

What is the Gospel Message?

Romans 1: 16-17

Our question for this Sunday is “What is the Gospel message?” Well, honestly, this is a trick question because the answer to this question all depends on who we ask. And here’s why I say this: For those who are oppressed, caught up in the cycle of poverty, hate, hurt, and brokenness, the gospel message is one of liberation. It is one of freedom. It is one where the person’s worth is seen and respected as a Beloved Child of God. This looks a lot different from the gospel message for those who are powerful and rich. For that group we are told the gospel message is one where the proud will be scattered, the powerful brought down from their thrones, while the rich are sent away empty. It is a leveling of the playing field. It is a recognition that there is injustice in our world and this injustice will be resolved. This understanding of the Gospel terrifies the powers that be because it challenges their very authority. And again, this understanding looks very different from our viewpoint as ones who are in between these two extremes, the extremes of oppression and power. For us, the Gospel looks a lot like a call to repent, not because we are bad people. We are called to repent because the Kingdom of God is at hand. The Gospel message tells us that it is time to quit being so comfortable with the status quo and get to work in helping to bring about the Kingdom of God here on Earth just as it is in heaven. It is one of empowerment

and possibilities while reminding us what we are called to do here on Earth as the Body of Christ.

This question of What is the Gospel is a trick question. We cannot sum it up in one simple sentence. It is something we need to struggle with, something we need to spend time on as people of faith. Because again, just like last week's question about who Jesus is, our answer to this what is the Gospel question will shape our beliefs, will shape our words, will shape our actions as disciples of Christ. Our answer to this Gospel question becomes what we proclaim as TRUTH as followers of Jesus.

Our answer to this Gospel question is so much more than a statement which we can memorize. The Gospel is our good news, news which transforms our world viewpoint. It becomes an opportunity for us to clarify the meaning and implications of the Gospel as we understand it. Just like it did for Paul in this letter to the Romans.

To give us a little background for our text: As we may remember, Rome was "part of the Hellenistic world. It was a world of ethnic, cultural and religious diversity. Nowhere was this more evident than in the city of Rome. The earliest Christian presence in Rome arose from conservative, law-observant Jewish origins. Their ties to the church in Jerusalem were strong, and in both places, (Jerusalem

and Rome) Paul's contention that Gentile believers did not have to take on the whole Jewish law as part of their Christian practice met with opposition. In 49 CE when Claudius expelled Jews (including Christian Jews) from Rome, the Gentiles who had not been among the leaders of the church suddenly found themselves providing the leadership. By the time Claudius died in 54 CE and the edict of the expulsion lapsed, the culture, theology and practices of the Roman church had changed under the Gentile leaders. So when the former leaders returned and saw the changes, surprise, surprise, there were conflicts.

In the letter to the Romans, Paul takes the time to remind the community there who they are as Christians and why the Gospel message is important. For Paul, he understands that the Gospel is not an inactive thing. It is an active power in this world. It transforms lives and brings barriers down. And it is grounded in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

That's why Paul goes on and on, not just in this letter, but letter after letter, to various communities faithfully proclaiming the good news. Paul sees this good news as both a story and an event, the event being the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the story...is the whole narrative told from Genesis to Revelation and beyond to even now, a narrative which tells of how God has been at work since the beginning of time, bringing about healing and wholeness, not just for a select few but for all of God's people now and forevermore. For Paul, the Gospel is

a story and an event which reveals who God is for the people of God, a God who reaches out, who becomes the Word Made Flesh so that all would know the love of God in their lives.

But you see, Paul wasn't the first one to proclaim the Gospel. That's where we as people of faith tend to make a mistake. We assume that since Paul was the great evangelist, that he created the talking points for the Gospel, talking points which he shared with everyone along his travels. But in reality, the Gospel started long before Paul.

The Gospel was in the beginning when God moved across the chaos and brought forth life. The Gospel was in Egypt when God set God's people free and brought them into the Promise Land. The Gospel was in the Song of Mary as she sang about how the poor will be made rich and the rich made poor. The Gospel was in the teachings of Jesus when he spoke of loving our enemies. The Gospel was at the Table that night when Jesus was betrayed when he dined with those who would betray him and deny him.

You see, we know the answer to the question of what the Gospel really is....The Gospel is the power of God at work in this world, a power which brings down barriers used to divide. The Gospel is a power which turns our world upside down. The Gospel is a power which bring good news to the poor, which proclaims

release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, which lets the oppressed go free, and proclaims the year of the Lord's favor." The Gospel is the power which shows us time and time again that the Kingdom of God is at hand, telling us, telling the world a story about how love is the most powerful force in the world, proclaiming how grace can bring the proud down, telling a story which points to the one event which transformed us as people of faith...the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

When it comes to our answer to this Gospel question, I realize that I'm not telling us anything we don't already know. We know what the Gospel message is yet...yet, as I have lived with this question this past week, I came to the realization that we don't necessary like the answer to this Gospel question. I say this because the answer to this questions asks something of us. It challenges us to step out of our comfort zones and engage the other. It requires that we love kindness, that we make justice and that we walk humbly with our God.

That's why time and time again, we have tried to tame the Gospel message. We have tried to water it down so that it will fit our needs rather than challenging us to be challenged to become the people of welcome that God calls us to be. Time and time again, as followers of Jesus, we have tried to place the Gospel in a box, confining it so that it doesn't mess us the boundaries we are so determined to

maintain. Because we don't like the answer to this question of what is the Gospel message.

As disciples of Christ, we know what the Gospel message is yet.... time and time again, we have ignored its scandalous call and pretended that it is all about us as individuals, that the Gospel is about saving souls for some heaven light years away, rather than allowing it to inspire us to do the hard work of reconciliation here and now on Earth so that healing and wholeness can happen for all of God's people, not just a select few.

So again, I come back to the fact that this question about what the Gospel is is really a trick question because in all honesty, we know what the Gospel message is. We simply don't the answer.

And who can blame us right? Unfortunately, we know how this world receives the Gospel. We know what happens to those that preach and teach its scandalous message. After all, look at what happened to Paul. He was killed by Rome because he proclaimed a different power than the Pax Romana. We know what happens to those who don't sanitized the Gospel message. After all, look at Martin Luther King. He was shot because he dared to proclaim a power that would liberate all of God's people. We know what happens to those who speak out against the powers that be. After all, look at Jesus.

He had the nerve to stand up in his own home church, proclaim the Gospel and they ran him out of town. And that doesn't even tell half the story. Just look at how he died. A political prisoner crucified by Rome because he proclaimed that the Kingdom of God was at hand.

So you see, we can't win when it comes to the Gospel message except maybe that's the whole point. As ones who worship a Risen Savior, as ones who know how the story really ends, as ones who are thought to be foolish because we choose to believe in the life transforming news that love will overcome and death and darkness will be no more, maybe that's the whole point of the Gospel...to realize that we are called to a different way, a way not founded in power and might but a power which can liberate and set people free.

I don't know about you but I think the only way we are really going to ever answer this whole what is the Gospel question is to start practicing what we preach...to starting turning our lives towards the saving love of God and begin the joyful but painful work of reconciliation right now because after all...we've been told the Kingdom of God is at hand. Thanks be to God. Amen.