

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious loving God, source of all things good and all things wonderful, throughout all things in our lives, we worship you. We worship you because in each new day, you offer the new possibilities. You provide the opportunity to give or receive forgiveness for past arguments, whose causes are long forgotten. You provide the opportunity to build a new relationship with another one of your blessed people. You provide the opportunity to do good work or to praise and uplift the good work of another. We seize these opportunities as we come to your house today, God, offering all that we are to you that we may be changed. Lead us, guide us, direct us as we offer all that we are to you in our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness, Holy One.

Gracious God, the calling to live for the message of the Gospel is a heavy but wonderful one. We hear of the transfiguration of Jesus, transformed to a glorious state before his disciples' very eyes, and want to serve that Lord with all of our hearts. We can lose sight of what that call of living for the Gospel fully means in favor of excited zeal, and we don't even realize it. Holy God, it is never too late to reorient to that timeless message, the timeless message of sacrifice and care that brings you glory. Help us, empower us, lead us, fortify us, all for the sake of your Gospel, the sake of life lived with power and care. We pray all these things in the name of the eternal Lord of Love and Care, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together...

SERMON

You know what? Praise Jesus, I've seen the light. I have been at the top of the mountain, and I know what the truth is. There is nothing on earth that can beat...the taste of a banana. It's delightful texture, it's wonderful taste, and the fact that it looks like a

phone are truly gifts from God. This is the fruit the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. You're all in agreement with me, or you're in deep trouble. Anyone disagree? You're in deep trouble because this is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

We have those experiences that lead us to believe we have it all figured out. This week, we have two different stories: the story of the Transfiguration from Mark and a message from letter of 1 Corinthians to that ancient Church of Corinth. On the one hand, we have Jesus transformed before the very eyes of his disciples. But how we deliver the message of that mountaintop experience matters. We have Paul talking about his evangelism, how he spreads the Gospel; he does it "for the sake of the Gospel." These may seem like two separate stories. They are, but they share a common thread. Indeed, proclaiming in 1 Corinthians, Paul speaks about the Gospel as free for everyone. It doesn't make us powerful; it instead brings us into the service of others when the rest of the world wants to make it all about me. His message is just as relevant to us today as it was back then. The Gospel is the ultimate way to live, and we preach, we give, we live, we do it all for the sake of the Gospel. How do we live for the sake of the Gospel? One cannot simply go out into the world and conquer it for the Gospel of Jesus Christ; that is folly and destined for failure. One needs to know how to share the Gospel and how to share it well, and the key factor is not pride or zeal, but humility. It is, in other words, not in what we say but what we do and how we do it. These stories share a strong message, one that we have partaken in already and must keep sharing: our God is a God of relation. God knows us. God cares for us. God reveals God's self to us each and every day when we have the eyes to see and the ears to hear. As a result, we have to live "for the sake of the Gospel;" in other words, we

return the favor. Let us look to this mountain top experience and Paul's message, see a life lived for the sake of the Gospel, and realize what we can do to live in that eternal example.

In that first passage, we have Mark's version of the Transfiguration. Jesus goes with John, Peter and John to the top of a mountain, and then, so to speak, all heaven breaks loose. They stand there and see Jesus Transformed, clothed in white and standing with the two of the most important figures in all of Jewish life. This is clearly one of the biggest meetings in all of history. The disciples are left dumbstruck; they have no idea what to say, so Peter somehow babbles something about making three dwellings for them. Then a cloud from the sky announces with seemingly the voice of God, "This is my son, the Beloved; listen to him!" And then it all goes away, and Jesus is his normal self among them.

This was surely one for the disciples. Everything, literally everything, changed before their very eyes; the veil between our world and the divine dropped away for an instant, and the disciples got a peek of the fully glorified Jesus Christ. Have you ever had a "mountaintop experience?" When we have a mountaintop experience, the world seems to change before our eyes, and nothing is the same anymore. We are often humbled, but that humility can quickly turn into zeal. Zeal leads us to do whatever it takes to share the truth of what we learned from that experience. That zeal can move into how we see the Gospel, as something to impress upon others so that they can share in the joy that we have. But this story is about Jesus showing glory from his humility on that mountain. He appeared to three disciples, not the crowds of thousands. Zeal for God's ways can easily become toxic and off-putting; that is where Paul comes in to share his message about evangelism.

Paul in this passage is explaining what it means to be an evangelist. It's not a tactic but a lifestyle. What does it mean to spread the Gospel? To him, it is a privilege and a

responsibility. Frank Crouch from workingpreacher.org provides an excellent commentary on Paul's statements. This Corinthian church needed to hear what it means to live this Christian life, and it's not about the privileged position of being able to attend worship services. That fact doesn't mean a lot in the grand scheme, for we have taken the choice to follow Christ, and that means a new lifestyle and new mission. This new way has taken over, and that means, in Paul's estimation, "an obligation has been weighed on me...I am trusted with a commission." This Christian life means that the Gospel is not a choice but a privilege and responsibility that cannot be taken away. We are called to spread the Gospel, the message that God has come to this world as a human being, and nothing is the same. All can become children of God with the power of freedom and grace from new life. What does this mean to how we spread this awesome Gospel? It's all in the presentation.

Put simply, Paul stresses evangelism means we meet the other person on their own terms, not ours. The strongest part of this passage explains what the Gospel life means in verse 19 through verse 23. Paul describes the person who lives for the Gospel: "For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all that I might win more of them." Did Paul always live up to this lofty ideal? Not always, but it is the standard to which we should strive. It seems to be wimpy and weak, but it is the harder and more fruitful way. The Gospel has been made a tool for conquest; "Go and win the masses for Christ!" "Take the banana and make sure they eat it!" But that is faulty; it makes the carrier of the Gospel to be burly and powerful. Nothing lasting was accomplished by conquest, not to mention with the Gospel. That is not the way of the man who came to bring the Gospel in the first place, Jesus Christ. The Transfigured Christ appeared in glory from humility. The Gospel's servants should live humbly to spread its message.

But what is the nature of this Gospel? Is it something to be sheltered, to be held like a newborn child, protected against all who disagree or don't understand it? Or is it more durable than that? It is all too easy to forget how the Gospel is to be cared for. It is to be protected, but not in the way that we might think. The Gospel is not something to be guarded from the masses, as if the word of someone who doesn't believe in it will destroy it forever. Trust me, the Gospel has a skin of Teflon with a heart of eternal power. For thousands of years, those who didn't understand it have tried to invalidate it but to no avail. Paul advocates a different way, a way of offering this message freely and openly. As Paul says, "What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the Gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the Gospel." This is another path of humility and openness. Unlike those other ideas, Paul's point is that the Gospel is to be spread like seed in planting season, a very apt metaphor. When we plant, one does not protect the seed from the soil. When we keep the seed to ourselves, there is no growth to be nurtured. One instead prepares the soil to receive the seed. In other words, as spreaders of the seed of the Gospel, we need to prepare others for receiving that seed with our humble kindness. Indeed, the way we are called to protect the Gospel is to protect how it is presented, not in the receiving, for if we do not, it shuts others off to the message.

Let me give you a poignant example. The last Friday in January, Catherine and I went to see one of my favorite authors and scientists, Neil deGrasse Tyson, speak in Denver. As we walked to the auditorium, there was a woman outside holding up a bible and preaching. I couldn't tell what she was preaching. She was speaking a lot of words without a clear message. She wasn't speaking to anyone in particular; she was just preaching while many people walked by her. I have no doubt that she had good intentions

in that act, but as people of the Gospel, we have to live by more than good intentions. I was saddened by this display because this is not preaching for the sake of the Gospel. She was speaking at people, not working with people. This was preaching for its own sake. Indeed, to be a Christian is to feel great zeal for the Gospel. However, the Gospel can be used as a weapon, and I felt really saddened that this was the image she was taught of faithfulness. I looked at the response she was getting, and it was none at all. I knew that the only emotion people would feel as they passed her way would be of feeling repulsed, not invited. Against Paul's explicit direction, she was speaking from a place of power, not of trying to relate with the people. This, and, indeed, any demonstration of the Gospel from street corners or going where the preacher was not invited is not going to create more zeal for the Gospel; it will create brokenness, separation, and shuts off from the message. It will not invite transformation; it will invite walls, and Jesus Christ cannot come in.

As Paul says "I have made myself a slave to all." A better word more relevant to our ears would be "servant" or "employee." We become servants to those around us to best exemplify the Gospel, for the sake of the Gospel. Think about what that means for us today. In today's world, the service industry requires that customer service is number one. You treat customers well, and that builds trust. A good employee doesn't go around telling people what to think or what to do. An employee in a clothing store doesn't go up to someone who picked up a garment and say, "Wow...that's really ugly. You really need my help to get back on the right track." How many sales is that way of acting going to make? Would you listen? Instead, a good employee can offer his or her opinion when it is asked for, and she or he can offer those they serve whatever they request in order to find what they ask for. A good employee never tells someone where they think they are going wrong;

they assist, they guide, they be the best person they can be, so when that trust is established, guidance can be offered. But that's where the comparison must end. The way we offer the Gospel is not completely like the service industry. Their number one goal is to make the sale, and when that sale is made, the customer and the employee go separate ways. We instead are in the business of building relationships that last. In other words, when we offer the Gospel in this unrelational way, we become telemarketers. How many people love telemarketers? We know they don't care about us as people. They sell a product. It makes me weep when the Gospel is seen in the same light, that we have to sell it to others in order to be faithful by Jesus. But the Gospel is no product. Jesus peddled no goods. Jesus spread the Gospel by inviting all people, relating to all people, and caring for them as people. Faithfulness is relating to one another the way that we want to be related to. We want friends: to care for them, to demonstrate humility and love. This is service for the sake of the Gospel.

"For the sake of the Gospel" is no battle cry. It's a reminder of what the Gospel life is; when the Gospel becomes a battle cry, we have lost the heart of it all. Those Mountain Top experiences bring us to understand this truth that calls us to share well. We have a joyful obligation. We live in humble service for the sake of the Gospel. We live like Jesus Christ, with power in humility, for the sake of the Gospel. Jesus never forced like the telemarketer; Jesus preached and offered, Jesus called people to himself to bring about teaching so when they were ready, Jesus revealed his glory as they seized the Gospel he offered. Let us live for the sake of the Gospel in sacrifice, in care, and in servanthood, offering this gift by example and word when opportunities present themselves. Thanks be to God for this wonderful responsibility! Amen and amen.