who these people were and why they were doing it. Which led to many intrigued people turning up at church to see what made these people tick.

Let me assure you that if the Washington Post instead of having this headline about Grace Heldig said the folks of National Presbyterian Church are “in the gutters again!” . . . people would turn out just to see what was happening. Serving, not just as a PR stunt; not to do it just to do something fancy (Jesus avoided this temptation in his wilderness testing in Luke 4), but because in our hearts and in our lives we know that we’ve been called to love as a community. When people see that there is love within and flowing from a community, they say “What’s going on there?” And heads are turned to hear whatever it is we have to say.

AND we have much to say! We’ve been given good news. I hope you know the goodness of this good news; and if you don’t that you will embrace it fully:

You are not a cosmic accident.

Your life is significant.

You never need to be alone.

There is nothing you have done to mess up your life which is irredeemable.

Because there is a God who is a creator, a redeemer and a reconciler who adores you.

Who says to us all, “Embrace this good news but do not keep it to yourself. But together (not just alone; some of us are shy!) . . . together, “Proclaim the Gospel for the salvation of humankind.” May God help us so to do.

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