

Trusting God and Ministering to All People as Christ Teaches Us in the Gospel

"In the Gospel"

The Fourth of Four Sermons on our Church Mission Statement

1 Timothy 6:6-19

Luke 16:19-31

Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green
September 29, 2013

Today's sermon is the last of a series of four sermons on the Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green mission statement. Let's review:

"**Trusting God, and...**" was our starting point on Week 1, and during that Sunday's sermon we experimented with substituting "trust in God" language for "belief in God" language. Whereas the Apostles Creed begins, "I *believe* in God the Father Almighty," the newest Confession of Faith in the Presbyterian Church USA (called "A Brief Statement of Faith") uses "trust in God" language: "We *trust* in the one, Triune God... We *trust* in Jesus Christ..." We also paid attention to the little word "and," acknowledging that while we place our ultimate trust in God, we are responsible parties in the relationship. We trust God *AND* we do what is ours to do. We trust God *AND* we do the next necessary thing. Trusting God is the beginning, not the end, of a life of faith.

On Week 2 we moved on to the second line, "**Ministering to All People.**" Considering Jesus' three parables about the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost (the prodigal) son, I suggested that "ministering to ALL people" was an ambitious goal for a church--even an impossible one--but that we shouldn't let that stop us! To narrow our ministry focus from "all" to "some" would not be faithful to or consistent with the life and the teachings of Jesus. For Christ followers, the word "all" means all, *all the time*.

On Week 3 I invited us to consider our role in the teaching/learning relationship "**As Christ Teaches Us.**" If we call Christ our teacher, then our job is to show up every day ready to learn. We looked at learnable moments in our scripture readings--at Israel's point of transition just before entering the Promised Land, and at the unjust steward's point of personal crisis when his dishonesty had been revealed. We asked ourselves whether our minds are mostly already made up on most of the things we consider important in life or whether we are, in fact, learning? Whether we are, in fact, willing to leave church on any given Sunday morning with our minds changed?

That brings us to today, the grand finale, the last three words of our mission statement which are very possibly the best three words: "**In the Gospel.**"

Trusting in God, and
ministering to all people
as Christ teaches us
in the Gospel.

Technically speaking, I suppose we don't really need these last three words. Everything that Christ teaches IS in the Gospel, so why do we have to say it? Isn't it implied?

To answer my own question (don't you love it when preachers do that??), yes, the word Gospel is implied in line 3 but in my humble opinion it deserves a line of its own.

Because Gospel means Good News!

Survey after survey shows that a rapidly growing segment of American society believes churches are judgmental, homophobic, and intolerant. The lunatic fringe pastor of the Westboro Baptist Church claims national headlines, contributing to the false impression that all Christians are like that. It is up to us to correct the record and control the message. What Christ teaches us is in the Gospel, and IS Gospel, meaning it is GOOD NEWS: "good news of great joy for all people" according to the angel Gabriel. If you recall the Christmas story there was nothing subtle about that announcement. A multitude of the heavenly hosts backed up those words of the angel Gabriel with a chorus that even Handel's Messiah couldn't do justice to.

Mission statements help us hone in on the important stuff, and these last three words of our mission statement, "in the Gospel," remind us that we are entrusted with a Message, a Story, a Book, that is *Gospel*, meaning good-news-of-great-joy-for-all-people!

If the message we convey isn't good, if it is hateful or cold or racist or classist or homophobic, then we've distorted the message. Likewise, if the time we spend in the church and the conversations we have and the work that we do wears us down more than it builds us up, then we are missing the proverbial boat.

Both *what we do* and *how we do it* should be Gospel. Both *what we say* and *how we say it* should be Gospel.

The Gospel has sharp, well defined edges. Living the Gospel will find us doing things we'd rather not do with people we might not otherwise choose to spend time with--but *good* is the dominant feature. We don't carry crosses for no good reason. We don't suffer for the sake of suffering, but for righteousness' sake. We do not turn the other cheek to invite further abuse but to stop the cycle of violence altogether. These are *good* things.

Our first scripture reading today from 1 Timothy comes to us from a time when the early church was beginning to realize that something they expected would happen right away was taking much longer than they had anticipated. The first Christians believed they were living in the "end times" and that Jesus would return any minute. You know how hard people can work when an emergency is on the horizon, right? So the emergency was the end of the world and the goal was to get the word of salvation in Jesus Christ out to as many people as quickly as possible.

But weeks passed, then months, then years. The world didn't end. The sense of urgency and the adrenaline it produces wore off, and the young churches across the Mediterranean were faced with the task of getting along with each other for the long haul. As they adapted to this dawning realization, words of wisdom from Paul to the younger Timothy summarize the salient points of the Gospel and offer advice on how to stay true to the Gospel for the long haul.

A huge distraction for early Christians seems to have been the lure of material riches. Not money but the love of money leads to all kinds of evil, the scripture says, so be sure to invest in the real treasures instead: "there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment..." so "pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight..." And there is that word "good" again. The good news of Jesus Christ calls us to develop good character traits in order to fight a *good* fight.

Meanwhile, those who are already wealthy are advised "to be rich in good works," hoping in God "who richly provides," thereby "storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation..."

The real treasures to focus on are what God gives and what we can do to return our thanks. Timothy must help his flock focus on what is genuinely good, and the passage ends with one of my all time favorite lines in scripture, "so that they may take hold of the life that really is life."

Friends, isn't this what we are all about here as Christians and as church members: "the life that really is life"? Isn't that what we are trying both to communicate and to demonstrate??

The early church needed to reset its clock. Jesus would come not immediately but "at the right time," whenever that was, so in the meantime the church needed to shift its focus to Gospel living.

You at the Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green have had to reset your clock a number of times in recent years. After Dr. Boger retired you expected to call a new pastor, settle in, and pick up easily where he left off. That didn't happen.

Reset the clock. Another interim period began, and in time your Designated Pastor Nominating Committee (DPNC) announced the selection of a candidate (who wasn't me). Information that can't be freely shared was discovered the following week, and

that candidate's name was withdrawn. Reset the clock again. The DPNC went back to the drawing board...

Meanwhile your sanctuary building started listing to the east. The sanctuary was closed and studied and reopened. Then came a hurricane and an earthquake. Reset the clocks again: the building had serious structural issues and wouldn't be useable again any time soon.

Well, you got your pastor finally (yay!) but important details about the sanctuary restoration and financing are yet to be resolved. Reset the clocks again.

With all of this recalculating, let's take our cues from the early church and focus as it did on *Gospel living*. Paul's words to Timothy's flock resonate with our situation. As we wait to reclaim our sanctuary and as we continually readjust our timetables, let's invest in the treasure that is of real value--compassion, endurance, godliness--which is the whole point in the first place.

Taking hold of "the life that really is life," we can demonstrate to ourselves and to the Town of Bloomfield that a tired and slightly beleaguered church is being renewed day by day by God's grace. Visitors will find their way here despite the fences and the buttressing and perhaps they will leave after worship saying to themselves, *I don't know how exactly to describe it but I felt the presence of God there with those people and I'm coming back.*

Our second reading today is Jesus's parable of the rich man and Lazarus. In this story Lazarus is an abjectly poor man whose body is covered in sores. The rich man in the parable is so hard hearted that not a crumb will he share from his storehouse with the poor wretch. When they both die, in the parable, tables are turned. Lazarus enjoys eternal bliss while the rich man endures eternal torment.

Remembering that this is a parable and not a factual description of heaven and hell nor of the rules for getting to either place, we interpret this parable in the context of Jesus' other teachings about money and about wealth in particular. An incorrect interpretation of the parable would be to say that poor people and sick people shouldn't worry or complain now because it will be great for them in heaven.

In fact, this parable slams rich people who don't share. It slams rich people who don't care. It slams first world Christians who can't spare a crumb from our storehouses to alleviate at least some of the suffering of the the third world whose name might as well be Lazarus.

The Good News of Jesus Christ is "the life that really is life," both now and forever. Since it is not for us to know or influence much about the forever part of things, we rightly turn our attention to the now.

Acts of justice and mercy are essential to living the Gospel. Gospel actions speak just as loudly as Gospel words. The poor man covered with sores deserves our loving attention now. And that is why I am proud to be your pastor, for you open the doors to your own community with home cooked meals and you stock shelves in the education building with food that you give to people who can't make ends meet otherwise, and you struggle and sacrifice to pay your pledge, which pays my salary, to lead this church in this present time.

Therefore, with "trusting" as our first word, and "Gospel" as our last word, let us consider ourselves launched into a new church season ready to grow in faithfulness together.

To the glory of God. Amen.

~The Rev. Ruth L. Boling, Pastor