

“For the Sake of the Gospel”
A Sermon on 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39
Epiphany 5 B
February 8, 2009

Pastor John R. Pederson
Augustana Lutheran Church
Denver, Colorado

Sooner or later the law that comes from God reveals that you and I will never measure up. Our righteousness will never be enough. Our sunny disposition, our enlightened moral positions, our getting all manner of good things done: they will never, ever manage enough perfection to recommend us successfully to God. According to the law you and I are always *doers*. And that doing trap is the end of us. The result of the law being done to you is that you can't do enough.

And the Gospel is this: you don't have to. Your relationship with God is not the result of doing. It is the result of receiving. The Gospel is that God comes to you, not half way or some of the way. God comes to you all the way; all the way to Jesus' cross.

That is the Gospel, the good news. The Gospel is that righteousness of God trumping your own. God gives what you yourself. The “you” that God gives is a gift. According to the Gospel you and I are always *receivers*. “We are who we are as receivers.”¹

The Gospel is not a doctrine. It is not a way to think about God in the right way. The Gospel is not a feeling. The Gospel is not information about God. The Gospel is not there to be examined from your easy chair. The Gospel is not something you come to understand or admire.²

The Gospel is an *event*. The Gospel is what God *does to you*. Don't you think Simon's mother-in-law would say as much? The Gospel is what God does to you when read scripture, come to worship, are inspired by a choir anthem or an organ postlude, are encouraged by another Christian, and have water splashed over you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Gospel is the shape of what God is up to in your life.³

Yesterday your Congregation Council met on retreat. At one point each was asked to reflect with one other person, “What is God up to in you life?” I think it a fair and good question for all of us to reflect on. How do you think Simon's mother-in-law would answer that question? In

¹ Eberhard Jüngel.

² Jüngel, *Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith*, Trans. by Jeffrey F. Cayzer (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 2001), p. 68-9

³ “If the event, the accident, happens to us, breaks into our lives with the impact we have been trying to describe, then it will involve a full stop and a new beginning, the death of the old and the resurrection of the new in faith. The word of the cross must be a word that does the cross to us, no one that directs attention elsewhere as to enable us to avoid it.” Gerhard Forde, “Atonement as Actual Event,” *Christian Dogmatics*, Volume II (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1984), p. 95.

my experience, when people think about that they come up with some version or other of the Gospel. The Gospel does not take the same shape in every life, but in one form or another, the Gospel is the shape of what God is up to in one's life.

And that Gospel has power. And that Gospel has such power as to cut you loose from whatever allegiances you once may have owned; such power as to render you without an ideology; such power to strip from you any metaphysic or political program, such power as to suspend you between heaven and hell without a single "ism" to your name, and to wring a "yes, yes" from deep inside you. This Gospel has such power that you may find yourself living or dying for the sake of mere words, the promise of God. That is what God does to you in the Gospel.⁴ The Gospel is the full stop interruption of your life in which your old life is snatched from you and a new life given in grace to you.

The members and friends of Augustana often offer encouragement to preachers. And that is appreciated. One morning I received one of the nicest pieces of feedback. It made me think about how God is present in all of our lives. The person shook my hand and said, "You really did the Gospel to them this morning." For preaching is not in the end about inspiration or information or Bible understanding or giving a locker room talk to your old Adam or old Eve so you can get out there and give it another run. Preaching – on a good day -- is doing the Gospel to the congregation.

I think that is how it seemed to Paul. That Gospel had interrupted a very busy life for Paul. This Gospel was done to him in such a way that he could, quite simply, never be the same again. And what Paul then discovered was that he began doing that same Gospel to others. There was compulsion in it; he was no longer his own. It was as though for the sake of the Gospel Paul did that same Gospel to everyone near and far from him.

If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission. What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge. . .

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law . . . so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the 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. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

⁴ This paragraph is re-written from Roy Harrisville, "The Loss of Biblical Authority and Its Recover," *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, ed. by Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 48.

It is for the sake of this Gospel that Paul gives up every former allegiance he ever had. For the sake of the Gospel, Paul gives up rooting around for his “true” self and becomes all things to all people. It is for the sake of this Gospel that Paul lives anymore not for himself but from now on for others.

So, what do you think? Do you suppose the Gospel has that power in your life as well? Since the Gospel is done to you, do you think you are now commissioned to do that same Gospel to those near and far around you?

For the sake of the Gospel you are a mother or a father. For the sake of the Gospel you are a teacher, an engineer, a student, a representative, a social worker, a peacemaker, a child or a grandparent. For the sake of the Gospel you have neighbors in need. For the sake of the Gospel you can listen, make friends, give a gift. For the sake of the Gospel God has placed you where you are now.

The Gospel doesn't take exactly the same shape in each life. But it is a powerful first clue to what God might be up to in your life. For Paul, God was up to the Gospel. For Simon's mother-in-law, God was up to the Gospel. For the sake of the Gospel neither one ever saw people, events, things in the world the same again.

So, what is God up to in your life? I should think it is some variation of the Gospel. Do you think so? Yes, I think so.