

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious Loving God, you are God above all, and we come to worship you. We worship you because you made us and gave us the ability to worship you as we have the gifts. Some of us worship the best with our hands. Some of us worship the best through teaching. All of us come to your house to proclaim your absolute goodness to the world and in our lives. In return and response to all the goodness you provide, you ask for all of us, and we come to give that. We offer you the thoughts and burdens of our hearts that you might fill us to be carriers of your Spirit wherever we may go. Hear our prayers, Holy One.

Loving God, you know us better than we do. You know where we seize the calling of the Gospel, where we celebrate it, and where we find ourselves not understanding or fearing the ramifications of Christ's words. O, God, it is so human to be selective on how we approach your word. On this day, we pray that our eyes may be opened and that our ears may hear once again the power of the Gospel, the Word that can set us all free. May we see the Jesus Christ the scriptures present to us, God in human being and human being who is God, with the mission that changes all of history. That mission is hard, but because it comes from you, Gracious One, we know that it is worth the time, the pain, and the effort toward the full redemption of all creation, in spite of the false gospels of hatred and fear preached today. As we seek to live out this true way, we pray all these things in Christ's Holy Name, fulfilled in our hearing, as we pray the prayer he taught us, saying as one...

SERMON

When I was growing up, I loved to collect sports cards. I still do, but I don't have as much free time these days to enjoy the hobby. When you collect sports cards, you learn a lot. You learn a lot about the importance of condition, about keeping things in the best

shape, proper storage, and a lot about supply and demand. You also learn about the dark side of the economic market in a strange word I learned: counterfeit. Especially in the late 1980's, baseball cards reached new heights, and so, some cards got to be super-popular. Some people wanted to profit as much as possible, so they started making cheap copies – counterfeits – of those expensive cards. I learned to be wary and aware of such things.

Counterfeits may look like the real thing, they may smell or feel like the real thing, but when you get down to it, it's not the legitimate article. It's a fake, and a fake does not satisfy. It's like eating candy for a meal. It tastes good for a second, but then, later, you don't really feel satisfied. The same thing works with the Gospel: anything less than the full story, the real McCoy, the legitimate article, doesn't satisfy.

Last week, we heard the story of Jesus' first miracle in the Gospel of John, the first sign of who he was, at a wedding in Cana. This is the first story of Jesus' ministry in the Gospel of Luke. He went out in the wilderness, was tempted by Satan, and returned with the power of the Spirit. He apparently had already ministered throughout Galilee and now returns home. It's a warm homecoming. The great up-and-coming preacher returns to his home and comes to read the scripture in the synagogue. This seems like a typical Sunday...or Saturday, in that case, since one went to the synagogue on the Sabbath, after all. So, Jesus is given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Was he asked to read a certain passage or did he choose to go to this one? Either way, it's time to make some waves. Jesus finds and reads about the restoration of Israel, according to the podcast Sermon Brainwave...just as applicable when it was written as it was at that moment. It's from what we now know as Isaiah 58 and 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor." That's a big statement. "He has sent me to proclaim release to the

captives and recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free.” That’s not easy either. “And to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And then there’s the topper, as they are all sitting back and listening. It’s his way of saying that the legitimate article had indeed arrived when he tells them, “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Welcome to the Ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God come to Earth. So, this is the real Gospel. So, this obviously was more than just a reading of the writings of Isaiah. This is Jesus’ thesis statement of his ministry: the exact summing-up of everything he will accomplish in his work. It’s a new way in the world that loves its old ways, and it’s not exactly easy...in fact, it’s really hard. Here is the Gospel, and it calls us to follow.

I love to watch movies over and over again. I recently saw Star Wars: The Force Awakens for the third time, but I think I’m done watching it until it comes out for purchase. But my point is, I saw things in the third viewing that I missed in the first and the second viewings. The thing is, we need to consistently look at things over and over to find what might be new to us. After all, we are people that change, and our perspectives change with it. The Gospel is no different. I think what we have here is an honest-to-goodness new or, at least revised, look on the true Gospel of Jesus Christ. What do we think of when we hear “Gospel?” We think of this, and these four books that we have called “Gospel.” But that’s not the whole story. The story of the “Gospel” comes from what “Gospel” means, which is...? Indeed, “Good News.” This is Jesus beginning the proclamation of the good news to all people, and what good news it is. Jesus preaches release of the captives; indeed, he comes to free the people from the bonds of their sins. Jesus preaches good news to the poor; indeed, he comes to show the world that the most worthwhile people in God’s eyes are those the world scorns. Jesus preaches sight to the blind; indeed, Jesus comes to open all

our eyes to the Kingdom of God that exists beyond the bounds of the world but we can see when we look hard. He comes to let the oppressed go free; indeed, because the world's oppression, when under the power of God, ceases, and there's a lot of oppression to be broken. And, ultimately, he preaches the Year of the Lord's favor because the love of God is revealed in this man Jesus Christ. Got it all down? Good.

From my youngest years, I remember several things that are good for you but aren't the most fun thing to do. Go to the dentist. Eat your vegetables. Yearly check-ups at the doctor. We know it's good for us, but it's much more fun to sit on the sofa and eat ice cream, right? Well, it's human nature to do some things that are good for us and perhaps neglect some other things that we should be doing. It's no different when we come to the bible. It may sound harsh, but it's true: one of the rarest things out there these days is an honest-to-goodness biblical literalist. You've probably heard many people say, "I take the bible literally." It sounds nice, and it sounds like they are very observant and obeying of the scriptures. There's just one little bitty problem. Despite what anyone says, no one ever really takes the bible fully literally; no one does absolutely everything there. It's human nature to pick-and-choose what we follow and what we do not, what we emphasize and what we decide to leave in the background, just like all those things we do with our health. I lift myself up as a prime example. Do any of us literally forgive one another seventy-seven times seven times like Jesus said? I can't say I do. No, if you're like me, eventually our patience runs a little thin, and we walk away from those who keep offending us. In that way, many people will take this passage of Jesus and pick and choose what to follow and what to leave behind. It's a human thing to do, but we also need to see why we do it.

If we consistently neglect a part of the Gospel, we lift up a counterfeit gospel which hurts the real Gospel. Like the copy of a baseball card, it may look like riches, but it's actually worthless. And that's a big problem. The bible isn't considered "good news" anymore with counterfeit gospels; it easily becomes hijacked to fit an agenda. I would challenge that this Gospel Jesus preaches most people these days aren't that accustomed to or all that interested in, no matter what they say. This one preached by Jesus Christ is a gospel of radical freedom, a freedom from fear, from oppression, from hate, and an introduction to the goodness of the Eternal God on this green earth. This is true life.

For example, Christians can get too focused on the "freeing the captives" piece at all costs while neglecting the rest; when you do, the whole thing gets out of whack. There was a story running around the Internet lately that made many of my Christian brothers and sisters shake their heads in disbelief. A 17-year old waiter was excited to receive what looked like a \$20 bill for his services to a family, though when he picked it up and opened it, it was an advertisement for reading the bible. "Want something more valuable than money? Have a relationship with Jesus Christ!" What seems like good intentions fails in its follow-through. As this young man told a local news outlet, he's working seven days a week to pay off a big car debt and to get himself through school, not to mention the daily bills that he has to face. To get \$20 is quite the awesome tip, but he was tricked. He didn't even get any real tip for his hard work. Put yourself in this young man's position. How would you feel? I would feel swindled, and that not only does damage to him, it does damage to the Gospel. It makes all of us Christians look bad. Does this make disciples of Jesus Christ? No, it's nothing more than a crafty trick. This is not sharing the Gospel; this is peddling goods, which only sets people off and pushes them away from the true power of the Gospel.

This is cheap, and it saddens me that this is what the Gospel has become: something to be sold, not lovingly offered as something meaningful, from the heart.

Then there's the other form of the Gospel, the Gospel that uses Christ's name for self-gain. This Gospel I hear preached this day in the wider world is no good news but old news of easier human nature preached in Jesus' name. This is a gospel of enormous hatred, of anger, of oppression, and a lot of it has to do with difference. The political realm uses God's name to further this false gospel, using words like "protection" and "freedom" as the shortsighted rationale. The end result is "it's about me and what I want." For example, the perception and treatment of Muslims in our country has taken a far downturn, with calls to remove them all from our borders. I see nowhere in the Gospel of Christ to justify this, frankly, racism burning in the background. If you have dark skin and you wear anything atypical to the mainstream, you are labeled with fear and have already become an enemy. Honestly, it makes me sick, and it abuses the Christ. This is the counterfeit Gospel of Fear, not the Gospel of Life, and it is not in the Lord's name.

The politics of fear have gone on long enough, and it's up to Christians to say so. This passage in Luke is the key. It invites freedom when fear wants to reject. It invites forgiveness in wrongdoing. It requires opening our eyes to the wider world and all its implications when we'd rather keep them closed to all the problems out there. This is the calling to be front and center, when the world would rather hide. It all starts with the ministry of Jesus Christ, the beginning that we see here. From this preaching in the synagogue, we have the mission. From there, the gospel takes form in two words Jesus invites over and again. The easy response is "worship me," but Jesus never says that in the Gospels. The harder response is "follow me," and there we find the Christ.

So, this is only the first piece in a two-piece puzzle. This is Jesus' announcement of the Gospel. Next Sunday is the response of the people. Spoiler alert: it's not the best, but I guarantee you it will teach us something. In the meantime, before and after the Broncos, celebrate the very nature of the Gospel, the Gospel that brings us new life, for it truly is "Good News!" Let the words of Christ dwell richly in your hearts and reflect on the freedom that God gives us. This freedom keeps teaching, keeps preaching, in the name of Christ for the benefit of all the captives, the blind, and the oppressed in this, the year of the Lord's favor. Thanks be to God. Amen and Amen.