

“Can the Gospel Be Good News Again?”

Gen. 1:1-5

John 1:9-10, 3:16-17

2 Cor. 4:5-7

1 Tim. 2:3-4

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Preface (addressed to Lisa, Bruce’s widow):

It is the minister’s task to preach good news that will bring joy and comfort to the hearts of people. But in a situation like the one in which you find yourself after such a tragic and sudden loss, it’s hard to find any words that can bring joy and comfort to you at this time. I wish I had the words that could lift the pain and sorrow from your heart today, but I don’t. All I can do is prayer that soon you will find comfort and know joy again.

Prayer:

O God, if it is possible, speak your Word through my words; and if this is not possible, forgive me for my inadequacies and send other messengers through whom your Word can be heard. Amen.

The word “gospel” means “good news.” It refers to the Christian message that God has done something wonderful for humanity in and through Jesus. It was the gospel that first called the church into being. And it is the gospel that gives the church its reason for being. In worship each Sunday we gather to hear the gospel message anew so that we can be reminded of its import for our lives and to shape our lives in accordance with it. As Christians we are also called upon to share this good news about what God has done through Jesus with others so that they too may rejoice in it and live their lives in its light. Sharing the gospel with others is called “evangelism,” from the Greek word for “gospel” (*euangelion*). The word “evangelical” is the adjective derived from this Greek word. Our message is called evangelical because it is about this good news.

But here it seems we have a big problem. For many people in our culture today, what the church stands for is anything but good news. Christianity has become identified in the minds of

many persons, especially in the younger generations, with a message that is now outdated and no longer relevant. For them, our message is no longer news at all; it's yesterday's news, a message that may have made sense to people in the ancient world or in the Middle Ages, but one that has lost all meaning and significance in the modern world. There are many reasons for this, and we can't discuss all of them here. I discussed one such reason a few weeks ago when I mentioned the fact that fundamentalist Christians have opposed modern science and what it has taught us about the natural world. You may recall the story of my biology professor in college who lost his faith in God once he became a scientist. His view of Christianity was formed by what he had been taught as a fundamentalist. Even after he had become an atheist, his understanding of what Christians believe was still that of a fundamentalist. It never occurred to my professor that there might be another, theologically more sophisticated interpretation of what Christians believe that does not pit religious faith against science. Fundamentalists have been so successful in shaping public perceptions of Christianity in this culture that even atheists are in agreement with them as to what it means to be a Christian. Usually the first question I am asked by non-religious people when they learn that I am a Christian (or even worse, a minister!) is whether this means I reject modern science. Among younger generations this is a widely held perception about Christians: We are anti-intellectual people who reject the most important scientific knowledge of our time.

A few weeks ago, those of us who attended our church retreat listened to my friend and colleague Damian Geddry, a marketing consultant who works with churches, explain why mainline Protestant churches like ours are struggling to get our message across. His answer was that we no longer speak the language of our culture. Moreover, we have lost control of the public perception of what Christianity is all about. Aside from being seen as anti-intellectual and anti-scientific, we are also seen as being intolerant of other religions and as trying to impose our

own religion upon everyone else. What *we* call “evangelism,” sharing the gospel with others, is heard as a threat that everybody who does not become a Christian is going to hell. Worse yet, we are seen as hateful bigots who oppress gay and trans people in the name of fidelity to God and the Bible. Consequently, what *we* call “good news” sounds to others like bad news, indeed. Even that venerable word “evangelical” has become so completely identified with extreme right-wing causes that its original meaning is virtually unknown today. As a result, the word is now useless to describe our message as good news. The sad fact is that the language of our inherited Christian tradition is no longer an effective means of communicating our message today.

For those of us in mainline Protestant churches, it comes as quite a shock to hear our religious heritage described in such negative terms. Since my own experience growing up in the United Methodist Church had nothing whatsoever to do with anti-intellectual and anti-scientific fundamentalism or religious intolerance or bigotry or oppression of minorities, it saddens me greatly that this is now a widely held perception of what Christianity stands for. But this only adds to our perplexity. How has this situation come about and, more importantly, what can we do about it? Is there any way that the gospel we preach can be heard again as good news?

As I’ve already indicated, fundamentalism bears the lion’s share of the responsibility for this situation. Beginning in the early twentieth century, fundamentalists opposed the most important developments in science and modern culture in the name of the Bible. Until the 1980s, they remained a marginal group in American society; but then they gained political power in order to oppose the teaching of evolution in public schools, the legalization of abortion, and gay rights. Their success in the political sphere meant that we in the mainline churches lost our public voice. Churches like ours became more peripheral to American culture in general. The result is that we now have to wage battle on two fronts: first, we have to articulate a compelling

alternative to the fundamentalist understanding of what it means to be a Christian; second, we have to speak to the non-religious people of our culture in a language that makes sense to them.

When we argue with fundamentalists about the meaning of Christian faith, we do so as Christians arguing with fellow Christians. For this reason, we speak the same language as they do, the language of the Bible and the Christian tradition. Yet the fundamentalists claim to have the Bible and historic Christianity on their side, whereas they accuse us of having betrayed the Bible and traditional Christian faith. The truth, rather, is that the fundamentalists operate with distorted views of both the Bible and the Christian tradition. What they mistakenly think is the message of the Bible is, in fact, a seventeenth-century interpretation of the Bible that has been frozen in time. Instead of adapting to modern culture and trying to find an authentic contemporary formulation of the gospel that could speak to modern persons in terms that make sense of their experience of life, they insist that true faith requires us to sacrifice our intellects in order to believe as seventeenth-century Christians did before the advent of the modern world, that is, before science and the historical-critical method of biblical study forever altered our inherited ways of thinking. For this reason, fundamentalism represents an extreme form of traditionalism, which is a confusion of the gospel with a particular historical expression of it. By contrast, mainline Protestants have long realized that the gospel is never to be identified with any particular historical expression of it; and, precisely for this reason, the gospel can be expressed in new and non-traditional ways that are meaningful to people today. The church's tradition is not static, but dynamic, ever lending itself to new formulations of the gospel message for new times.

Tradition means that which has been handed down to us from the past. The Christian tradition is how the gospel has been handed down to us from the first Christians who knew Jesus personally and who bore their testimony to others of how God had acted upon them through him.

These first Christians were Jews, and they had inherited the Jewish tradition which includes what we call the Old Testament. But in the light of their encounter with Jesus and what he meant to them, they modified their understanding of this inherited Jewish tradition in significant ways. They set aside the authority of the Torah, the law of Moses. Moreover, they reached out to non-Jews and sought to express the meaning of the gospel in ways that could make sense to people who were not immersed in Jewish scriptures and traditions. And though they made major departures from their received Jewish tradition, they believed they were being faithful to its core.

At the time of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, Protestants broke with the Roman Catholic tradition in which they had been raised. Whereas the Catholics claimed that there was a complete identity between the gospel and their own tradition, the Protestants disputed this claim. Consequently, Protestants set aside the authority of the Catholic tradition and returned to the Bible in order to learn anew what the New Testament teaches about the gospel. In the five centuries since the Reformation, we Protestants have developed our own traditions. If we don't want to make the same mistake that we accused Catholics of making in the sixteenth century, then we must always be ready to test our Protestant traditions to see if they continue to be adequate vessels for communicating the gospel to the present generation.

Whereas traditionalism is unthinking adherence to whatever has been handed down from the past, a living and vital tradition is always ready to adapt itself to new circumstances on behalf of the gospel it transmits. As a famous historian of Christianity once put it, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living; but tradition, in the sense of a creative, dynamic tradition, carries on the living faith of the dead, of those who went before us. John Calvin, the most important Protestant Reformer after Martin Luther, had this to say about the Protestant approach to tradition: "Our constant endeavor is not only to hand on the tradition faithfully, but also to put it in the form we

think will prove best.” What Calvin means is this: our efforts to be faithful to the Christian tradition that we received from those who came before us must always include the willingness to revise the tradition for the sake of a faithful formulation of the gospel in our time. After all, revising the inherited Christian tradition is what the word “reformation” means: re-forming the tradition, forming it anew, improving upon it (“putting it in the form we think will prove best”).

Our response to fundamentalists, therefore, must be that they have a mistaken view of the relation of the gospel to tradition: in the name of fidelity to the gospel, they absolutize one form of the Christian tradition in which the gospel was previously transmitted. For us, however, the gospel is the treasure in clay jars of which Paul speaks in 2 Cor. 4:7, while the tradition consists of the clay jars in which this treasure is stored. For this reason, we believe it is not only possible but necessary to move this treasure from one clay jar to another as occasion demands. That is, as we seek to articulate the gospel in ever new situations, we do not confuse it with the ways it has been articulated in the past, whether in the ancient world, in the Middle Ages, in the seventeenth century, or even in the 1950s. The gospel can always be formulated afresh for new contexts.

This week I went to the two meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) that meet here at our church on Monday and Thursday evenings. I wanted to introduce myself and to invite everyone to attend our church. In doing so, I was very conscious of the fact that many of the people in A.A. are alienated from the churches for the reasons we discussed earlier. Yet A.A. is a spiritual program of recovery from alcoholism. Quite a few of their members describe themselves as being “spiritual but not religious.” That is to say, although they do not identify with organized or institutional forms of religion such as the churches, they are seeking to practice a contemporary form of spirituality because they recognize the utter necessity of living a spiritual life in order to stay sober. Between those two meetings I must have counted well over a hundred

and fifty people. That means that each week far more people are coming to our church buildings to practice an alternative contemporary form of spirituality than are coming to attend our services of Christian worship. This should tell us something important about what is going on in our culture today. It's not that the non-religious people have lost all interest in the spiritual life; it's only that they don't believe they are going to find what they are looking for in traditional religion. But if you take a close look at A.A. you may notice that its "twelve steps," its principles for living a spiritual life in recovery, are basically a secularized reformulation of teachings found in the New Testament. So, the spiritual foundation of A.A. is not really all that different from the spiritual foundation of our Christian churches. Nonetheless, when introducing myself to the A.A. groups this week, I made a point of emphasizing that Christ Church by the Sea is not like those churches that many of the members of A.A. probably have already rejected. I stressed that anyone is welcome to come to our church, even if they don't identify themselves as Christian. I explained that we don't throw stones at persons who have doubts or questions about God and that no one is condemned on account of sexual orientation or gender identity. You see, I knew that at the outset I needed to knock down all the stereotypes that must have gone through their minds the minute I introduced myself to them as this church's new minister.

When I stand up in this pulpit each Sunday, preaching the gospel is a relatively easy task because as people of the church we share a common Christian language based on the Bible, the Christian tradition, the hymnal, and our regular experience of worshiping together. But after visiting those two A.A. groups, I asked myself what it might be like to proclaim the Christian message in non-traditional terms to people who aren't at home in the traditional language of the Bible and the church. It would be a daunting task, but just imagine how any of us might share our good news about God and Jesus with persons who are unchurched or no-longer churched.

We would need to do some translation of traditional terms like “salvation” in order to clarify in somebody else’s terms what we mean by salvation. Maybe even the word “God” would need to be translated in other language so that people could understand what we mean when we speak of God. Many of the people in A.A. use the term “higher power” instead of “God.” And maybe I’d have to avoid mentioning the name of Jesus for a while, too. At the risk of oversimplifying the gospel by attempting to translate it into a non-traditional idiom so that it might be understood as good news by people who call themselves “spiritual but not religious,” let me take this stab at it.

Recall the passage that was read from Genesis. In the beginning God distinguished light from darkness. In the Gospel of John, the light that shone in Jesus is identified with the light that is already illuminating every person so long as they are not choosing to live in darkness. In both John’s Gospel and Second Corinthians, the light of creation is equated with the light of salvation. In John’s Gospel, God is said to love the world which is why God sent Jesus, not to condemn the world but to save it. Finally, in First Timothy God is said to desire the salvation of every person by bringing everyone to the knowledge of the most profound truth about their lives. So, what might a “spiritual but not religious” translation of these biblical passages sound like?

If I were preaching at an A.A. meeting, I would say to those assembled: Your higher power is none other than the awesome power that brought this amazing universe into being and brought you into being as a special part of this amazing universe. This awesome power that brings forth all things is loving. This awesome loving power is the spiritual light that illuminates our lives, yours and mine. This spiritual light is already dwelling inside each one of us, but often we turn away from it and fall into addictions such as alcoholism, thereby smothering the light of our lives but never extinguishing it completely. For it is always there, waiting to be rekindled so that we can live again in the light of day and not stumble in the darkness anymore. When we



live in darkness, we cannot see and so we lose our way. That's when we try to rely on our power and lose contact with our higher power. This is not said to shame you. But after losing our way by living in the darkness, our awesome and loving higher power sent a messenger to seek us out and find us, so that we would not be lost in darkness forever. It is not important that you know the name of this messenger for now. Perhaps at some later date you will learn the messenger's name. All you need to understand is that the light brought by the messenger is the same light that illuminates everything in your higher power's amazing world, including you. Your higher power wants you to know this truth, for in this truth lies your ultimate well being and happiness, your deepest fulfillment as a human being. This spiritual path is your way, your truth, and your life. Accept it. Accept it as the gift of your higher power to you out of pure love for you. Don't do anything at all, just accept it. You can't earn it in any case, so just accept it. And then live, one day at a time, out of the knowledge that your higher power has given you the greatest gift of all: you have received back your very life that you alone are meant to live and for which you were brought forth into this amazing world by your higher power. Accept it, and be thankful.

As I said, I'm just taking a stab at what it might mean to translate our gospel into terms that other people could possibly be able to hear today as good news. This is merely an experiment, a first try, not a finished product. And yet, I think those of us in the mainline, non-fundamentalist churches are going to have to risk such experiments at translating our message into non-traditional language if our gospel is ever to be heard again as good news in this culture. At one and the same time as we must strive to reclaim the center of the Christian tradition from the fundamentalist distortions of it, we must also try to reach the unchurched and the no-longer churched in a way that will make sense to them. It's a challenging double-sided task, but a necessary one if we are to recapture the heart of the gospel as God's good news for all people.

I know that my friend Bruce completely shared my belief in the utter necessity of these two tasks. He was sickened by the way the fundamentalists had defined what it means to be a Christian for people in our culture today, whether Christians or non-Christians. Moreover, he painfully knew that many people are alienated from the churches because of this fundamentalist distortion of authentic Christian faith. It is to them, he believed, that we must try to address the gospel message afresh, since they have been the victims and the casualties of fundamentalism's anti-intellectualism, intolerance, bigotry, and oppression. That's one reason why Bruce was so interested in our congregation. He saw here the possibilities of a non-fundamentalist church willing to reach out to those who most need to hear God's good news: the marginalized, the oppressed, the abused, the hurt, the shamed, the questioning, the doubting, the despairing, and the forgotten. Can the gospel be good news again? Bruce would say an emphatic "Yes," provided, of course, that we Christians get our theological and ethical priorities straight, preach our message boldly even if in non-traditional terms, love others without reservation, and show the world through our own example what it means to live out of the gospel of God's love. I had looked forward to thinking through these challenges in regular conversation with Bruce since he was such a good listener and a thoughtful person. And though he won't be here to share in this task with us, he will continue to inspire me as I do my best to get a hearing for the gospel as good news again in our culture. Bruce will be my silent conversation partner, encouraging and urging me on every step of the way. I will imagine the conversations we might have had as I face this challenge. And when I stumble or feel uncertain, or even doubt whether the gospel can ever really be good news again, I expect I'll hear Bruce's quiet but sturdy voice, confidently assuring me with that knowing look in his eyes, "Yes, Paul, it really is possible. You know it is. Now back get to work. There's so much work to do. And if you don't do it, who will?"

