

*The Proclamation of the Gospel
for the
Salvation of Humankind*

*Summer Series on the
Great Ends of the Church*

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
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June 16, 2019

Acts 10:34-48

³⁴Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. ³⁷That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: ³⁸how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and

in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; ⁴⁰but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴²He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

⁴⁴While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. ⁴⁵The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, ⁴⁶for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, ⁴⁷“Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” ⁴⁸So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

What makes something a church? Maybe when I ask that question the old Avery and Marsh Sunday school hymn pops into your head - the church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is the people. That is a helpful sentiment in considering what the church is not, but maybe not a good way to think about what the church actually is, or even what needs to be present to be able to call something a church.

We know that churches all look different, and act differently, that different kinds of very legitimate churches can interpret passages of scripture very differently, worship differently, do different kinds of mission, and even use different language to describe faith in God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit - and it is even possible for all of those things to be different and for all of those different churches to still all even be Presbyterian.

Fredrick Buchner's definition of the church, aptly reminds us that when we talk about church, we can be describing the visible church or what we call the invisible church. He writes:

“The visible church is all the people who get together from time to time in God's name. Anybody can find out who they are by going to church to look. The invisible church is all the people God uses for his hands and feet in the world. Nobody can find out who they are except God. Think of them as two circles. The optimist says they are concentric. The cynic says they don't even touch. The realist says they occasionally overlap.”¹

It is in our hope to describe those places where the visible and invisible church overlap, that for over 100 years Presbyterians have drawn upon a list of six things that are the essential purposes and functions of the church - the great ends of the church, we call them. Formally introduced in the version we have of them today around 1910, they find their roots both in the language of the Westminster Confession of Faith - our primary confession of faith as American Presbyterians up until the 1960's, but certainly as well reminiscent of what John Calvin described as the marks of the true church - those being where the word of God is rightly proclaimed and heard and the sacraments rightly administered.

¹ Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC's of Faith. Frederick Buechner. 2004

Each week for the next six weeks we will be reflecting together on one of these great ends - and you can find all six of them in the worship notes in your bulletin:

the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of human kind,
the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God,
the maintenance of divine worship,
the preservation of the truth,
the promotion of social righteousness and
the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

Hopefully our series will not be a moment for us to determine together which ones of these we are doing particularly well, which ones we need to work a little harder on, which ones might take priority over another, or even which ones are each of our favorites.

Rather, each of these ends articulates the very best of who the church is called to be, and as we continue to try to do this church thing together - visible and invisible - we use them as guides for what should be essential in our life and work together. And we will see I am sure, that none of them can be taken in isolation, and in any moment the church can and should be accomplishing more than one of these at a time.

This work to sort out the overlaps between the visible church or the invisible church, or the difference between the true church from the church that has lost its way, or maybe even the church that is following the Spirit of God into a new way, is 2000 year old work, even if the great ends are only 100 years old.

In fact our story from the Acts of the Apostle's this morning reminds us that this work began with Jesus' own disciples before a single foundation for a church building was ever laid.

Peter - the rock on whom Jesus declared he would build his church - has found his way to the home of the Gentile Cornelius in the city of Joppa. Just prior to this visit Peter has had a vision - and while it might sound like a silly or strange vision to us, it was actually an earth shattering one for Peter - for he dreamed that

he saw a giant sheet of some sort descending down from heaven held up on the four corners, with a variety of unclean animals upon it, such as shellfish and reptiles, and bird, and heard a voice telling him to kill them and eat them. A voice and a vision telling him that as an observant Jew it was not just okay for him to not adhere to the dietary laws of the Old Testament, but that God was about to do something that would make it necessary for all of those rules to change.

In writing on the significance of this vision for Peter, and likely for the Jewish readers of the Book of Acts, Barbara Brown Taylor writes - “I wish there were some way we could understand how important dietary law has been to the people of Israel. Imagine anything that for you, is the dividing line between Christians and other people - the one thing that makes us who we are, that is not negotiable, that we cannot let slide without letting slide our whole identity as people of God. And when you have figured out what that is, get ready to let it go, because that is what Peter did. God gave him a vision that changed everything he had ever believed about who he was and how he was supposed to live.”²

It is after that vision and on his way to preach the sermon that was our reading for this morning to a house full of non-Jews, that Peter formulates an entirely new way to describe the Good News of the Gospel - that maybe Jesus’ message was not just for Jews but for Gentiles as well. Peter has no script for a sermon like that. He has no scripture passage upon which he can draw - but somehow within himself he finds the words to declare and proclaim the Gospel for the salvation of all humankind for the very first time.

The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind - the first of the great ends of the church. President of Austin Theological Seminary, Ted Wardlaw says that this first great end is too wordy and could just as easily be summarized as “Good News R Us.”

A good friend, who is the preaching professor at the seminary where Joshua and I worked in Egypt, introduced me to a sermon writing technique that she learned as a seminary student and that she was trying to introduce into the Egyptian Church - called the four page sermon. Now this is not a guide for how long to preach - though I am personally of the mind that anything that needs to be said in a

² Barbara Brown Taylor. Bread of Angels. Cowley Publications. 1997

sermon probably can be said in 4 pages. But the four page sermon breaks down what should be included in every good sermon - the first page addresses the problems in the scripture passage, the second page addresses a similar problem in our world today, page three illuminates the Good News of the Gospel in that same passage, and the fourth and final page reminds the community of the Good News and the Gospel in the world.

No matter how many preachers you ask how they get from the biblical text to sermon on any given Sunday, you will get just as many descriptions of the techniques, like my friend's, that are used to proclaim a message of good news that is both faithful to the biblical witness and relevant to the congregation that hears it.

As Presbyterians, we place such a high value on preaching-the proclamation of the Gospel-as a pastoral task that it is often the only thing that we ask a potential new pastor to show examples of in the interviewing and vetting process. Search committees visit potential pastors to hear them preach but never stalk them at a nursing home to see how they offer pastoral care. PNC's require sermon tapes and manuscripts but don't often ask too many questions about a new pastor's ability to respond to an email in a timely manner.

And that is okay, because preaching and providing a space and a time each week to hear the good news read and proclaimed is essential to our common life together as a church. It is okay that it is highly valued.

Preaching is a unique art and skill, and while all of us are very good at dissecting what it is that we liked or didn't like about one specific sermon, it is not something that as a particular form that we tend to talk a lot about what it a sermon is supposed to be doing - whether we like a particular sermon or not.

Sermons aren't necessarily supposed to make you feel good or bad, confirm everything you already thought or believed or dismantle everything you ever thought or believed. They aren't supposed to turn the world upside down or right a broken world.

What a sermon should always do - what it means to proclaim the Gospel week after week - is take a particular text and ask what that text through the movement of

the Holy Spirit is saying to a particular community of people in a particular moment in time.

Sometimes that might mean a word of encouragement, sometimes a word of challenge, maybe a call to action, or even a reminder that no matter what we do, the news is indeed good that through no act of our own, salvation is freely offered to all through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And sometimes it actually winds up meaning all of those things all at the same time to different hearers on the same Sunday morning.

Peter's sermon that day in the home of Cornelius would have meant different things to the different people who heard it - to the Jews who accompanied him, it was a radical transformation of understanding of who was called to be part of the body of Christ. And for the gentiles who were hearing this good news for the first time it was a message of radical grace and inclusion. For both a message of challenge to imagine the church together becoming something that no one had ever even talked about before. It was a message of change inspired by the unchanging and impartial love of God.

Will Willimon has reflected on what the implications are for being a church that is willing to let the Spirit of God direct our proclamation of the Gospel like it did for Peter and his new congregation that day in Joppa.

“If Jesus Christ is Lord, then the church has the adventurous task of penetrating new areas of his lordship, expecting surprises and new implications of the gospel which cannot be explained on any basis other than our Lord has shown us something we could not have seen on our own, even if we were looking only at Scripture. It means that we are continuing to penetrate the significance of the scriptural witness that Jesus Christ is Lord and to be faithful to that prodding. Faith, when it comes down to it, is often our breathless attempt to keep up with the redemptive activity of God, to keep asking ourselves, “What is God doing, where on earth is God going now?”³

To be a church that proclaims the gospel for the salvation of human kind, means more than just making sure there is always a preacher to stand in this pulpit.

³ William H. Willimon. Acts. John Knox Press. 1988

Sure a preacher - any one of the many that we have here - can stand in this pulpit and tell you what Gospel message we have discerned God wants us to hear on any given Sunday about where the Spirit is guiding us. But thank God that the church isn't just not a steeple, the church is also not its preacher.

Instead it means all of us asking ourselves over and over again how the work that we are doing together is connected to the Good News of salvation - work of education, and mission, of worship and study, of social justice and social witness, of building a reflection of the kingdom of heaven. For the whole church to proclaim the Good News in everything we say and do is to be open to the possibility that the ancient Gospel message might lead us to a place that the church has never been before, due to the essential foundational work of the church in a different way - maybe even to make that overlap between the visible and the invisible church a little bigger because we have gotten a little closer to not just proclaiming the Gospel, but living it as well. Amen.