

“Full Gospel”

Exodus 6:2-8 • Titus 2:11-14

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • April 26, 2015

What a weekend. Yesterday was our annual “Gospel Fest.” If you didn’t make it out here yesterday, you missed a great day of music! And what a joy to see our sanctuary full with people praising God. But it occurred to me that when we use the word “gospel,” people tend to get a little fuzzy about what it means. One of the musicians yesterday talked about the same thing. Many people hear the word “gospel,” and they think it refers to a certain style of music. Maybe that’s you. Or maybe when you hear the word gospel you think of one of the first four books of the New Testament – the Gospel of Luke, for example.

The word “gospel,” however, literally means good news. A festival, of course, is a celebration. So as the young man said yesterday, Gospel Fest is our celebration of good news. The question, then, is what exactly *is* the good news? My professor would say, “when you read the Bible, ask yourself ‘what is the *surprising*’ good news?” I think the Apostle Paul, in his letter to Titus, summarizes the surprising good news very well. He says, “the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation.”

What makes this *surprising* good news? It’s the word “grace.” There are three related theological words that every one of us needs to know – justice, mercy, and grace – and here’s the way to remember them. Justice is getting what you deserve. When we talk about a criminal getting justice, we mean that he gets the punishment that he deserves. Sometimes you will hear people out protesting and they will often demand justice. Let me tell you, though, when it comes to God the last thing you want is justice. You don’t want what you deserve. Trust me. When you join the church you are asked a series of questions and the first one is, “Do you acknowledge yourself to be a sinner in the sight of God, justly deserving his displeasure?” What we deserve is eternal punishment. Show of hands, how many people want justice?

I’m not really interested in justice. What I want is *mercy*. Mercy means NOT getting the punishment you deserve. In little league baseball they have what’s called the “mercy rule,” which says that if one team is ahead by ten runs after four innings they automatically win. The idea is to avoid embarrassing the losing team any more than they are already. They don’t get the score they deserve. They get mercy. So justice is getting the punishment you deserve and mercy is NOT getting the punishment you deserve. Grace is getting something you don’t deserve, which is why another word for grace is “gift.” Verse 14 tells us that Jesus “*gave* himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify” us. In other words, we get mercy because of grace. The gospel, the surprising good news, is that instead of punishment we get a restored relationship with God as a gift. “The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation.”

As we study the Bible, and this passage from Titus in particular, we discover that there are three main aspects to gospel that affect us. The gospel is Word-centered, mission-centered, and community-centered. So let’s look at each one of these.

First, the gospel is Word-centered. The Bible, the Word of God, is central to the gospel. The gospel is good news. It’s a message. The gospel IS the Word of God. Think back to Genesis 1. God spoke the universe into existence. It’s the Word of God that brings order out of chaos. Jesus healed people by His Word. In John 5:24 Jesus says, “whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.” The grace of God comes to us by His Word. We become Christians by hearing and responding in faith to the message of the gospel.

If the gospel is Word-centered, then it’s also mission-centered. If the gospel is a message, then that message must be proclaimed. Paul

writes about this in the tenth chapter of Romans. “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone proclaiming? And how are they to proclaim unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’” Tim Chester writes, “You cannot be committed to the gospel without being committed to proclaiming that gospel.” The good news is not a secret for us to keep. It’s meant to be shared.

This is what Paul means in today’s passage when he says we are to be “zealous for good works.” I don’t think he’s really talking about big evangelism campaigns or complex church programs. He’s talking about living the Christian life. Our mission statement for this church is “To know Christ and to make Christ known.” I’d like to propose that we modify it slightly to say, “*Living* to know Christ and to make Christ known.” Our mission is to live in such a way that we get to know Jesus better and we share that with our friends and neighbors.

That brings me to the third point. The gospel is always community-centered. The Bible never teaches that we are saved individually and then choose to join a church, as if it were some kind of club or support group. In today’s passage we see that God’s mission is to save a people for himself, “to purify for himself a people for his own possession.” The story of the Bible is the story of God fulfilling the promise he made in Exodus 6, “I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God.” Christianity is a team sport. This doesn’t fit well with our American rugged individualism. More and more we are trading community for individualism and we are becoming more isolated.

In 2007, *USA Today* reported that single-person homes accounted for 48% of all households in Manhattan. One of the most densely populated areas of our country and yet people are more alone than ever. The *American*

Sociological Review published a study showing that the average person only has two close friends, which is down from three in 1985, and 25% said they had no confidant, up from 10% twenty years ago. The number of adults who say they are lonely has doubled in the last twenty years to 40%.

Apparently our love of social media like Facebook isn’t helping. One study showed an inverse relationship between happiness and the time you spend on social media. In other words, the more time people spend on Facebook, the less happy they are. But God created us to be in community with other people. Even us introverts.

According to Genesis 2:18 God said, “it’s not good for man to be alone.” 1 John 4:12 says, “if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.” Verse after verse in the Bible make it clear that we are to be in community with one another. The Greek word *koinonia*, which is translated as community, appears 119 times in the New Testament. In fact, Jesus summarized all of God’s law as love God and love others. We were created to be in community with others in order to be in communion with God. At the center of both of those is the church. You and I can’t be in a loving, serving community with each other unless I’m in a loving, worshipful community with God. And I can’t be in that community with God unless you and I are in community. The Christian community is central to Christian identity.

What if we changed the way we think about church? What if, instead of thinking that it’s “Jesus and me” and then adding church into our already crowded lives, we see each other as part of our identity? What if we realized that, as we see in Titus, “Christ died for his people, and we are saved when by faith we become part of the people for whom Christ died?” Because as Tim Chester says, “The community formed *by* the gospel *for* the gospel is the community in which God dwells by his Spirit.” It’s when we’re together that we experience the presence of Christ. When we are in Christ-centered

communities, with deep, meaningful relationships, Jesus begins to transform us from the inside out.

So what can we do to truly live in that kind of community that shares the good news of Jesus? The first thing is to pray. You don't need any special skills or equipment. Just a willingness to spend time in conversation with God. Pray for the church. Pray for the people in the church. Many of you are part of our Prayer Partners ministry and so let me encourage you to keep praying every day for the people on your list. Second, try thinking about church as part of your identity instead of one responsibility among others. If you're not connected to the life of a church beyond

Sunday worship, find some way to get involved with people. And third, be intentional about making room in your life for new relationships, including people who don't have a relationship with Jesus. Ask God to show you the people in your life that He wants you to connect with. Invite a small group of people to begin meeting regularly to share life together in a way that "God talk" is common. This is not a program, it's community. Grab a cup of coffee. Have dinner. Go for a walk. Be creative. Look for every opportunity to be a loving presence in each other's lives, especially where people are lonely. A good place to start just might be your friends list on Facebook.

Amen