

Manuscript of the June 15, 2008 Sermon – Jeffrey E. Bryan The Great Ends of the Church Series

1. The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind

Today, and for the rest of the summer, our sermon topics will be the guided by the historic great ends of the church. These quote-unquote “great ends” came to be part of the Presbyterian Church’s constitution way back in 1910; and I know several congregations who even use these “great ends” as their church mission statement. I’m not saying we need to do that, but I am saying the great ends of the church are very important. The term “great ends” is just old-timey language for “what being the church is all about.” This is who we are. This is what we do. I don’t think we’ll do this every week, but since this is the first, if you don’t mind, the great ends are listed in your bulletin – let’s all read these aloud together:

The great ends of the church are:

2. The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind
3. The shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God
4. The maintenance of divine worship
5. The preservation of the truth
6. The promotion of social righteousness
7. The exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world

Today we will be talking about the Gospel. So, I would like to read from one of the places where Paul sums it up. This is in:

1 Cor 15:1-8

¹Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ²By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

³For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. ⁶After that, he appeared to

more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Three points. The Gospel is a story. The Gospel is revolution. And, God uses the Gospel for salvation. Point #1: the Gospel is a story. In the 1 Corinthians passage we just read, we heard Paul retell the Gospel, and it was the story of Jesus Christ – he lived briefly, he died violently, and rose unexpectedly. This is the ultimate story of God’s constant love, of God’s amazing grace, and it really begins way back in Genesis with creation. The story winds its way through all of human history from sin in the Garden of Eden, to the Exodus, to the Prophets and God’s promises, all the way to Jesus Christ. Certainly, the story keeps on going to the cross, the resurrection, and even further. The story of God’s love is told and retold all through the New Testament, especially in the book of Acts. Whenever believers explain why they are acting so radical, why they are acting so weird and so loving: they tell the story. In Acts 3, Peter starts all the way back at Abraham. He tells the story of Israel and finishes with the resurrected Jesus. In Acts 7, that great martyr Stephen proclaims the story of the Gospel in much the same way, starting with Abraham, Joseph, and Moses. The Apostle Paul told the same Gospel over and over again in letters, in public, and in prison. Jesus lived briefly, he died violently, and he rose unexpectedly.

You may already know this, but I spent all last week attending a preaching conference at Princeton Seminary. That’s why I millions of unanswered emails in my inbox. One of the conference attendees, a Lutheran pastor in south Jersey, talked about his church and how they have these stained glass windows. Now, I typically do not like stained glass windows, but I loved the way this Lutheran talked. He said each window in the church, starting here with Genesis, told the story of the Bible, the story of God’s love, all the way around the church: creation, fall, exodus, covenant, exile, homecoming, oppression, Christ, crucifixion, resurrection, the coming kingdom. This Lutheran pastor talked about how each person

in his congregation stands literally in the middle of God's story. It reminds me of what Paul said in our scripture lesson – the Gospel is something we have received, and on which we take our stand.

That brings us to point #2: the Gospel is revolution. The word “gospel” is an Old English word that simply means “good news.” Gospel – good spell – good spelling – good speech – good news. That is what we are talking about, and this is very important to remember: the story, the message about Jesus Christ is good news. Good News. In the Bible, in the original Greek, the word for gospel or good news is εὐαγγέλιον, as in evangelism, evangelist, and even the word angel. A person who delivered the news, the way angels do in the Bible, was called an evangelist, – one who spoke the εὐαγγέλιον, or the gospel.

Back in the day, the Roman Empire ruled the entire known world; and they kept the peace in that huge empire in a few ways. For one, the Romans knew that scared people are easy to control. So, they used intense military force, shock and awe, if you will, and they kept people anxious and afraid. Caesar, the Roman Emperor, would also send evangelists out into the empire with propaganda. If you lived in a big city like Jerusalem or even a small town like Bethlehem, a Roman evangelist would come in on a regular basis, stand up in the middle of town, and proclaim the Gospel according to Caesar. They would say stuff like: “Hear the good news according to Caesar, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Caesar gives you bread, Caesar gives you clean water and wine, Caesar gives you gladiators and stadiums for entertainment, your lives are better and you are more fulfilled because of the god above all gods, your Savior, Caesar.”

When Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John wrote what they called “Gospels”; when Peter and Penelope, Steven and Phoebe, Paul and Priscilla all proclaimed the true εὐαγγέλιον, the Good News of Jesus Christ, they were rebelling. If Jesus Christ is King of Kings and Lord of Lords, if Jesus is the Savior of the world, if the kingdom, power, and all the glory belong to our Father who art in Heaven: then Caesar is a fraud. Every power that competes for God's ultimate say-so in our lives is a lie, powerless, impotent: kaput.

The first Christians understood that saying yes to the Gospel, saying yes to the good news of a living, resurrected Jesus means saying no to a lot of other, dead things. It is rebellion. Saying “yes” to the fact that God is generous and gave his life for us means saying “no” to privilege, prejudice,

and greed. Saying “yes” to the cross (that bloody, ruthless, Roman death machine that murdered the Son of God) saying “yes” to the Good News of the cross means saying “no” to death, revenge, and violence. Saying “yes” to the Good News that Jesus won freedom for us in the resurrection means saying “no” to the American religion of achievement, overwork, and busyness. The Gospel means we have a better Kingdom here and now – a Kingdom founded on the love of Jesus Christ.

That brings us to point #3. The Gospel is not just a good story or just something we can use to pick a fight. **God uses the Gospel to bring salvation.** Kind of like how there is a big difference between watching a movie about football, and literally playing football; kind of like how there is a huge difference between reading a romance novel, and having someone tell you, “I love you;” the Gospel story of God’s love has realness and power. As Paul says in this scripture lesson, “By this gospel you are saved.”

I heard a woman named Sheila tell her story. Sheila was in a Bible Study in her church, and somebody suggested they study the book of Revelation. Sheila thought she might find some spooky clue to when the world would end or some mystical decoder-ring that would predict the second coming of Christ. Mostly, Sheila just went to the Bible study because that’s where she felt safe. What Sheila found in studying Revelation, praise God, was that great image of Jesus in Revelation chapter 5, “the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, [who] has conquered.” Thing is, in Revelation chapter 5, Jesus the lion who conquers is also a little, slain lamb. Sheila got to thinking about the abuse Jesus went through. Sheila got to thinking about how Jesus was faithful in his message of forgiveness and grace, and how folks rejected him, spit on him, and whipped him. Sheila got to thinking about that little, slain lamb that conquers; and the good Lord put it in her heart that she would no longer stand idly by while her husband abused her, beat her children, and rejected her faithful attempts to love him into sobriety. The Lord gave Sheila the spirit of a Lion, yes, and the spirit of a little, slain lamb that conquers. The cross and resurrection saved her life. That Gospel saved Sheila’s life.

Another story – Last Wednesday morning, I got breakfast in the dining hall at the seminary. You never know who you will meet in the dining hall at that seminary. I sat down at a table with two strangers: a middle-aged woman and a youngish man with a really cool afro. I soon realized that the woman was a keynote speaker, a world famous fighter for

justice. She talked about her work with poor people in Africa, working with lepers, helping villages get clean water and good medicine. Just listening to this woman I felt inspired to make real changes in the world.

Knowing I had to preach today, I just had to exploit this lady. So I asked her point blank, “how does the cross and the resurrection, how does the gospel fit in to what you are doing?” This strong, freedom-fighting, lion of a woman looked me in the eyes and I could see tears starting to well up. She said, Jeff (I was wearing a nametag) I have spent the last 5 months bed-ridden, on my back, asking myself, “What does the cross and resurrection have to do with this, this cancer.” She said, and I don’t know if I’ll ever forget this, she said the resurrection means that God has vanquished, defeated, triumphed over every evil, even her cancer. God uses that story, that powerful story of the Gospel, to keep her going.

Church we are all in this Gospel thing together; we are a family and we back each other up. We help each other say “no” to the empires of this world that want to slave us and “yes” to the Kingdom of God. This is what being the church is all about. This is who we are. This is what we do. We tell our story. We proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ for the salvation of humankind: he lived briefly, died violently, rose unexpectedly, God keeps his promises, Christ will come again, there will come a day when every creature in heaven and on earth will agree to the truth that God’s love wins. First Presbyterian Church of Springfield, PA, welcome to the revolution.