

BIBLE IN A YEAR

**THE READING PLAN IS TAKEN FROM
“READING GOD’S STORY: ONE-YEAR CHRONOLOGICAL PLAN” BY YOU VERSION**

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2018

STUDY AND COMMENTARY

BY

**DR. DOUG RESLER
SENIOR PASTOR
PARKER EVANGELICAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

FROM “THE INTERSECTION”©

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November 1, 2018

WAKE UP!

Readings for the day: Matthew 24, 25, Mark 13, Luke 21:5-38

Today Jesus gives us a reality check. In this world, we will suffer. There will be trials. There will be tribulation. The culture will reject God. Nations will defy God. Kings and rulers and authorities. Presidents and Congressional representatives and Supreme Court Justices will go their own way and do what is right in their own eyes. There will be wars. Violence. Natural disasters on a devastating scale. Drought. Famine. Disease will afflict so many. People will love injustice. People will love ungodliness. People will chase unrighteousness. They will call good “evil” and evil “good.” And these are just the beginning of the birth pangs of the new age.

In this confusing time, many will claim to speak for Jesus. They will claim to speak for God. They will push their own agendas. They will offer up their own ideas in place of God. They will promote selfishness and pride and narcissism. They will promote unrighteousness and lawlessness and unfettered freedom. They will sound so good that many will be led astray.

There will be abominations of desolation. Incredible acts of self-worship and idolatry that would make the ancient Canaanites blush. Worship will grow cold. Honoring God will become rare as people choose to do what feels good or what seems right in their own eyes. It will be like the days leading up to Noah. The days when the Judges reigned in Israel. Hatred. Rage. Violence. Pain. Suffering. All will become the norm as the world rebels against the authority of God.

Any of this sound familiar? Any of this feel familiar? What’s a Christian to do in the midst of it all? Endure to the end. Persevere in their faith. Cling to Jesus. The world will hate us. The world will seek to destroy us. The world will persecute us. Throw us into prison. Torture us and even kill us. They will restrict our rights. They will label preaching the gospel “hate speech.” They will make faithfulness to the law of God a hate crime. They will drag us into courts. They will put us on trial. They will do all they can to force us to abandon our faith. Things will get so bad that if they weren’t cut short – if God somehow delayed His return – no one would be saved.

But make no mistake...God will return! Things will get so bad even nature itself will feel the effect. The sun will darken. The moon refuse to shine. It will seem like the stars have fallen out of the sky. And just when it seems like we cannot go on, Jesus will appear. He will come on the clouds with great glory and power! A trumpet will sound and the angels will gather His family from the four corners of the earth. We do not know exactly when this day will come but we know it draws ever closer. Seemingly with every single breaking news story! Climate change. Political corruption. Racism and hatred. Economic upheaval globally. The world seemingly stands on the brink. Now more than ever.

So again, what’s a Christian to do? Stay wise. Be prepared. Make sure we stay about the work God has assigned to us. Caring for the least among us. The hungry and thirsty. The naked and ashamed. The sick and imprisoned. As we care for them, we care for Jesus. Seek the lost. Fulfill the Great Commission. Take the gospel to every tribe, tongue, and nation in the world. This is the work the Master has assigned to us and when He comes again, may He find us faithful!

November 2, 2018
BETRAYING JESUS

Readings for the day: Matthew 26:1-5, 14-35, Mark 14:1-2, 10-31, Luke 22:1-38, John 13

Election Day is drawing near and my social media feeds have erupted. The outrage in our country is boiling over. Battle lines are being drawn. Apocalyptic pronouncements are being made. Listening to the rhetoric, it feels like we are engaged in a civil war. And perhaps we are. As I scroll, I find myself thanking God for the diversity of friends He has given me. Friends from across the political spectrum. People of color from all walks of life. Friends who are rich and friends who are poor. Urban friends. Rural friends. Friends who are gay and straight. Most of these friends are Christian. Many, however, are not. And I love them all. But it's hard right now. Those friendships are being tested. The bonds of love are beginning to fray. Political views have become a litmus test for a person's character. Those that fail are not just different. They are evil. They are not just misguided. They are malevolent. They are not just mistaken. They are immoral.

Our politics have taken on a theological edge. Both sides claiming Jesus. Both sides believing He is on their side, defending their cause. Religious wars are always the most brutal because the battle is between good and evil with heaven and hell literally at stake.

But what if Jesus isn't taking sides? What if, instead, Jesus is calling us to take His side? What does that look like, you might ask? It looks like a Table where 12 disciples sit, eating a meal together. James and John are there. Two guys who think they're better than everyone else. Simon the Zealot is there eyeing Levi the tax collector. And Judas. The betrayer. The man who was just paid 30 pieces of silver to hand Jesus over. What a crew! The differences could not be more stark! The divisions more pronounced! And yet what does Jesus do? "He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him." (John 13:4-5) "He took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Matthew 26:26-28) If the Table of Jesus was large enough to include even His betrayer, could not our tables also be set for those who might disagree with us politically?

Does this mean we gloss over or ignore or withdraw from the political debate? Of course not! Jesus wasn't killed for His love. He was killed because He was politically dangerous. We must defend the cause of the widow and orphan, alien and stranger, unborn and oppressed. We must lift up the poor. Come alongside the hurting and the wounded and abused. We must put an end to violence in our local communities. We cannot tolerate corruption or make excuses for the immorality of our leaders. We have to demand more. More from them. More from one another. More from ourselves.

Friends, we betray Jesus when we attempt to co-opt Him for our cause. The reality is all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Even our righteousness is like filthy rags to Him. Only God is holy. Only God is just. Only God is merciful. And faithfulness to God means following His example. Washing the feet of those who disagree. Serving others irrespective of their political beliefs. Loving our enemies, even on Twitter. This is what it means to be on the side of Jesus.

November 3, 2018
THE SUPERNATURAL POWER OF UNITY

Readings for the day: John 14-17

“The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.” (John 17:22-23)

There is power in unity. There is power when God’s people abide in Him. There is power when the Holy Spirit comes upon us. This power is not our own. It is a divine power. Tearing down every stronghold and every high thing that sets itself up against the knowledge of God. Tearing down every dividing wall of hostility that stands between us and God, us and each other. It is the power of salvation for all who believe. It’s a power that regenerates hearts. Justifies our very being. Sanctifies our lives. It is a power to make those orphaned by sin into children of the Most High. This is the power of God.

Jesus knew this power. Jesus drew on this power. Jesus understood this power. He lived in close, deep, intimate communion with His Father His entire life and He drew on this power constantly to heal, forgive, cast out demons, calm storms. He drew on this power when He multiplied the loaves and fishes and turned water into wine. He drew on this power when He suffered. Died. And this same power was at work when He was raised from the dead.

This is the power Jesus offers to those who follow Him. Throughout His farewell discourse in John 14-17, Jesus refers constantly to the unity He has with the Father and the unity desires to have with His people.

If you had known me, you would have known my Father also.

Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?

I will ask the Father, and he will give you...the Spirit of truth...You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.

I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.

In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.

I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 14:7, 10, 16-18, 20, 23, 15:5)

The gift Jesus offers us in Himself is beyond comprehension. He literally offers us the same power that created the universe. The same power that raised the dead. The same power that will one day bring all things together and make all things new. This same power is available to us through our relationship with Christ and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. This is why no weapon that is formed against us can stand! This is why no flaming arrows of the evil one can pierce the shield of faith! This is why we have nothing to fear! Because we abide in the Vine! We stand on the Rock! We drink from fountains of Living Water!

But what does union with Christ look like? Agreement. Submission. Surrender. It requires us to take our lives. All our thoughts. All our words. All our desires and align them with Jesus. Make His will our own. Allow His Spirit to determine what is True and Noble and Right rather than continuing to do what is right in our own eyes.

As we draw close to Jesus, we will find ourselves drawing close to one another as well. The Body of Christ will discover a collective power in its unity that will make a huge impact on the world. I firmly believe this is the secret to the revival taking place in Ethiopia, South Sudan, Uganda, and Djibouti. Over 4,000 churches have been planted. Over 570,000 lost people have been saved. God is changing the landscape in places like Gojo, Dire Dawa, and Borena. He is changing the landscape in Torit, South Sudan and in northern Uganda. He is just getting started in Djibouti and will move into Somalia in the next few years. All because believers in these regions have put aside their differences and come together as one in Christ. Does this mean they agree on everything? Absolutely not! Unity is not the same as unanimity! No, their unity comes from a deeper source. A spiritual source. A well that never runs dry. Their common faith in Christ!

I love the words of Psalm 133. How good it is when brothers and sisters dwell together in unity! It is like precious oil that overflows! Dew that drenches the mountains, bringing new life! There God commands His blessing...life evermore! In these fractured and divided times, the church has a great opportunity to show the world the power of the gospel in our unity with Christ and each other! May we answer the call of Jesus' prayer!

November 5, 2018
THE HUMANITY OF JESUS

Readings for the day: Matthew 26:36-75, Mark 14:32-72, Luke 22:39-71, John 18:1-27

There is nothing more revealing about the humanity of Jesus than His time in the Garden of Gethsemane. Sorrowful and troubled. His soul in great distress. In agony, He weeps. His anxiety is so high, He sweats great drops of blood. Some theologians speculate that what Jesus was experiencing in this moment was the withdrawal of the Holy Spirit. The withdrawal of the Father's abiding presence as He begins to take on His shoulders the full weight of human sin. The dark reality of what He is about to suffer hits Him with full force. He begs the Father to take the cup away. But the Father is committed to this course of action. The Cross awaits the Messiah.

The disciples flee. All their hopes are dashed as Jesus commands them to put away their swords. Their secret dreams of an uprising that would overthrow the Romans and re-establish the Kingdom of God on earth come to an end when Jesus heals the wounded soldier. One can imagine their bitter disappointment when Jesus DOESN'T call on legions of angels to fight at His side. So they abandon Him. They finally see where all this headed and it doesn't look good.

But Peter isn't quite ready to give up. He follows at a distance. Maybe waiting for an 11th hour miracle that would justify the last three years of his life. Has it all been a waste? Have all the sacrifices he's made been for naught? Leaving his business? His home? His family? So he sits in the courtyard of the high priest hoping to hear news of the verdict. A servant girl sees him. He denies knowing Jesus and gruffly moves away to the entrance. She follows. Again, he denies knowing Jesus. A crowd has now gathered. Finally, he lets out a curse and swears he has never been with the man. In that moment, Jesus turns and looks at him. Peter sees His Lord on His knees being brutally beaten by the Romans. The religious elite jeering and cursing and spitting on Him. Peter is utterly broken. This is really happening. All hope is truly lost.

I've often wondered what Jesus must have felt in that moment as well. His most faithful disciple. The one He loved perhaps more than any of the others. The man He had poured so much of His life into over the last three years abandoning Him. Betraying Him. Denying Him. Though expected, it must have cut Him deeply. Jesus is now truly all alone. His followers are all gone. The Spirit has withdrawn His presence. The angels are no longer at His side. He must face His suffering alone. He has been forsaken. And this is just the beginning. It is the Father's will that He drink this cup to its dregs in order to save us from our sins.

"Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted...Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them." (Hebrews 2:17-18, 7:25)

November 6, 2018
VIVA LA REVOLUTION!

Readings for the day: Matthew 27:1-31, Mark 15:1-20, Luke 23:1-25, John 18:28-40, 19:1-16

Barabbas has always fascinated me. I used to picture him as a common criminal. A wild-eyed murderer with crazy hair. Someone who was probably insane. I could never understand why the people would willingly exchange Jesus for this nut job. Why put a violent criminal back on the streets? Why invite this kind of danger back into the community? Were they truly that angry with Jesus?

But then I began to read a little deeper. Barabbas was not an ordinary criminal. He was a leader of an insurrection. A revolution in the city that threatened to overthrow Rome. As such, he may have been well-known. Famous. Admired for his zeal. Revolutionaries are always popular with the people. Yes, they may be violent. Yes, they may kill for the sake of the cause. But history is written by the victors and one man's murderer is another's freedom fighter.

Furthermore, I believe the people had become that disenchanted with Jesus. We simply cannot overstate their hope that He would be the one to overthrow the Romans. Cleanse the Temple. Purify the priesthood. Get rid of the hated Herodian dynasty. And re-establish the kingdom. Sit on David's throne. Reign and rule over a free, independent, powerful nation of Israel. As such, Jesus' words to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world..." (John 18:36) were brutally disappointing. To adapt that famous line from William Congreve, "Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, Nor hell a fury like a woman (or a people) scorned." When Jesus failed them, the people turned on Him. Their love turned to hatred. Their devotion to rage. Their fury burned white-hot and, when given an opportunity to exchange Him for another, - a revolutionary who understood their cause - they jumped at the chance.

Sadly, we continue to make the same mistake. We simply cannot seem to put aside our fascination with those who would use the tools of violence and anger and hatred to bring about a revolution. The ends justify the means in our minds. So we attach ourselves to Barabbas' of all stripes only to be let down over and over again. And once the revolutionary fires burn out - as they always do - we find ourselves worse off than before. The darkness creeps in. The despair deepens. Hopelessness settles into our hearts.

When will we understand? When will we grasp the full measure of what Jesus is saying? His Kingdom is not of this world! His ways are not our ways! His thoughts are not our thoughts! Our hope can be built on nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else than Jesus' blood and righteousness! He alone is our firm foundation! He alone is the Rock of our salvation! He alone is our sanctuary and fortress! Our refuge and strength! Our very present help in times of trouble! If we have faith in Him, we will not fear! Though the earth give way. Though the oceans roar. Though the mountains fall into the heart of the sea! Nations rage! The kingdoms of this earth come and go! Only God remains. He will not be moved. He will not slumber or sleep. He is the Lord of hosts. When He utters His voice, the earth melts.

Remember, Jesus could have called down legion upon legion of angels and laid waste to the Roman Empire. He could have called on the Heavenly Host to defeat all those who opposed Him. Not a single lash of the whip would have touched Him. Not a single blow would have landed unless He willed it to be so. Jesus chose to turn the other cheek. To let the violence and rage play itself out on His body. He took every stroke. He endured every blow. He willingly suffered every stripe. So that we might be healed. So death might be defeated. So evil might be crushed once and for all. This He did for us. And this He now calls us to do for others. May our engagement in this world look more like Jesus and less like Barabbas.

November 7, 2018
GOD-FORSAKEN

Readings for the day: Matthew 27:32-66, Mark 15:21-47, Luke 23:26-56, John 19:17-42, Psalms 22

There is nothing beautiful about the Cross. It stands unparalleled in human history as a horror. A terror. An act of unspeakable evil. The Cross is where we hung God. The Cross is where we murdered God. The Cross is where we executed God. Creation despising and rejecting her Creator. Humanity lynching her Savior. Sin having it's way. Satan rejoicing. His victory seemingly complete.

Jesus' suffering was unimaginable. After having been flogged and beaten. His flesh in tatters. His blood loss immense. Jesus is forced to shoulder a 300 lbs. Roman cross. (If He just carried the crossbeam – far more likely - it was still 100 lbs.) He carries it some two thousand feet up Golgotha where nails are driven into his hands and feet. They offer Him wine mixed with gall to numb the pain. He refuses. They strip Him naked so His humiliation and shame will be complete. Crowds gather to make a public spectacle of Him. Even the criminals being executed alongside Him take pleasure in His pain. Finally, He cries out, "My God, my God! Why have you forsaken Me?" Darkness falls. The ground shakes. The Temple curtain protecting the Holy of Holies is torn in two. Tombs are thrown open. The dead are raised. The natural order of things is thrown into chaos as the Author of Life dies.

Jesus didn't just suffer physically. It was existential. Ontological. Impacting his heart, mind, and soul as well. His cry of God-forsakenness reveals the depths of His pain. His body torn. His mind shattered. His heart utterly broken. His soul rent asunder. There is nothing that can compare to the agony He endured as He bore the sin of the world on His shoulders. He hung there alone. Forsaken by all who knew Him. All who loved Him. Even His Heavenly Father. Jesus hung between heaven and earth, making atonement for humanity in the ugliness of all her sin and satisfying the holy justice of God in all it's beautiful glory. A price had to be paid. God's righteous wrath had to be turned away. And Jesus – fully God and fully Man - was the only one who could do it.

What Jesus suffered on the Cross is a foretaste of hell. For those who wonder what hell is like, they need look no further than Jesus' crucifixion. It is truly terrifying. There is no escape. There is no hope. There is nothing redemptive or beautiful or pleasurable about it. It is awful. It is brutal. It is horrible. And it is just. It is what we deserve. Human beings are born sinners. Born rebellious. Born treasonous and seditious. Our hearts naturally oriented away from God. Our desires naturally opposed to God. Our loves naturally self-centered. There is nothing beautiful about sin. Nothing beautiful about evil. We are foolish to think otherwise.

God forbid we ever get comfortable with the Cross. God forbid we ever take for granted what Jesus had to endure. God forbid we despise His sacrifice on our behalf. Jesus suffered and died for my crimes. My wickedness. My sin. What He endured, I rightfully deserve. And it is good for my soul to sit and ponder the depth of my Savior's pain. It is good for my soul to sit and reflect on the unfathomable cost of my salvation. It is good for my soul to sit and contemplate how truly fierce and loyal and steadfast and unshakable is the love of God for me.

November 8, 2018
RESURRECTION

Readings for the day: Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20-21

Doubt. Fear. Astonishment. Confusion. Disbelief. This is the full range of emotions that swept the followers of Jesus that first Easter morning. No one – absolutely no one - was expecting a resurrection. They all believed it was over. Their hopes and dreams turned to dust. Some were returning home. Some were hiding out in fear. Some went to the tomb to mourn. All of them grieving in their own way.

It has been suggested over centuries that the disciples didn't know a dead body when they saw one. It has been suggested that Joseph and Nicodemus didn't realize Jesus was still alive. It has been suggested that Jesus merely swooned on the cross. Fainted. And in doing so, tricked the Roman soldiers – among the most brutal killers the world has ever known - into believing He was dead. It has been suggested that this same Jesus. Body broken. Incredibly weakened by blood loss. Was somehow able to roll the stone away from within the tomb and escape. That He then appeared to His followers and convinced them He was alive. Still others have repeated the fake news the chief priests tried to spread about Jesus' disciples - fishermen and tax collectors - somehow stealing His body in the dead of night when the Roman guards were asleep. (Something that rarely happened by the way since the punishment for falling asleep on your watch was death.)

The resurrection of Jesus Christ stands as the seminal event in human history. It demands attention. It requires reflection. One cannot dismiss it or ignore it or pretend it didn't happen. If Jesus was raised from the dead then we have to take Him seriously. We have to consider every word that He said. We have to grapple with the truth He proclaimed about a Kingdom not of this world and a God who loves the world and judges it with righteousness. We have to wrestle with what He has to say about the human condition. The sinful state of our hearts and our desperate need for forgiveness and grace. We have to listen to Him when He tells us how to live and repent of our stubborn, prideful, selfish ways. The resurrection validates everything about Jesus. His life. His teaching. His miracles. His suffering. His death. It is God's stamp of approval on unique identity Jesus claimed for Himself as the Son of God.

This is the truth that confronted the disciples. Jesus, whom they saw die, was now alive. They got to see the wounds in His hands, feet, and side. (Notice in John 20:20 how they all needed this evidence before believing...not just Thomas.) And if Jesus was raised from the dead. If death could not hold Jesus. If the grave could not keep Jesus. Then what did that mean for their lives? How would that change their future? They realized there was now no going back. No returning back to life as they knew it. No more fishing boats and tax booths. God was on the move. This gospel must be proclaimed! They were being given a great commission to carry this news to the ends of the earth!

2000 years later, we are still engaged in this same mission, friends! God is still moving! The news of the resurrection has yet to be proclaimed to every tribe, tongue and nation! Each new generation must come face to face with the Risen Christ! They must deal with the truth of His resurrection! He simply cannot and will not be denied!

November 9, 2018
CUT TO THE HEART

Readings for the day: Acts 1-4, Psalms 110

There is this great scene in *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* by C.S. Lewis where Eustace steals a bracelet and turns into a dragon. After initially enjoying the transformation, he soon realizes it is permanent and he is trapped with no hope of escape. He is terrified at the prospect and tries to cut the bracelet off to no avail. Then Aslan appears. The mighty lion who is the Christ-figure in the story. He asks Eustace if he wants to be free. Eustace shakes his head in an emphatic "Yes!" Aslan stretches out his claws and cuts him to the bone. Strips him naked. Lays him bare. The cut is painful. Deep. It goes all the way to the heart. And yet it is necessary for him to be set free.

I'm always reminded of that particular scene when I read the response of the people to Peter's sermon. Luke, the author of Acts, says they were "cut to the heart." The full weight of what they had done to Jesus hit them like a ton of bricks. They were heartbroken. They were devastated. And they asked Peter what they should do. "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38)

Repent. Literally an 180 degree turn in your life. A radical re-orientation of your heart away from the Kingdom of Self towards the Kingdom of God. A radical redirection of your desires. Whereas once you were prideful, arrogant, self-absorbed, greedy, filled with negativity and anger and lusts of all kinds. Those desires are now crucified with Christ and in exchange you receive love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and goodness and mercy. Repentance means a radical re-evaluation of your priorities. Whereas once focused on safety, security, and chasing personal happiness. Now you lay those aside in favor of generosity, service, and sacrifice for the sake of God's Kingdom. There is no middle ground. No keeping one eye on heaven while fixing the other here on earth. No standing with one foot in the kingdoms of this world and one foot in the Kingdom that is to come. Repentance represents a total commitment. A complete shift in one's allegiances and loyalties.

Baptism. The primary sign of this shift in allegiance takes place in baptism. Baptism is where we publicly declare our faith in Christ and align ourselves with His Kingdom. We proclaim to the world that we are no longer our own. We no longer serve ourselves. We no longer live according to the corrupt values of our sinful culture. We are in Christ. Our lives have now been taken up into His life. Our future is in His hands. Our resources are His to do with as He chooses. We are simply His servants. Sent out in His name to fulfill His purposes in this world.

Gift of the Holy Spirit. Thankfully, God doesn't send us alone. He doesn't send us ill-prepared. He doesn't send us out helpless or hopeless. He Himself goes with us. He gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit who comes and takes up residence in our hearts. He imparts all the gifts we need to succeed in Christ's service. He strengthens us for every battle. He encourages us in the face of every challenge. He gives us joy in every trial. He grants all the wisdom and understanding we need to make sense of His calling on our lives. The Holy Spirit is quite literally the greatest gift we could ever receive.

Repent. Be baptized. Receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is what it means to respond in faith to the work Christ has done on our behalf. Do you believe?

November 10, 2018
A CHURCH OF SUPERNATURAL POWER

Readings for the day: Acts 5-8

There is a new Reformation taking place. According to scholars like Philip Jenkins, the church of the 21st century will be traditional in its ethics, orthodox in its doctrine, supernatural in its power, and centered in the Global South. Africa will have over 1 billion Christians by 2050. Latin America over 650 million. Asia over 600 million. The growth of Christianity in North America will continue to slow to a crawl and will face steep decline in Europe. As the faces of Christianity change, one will expect the influence of theologians and pastors and ministry leaders from these areas of the world to begin to dominate the landscape. No longer will the theological tone be set by the Reformation of the 16th century in Western Europe but by the Reformation taking place in Ethiopia, Uganda, China, Nigeria, Brazil and Mexico. This new movement is decidedly Pentecostal. It is boldly Charismatic. The preaching of the gospel in these countries is often accompanied by signs and wonders and miracles. It all sounds very "New Testament" to me.

In our readings for today, we see signs and wonders all over the place. From the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira for lying to the Holy Spirit to the healings and casting out of demons by the Apostles at Solomon's Portico. Stephen, a man full of wisdom and the Holy Spirit, performing great wonders and signs as he preaches the gospel. And Philip driving out demons left and right. How awesome must it have been to be part of this movement in its earliest days? To see the miracles taking place. To watch as scores of people get saved on a daily basis. Worship services filled with new believers. Homes filled to overflowing with spiritual seekers. Everyone of one heart and one mind even in the face of persecution.

Why doesn't this happen in America? Why doesn't this happen in our local communities? What are we missing? What we are missing is desperation for God. A hunger and thirst for His righteousness. An overwhelming longing for His Kingdom. Affluence is a spiritual killer. It makes us soft and complacent. We have enough so we don't need God. We have doctors and nurses and medication and treatment so we don't need miraculous healing. We have psychologists and psychiatrists and an abundance of counselors to help us deal with our demons. (I am purposefully being a bit facetious here to make a point. Please don't take these words to mean I don't have the deepest appreciation for those who work in the medical field or am being dismissive of the complexities of mental illness.) We have plenty of food and clean water to drink. Warm homes to sleep in and closets full of clothes. We receive great education at the finest of schools. Our economy is the strongest in the world so everyone can have a job. What do we need God for? This is why Jesus Himself will say it is harder for a rich person to get into heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Basically it is impossible because we become so attached to the things of this world. Our primary concern becomes safety and comfort rather than the proclamation of the gospel. Our primary goal becomes taking care of ourselves first or those we love rather than the lost. We start walking by sight rather than by faith so is it really any wonder then that we don't see the signs and wonders and miracles of God?

Thankfully what is impossible for us is more than possible for God! And His great desire is for us to experience all the spiritual blessings He has stored up in heaven for His people. (Eph. 1:3) So the image I want to leave you with is Jesus standing out on the lake, having walked on water. You and I are sitting comfortably in our yachts and Jesus is beckoning to us. Calling us out. Calling us out of our comfort zones. Calling us out of our safe spaces. Calling us to leave behind our wealth and possessions. To come out of the gilded cages we find ourselves trapped in and go to him. Actually walk on water ourselves as we fix our eyes on Him. This is not an easy journey. Almost as soon as we leave the safety of our boats, we start to feel the waves rocking and rolling beneath us. We see the wind kick up and the clouds move in. The temptation is to run back to safety. Run back to what we know. Run back to what is comfortable and normal for us. But Jesus is insistent. He is relentless. His voice booms out over the waters. His voice rises above the storm. "Come to me!" He says. Let go of all you have. Unclench those fists. Relinquish your need for control. Come out to where I am and you will see My signs. My wonders. My miracles. For I am Faithful. I am True. I will not let you sink beneath the waves.

Will you go to Him?

November 12, 2018
GOD HATES RACISM

Readings for the day: Acts 9-11

I remember the first truly multicultural worship service I attended. It was in Chicago. In a Hispanic community called La Villita that is located within the larger African-American community of Lawndale. It was a violent place. Rival gangs running the streets. When kids came to youth group, they had to be picked up in vans with blacked out windows because they crossed gang lines. I was in college at the time and we sent a team to serve a local church in the community over Spring Break. We arrived on Saturday and attended worship on Sunday. That particular Sunday, they had done a pulpit swap with a local African-American church. So the preacher and choir were black. The congregation was mainly poor, immigrant Hispanics who only spoke Spanish. And our group was made up of privileged, white college students from Boulder, CO. We got to witness a miracle that day. As the preacher got rolling – as only African-American preachers can!!! - the translator tried his best to keep up. But as the sermon began to crescendo, this incredible thing happened. The translator sat down. The Spirit descended. I watched as everyone heard this man preach in their own language. It was clear that even the Spanish-speakers in our midst were tracking. It was like Pentecost. It was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.

God's plan was always to move beyond the confines of the Promised Land and the Jewish ethnic group to reach the Gentile nations. In fact, this was part of the initial promise God first gave to Abraham! In him, all the nations of the earth would be blessed! And it is precisely this promise that is being re-affirmed in the vision Peter receives from the Lord. What was once unclean is now clean. What was once unholy is now holy. What was once excluded is now included. The Gentiles who had been separated from God were now going to be grafted in. Those who were not God's people were now going to be part of God's people. Centuries of racial prejudice were erased in a moment as God sends Peter to Cornelius to lead him to saving faith. The dividing wall of hostility has been torn down. Now the gospel will go forth to the entire world. Every tribe. Every tongue. Every nation will have the opportunity to receive Christ. This is the heartbeat of the Great Commission, the underlying theme of the entire Book of Acts, and the main issue Paul will address in every single one of his letters. Jews and Gentiles living together as one family under God.

Friends, God hates racism. Hates racial segregation. Hates how His family has divided along racial lines. His desire is that all should be saved and not only come to a knowledge of His truth but then join together in authentic community as one family. This is not easy. Sunday morning is still one of the most segregated hours in our country. We have a very difficult time building friendships across racial/ethnic lines. We much prefer to gather with people who look like us, live like us, think like us. Sitting down with someone who comes from a radically different life experience is very challenging. We struggle to listen. We struggle to honor them. We struggle to communicate value and friendship because so often their perspective feels threatening to us. All this was true for the early Christians as well. The Jews who first came to faith could not imagine believing in Jesus without circumcision. Could not fathom following Christ without also following the Law. They had been taught for generations that Gentiles were unclean and unholy and to avoid contact with them at all costs. Now God was doing a new thing. Now Jews were being called to embrace Gentiles as their brothers and sisters. The Holy Spirit was being poured out in undeniable ways. How would they respond?

How do we respond? Over the years, I have been blessed with spiritual mentors and friends from a variety of ethnicities and social/economic backgrounds. I have spent time with the urban poor. Been in their homes. Listened to their stories. Heard their struggles. I have spent time in prisons and with ex-convicts who tell me how hard it is to reintegrate back into life after serving their time. The lack of jobs. The probation process. How easy it is to recitivate because at least the prison system is familiar. I have spent time with African-American friends who have helped me understand what it's like to have to grow up guarded and suspicious because you

cannot trust the justice system. I have spent time with Hispanic friends who've shared with me stories of racial animus that breaks my heart. I have spent time with Asian-American friends who tell me of the challenges they've faced as they transitioned from their home country to the USA. More recently, I've listened to Ethiopian refugees share their stories of what it's like to seek asylum in our country. It's overwhelming.

The gospel is designed by God to bring us together. It has divine power to tear down every stronghold, every wall, every division that keeps us apart. The gospel gives us the courage to honor one another in our differences. God delights in the diversity of His family. God's goal is not to make us all color-blind or erase our racial identities. The gospel does not turn us all into one homogeneous lump of clay. Rather it grounds our fundamental identity in Christ which in turn allows to celebrate the beauty and genius of the palette God used to create human beings in the first place! The goal of the gospel is not a post-racial community but one that is inclusive of all races, each with their own unique perspective and experience.

How do we get started? By simply reaching out. Being intentional. Engaging someone who is not like us in conversation. Listening more than speaking. Withholding the tendency we all have to judge someone else's experience or perceive it as a threat. Cultivating the humility to learn. Willingly relinquishing power and privilege in order to create a safe space for people to share. It's not easy but the gospel makes it possible. In fact, the gospel mandates it. Just ask Peter.:-)

November 13, 2018
FIRST MISSIONARIES

Readings for the day: Acts 12-14

It is amazing to read about Paul's first missionary journey. Coming on the heels of persecution in Jerusalem which cost James his life and put Peter in prison, the church in Antioch responds to the call of the Spirit to send out missionaries to proclaim the good news of the gospel. Barnabus and Paul are chosen after a lengthy time of prayer and fasting and worship. They travel from Antioch to Cyprus to Perga which is a gateway city to the region of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). From there, they hit the cities of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. All told, they travel around 1500 miles in about two years before returning to report the great news that many Gentiles are turning to faith in Jesus Christ!

Three things to note that will become paradigmatic for future missionary endeavors, including in our own day and age. First, the bold proclamation of the gospel. Paul was utterly convinced God had raised Jesus from the dead and that this was the fulfillment of all the promises given to Israel. Many have argued that Paul's conversion represented a radical break with his prior Pharisaism. On the contrary! Paul himself argues that the resurrection of Jesus is the fulfillment of all he believed. "And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus..." (Acts 13:32-33) Everything changed for Paul that day he met the Risen Christ outside of Damascus. He was confronted with the truth that everything he believed about Israel had now come true in Jesus Christ. Yahweh had indeed raised His Son from the dead in vindication of everything Jesus had taught. Far from being an enemy of the Jewish faith, Jesus was the fulfillment! And Paul's zealous passion for the faith of his fathers now would make him the greatest evangelist the world has ever known.

Second, the proclamation of the gospel was confirmed by signs and wonders. Wherever Barnabus and Paul went, the sick were healed. Demons were cast out. People were set free from oppression. Paul shows no fear in confronting powerful witch-doctors like Bar-Jesus. He calls down God's judgment on the man and strikes him blind. This was not an act of self-promotion. In fact, when the people of Lystra attempt to worship Paul and Barnabus because of the miracle they performed in making a lame man walk, they tore their garments. They refused to let it happen. They assured the people they were not gods but simply ordinary men serving the One True God, the maker of heaven and earth. No, the point of all the miracles and signs and wonders was to bring people to saving faith. To confirm the truth of the gospel they preached.

Finally, persecution. No matter where Paul and Barnabus went, they faced opposition. From the pagans in power like Bar-Jesus to the Jews who refused to receive their message. They were beaten. They were stoned. They were attacked and left for dead. The Word of God is a double-edged sword and it stirred the hearts of those who listened. Some received the good news with glad hearts and came to faith. Others perceived it as a threat and lashed out. There is no such thing as being neutral when it comes to Jesus!

Friends, this same dynamic is being played out the world over even today. My friends in Ethiopia, South Sudan, Uganda, and Djibouti all share similar testimonies. They boldly proclaim the gospel in villages, towns, and cities where it has never been heard. Their preaching is often accompanied by many signs and wonders and miracles. The sick are healed. The demon-oppressed set free. The dead are raised to new life. But these men and women face extreme persecution as well. Beaten. Stabbed. Shot. Imprisoned. Left for dead. Their families are attacked. Their livelihoods threatened. Some of them even lose their lives for the sake of the Kingdom. And yet, the "the Word of God continues to increase and multiply!" (Acts 12:24)

God is not done! Despite what you may or may not hear, He is still very much on the move! He will not rest or relent until the whole world hears the good news of the gospel! This is His will! This is His plan! And to this great end, He calls His church! This is the reason we exist! Not for ourselves but for the sake of the world! May we understand and embrace our calling to be missionaries in our communities and to the very ends of the earth!

November 14, 2018
REAL LIFE IN THE REAL CHURCH

Readings for the day: James 1-5

Real life in the real church is messy. The church of Jesus Christ – this side of heaven - is filled with sinful people who bring all kinds of baggage with them. In my experience as a pastor, hurting people tend to hurt people. Those who are in pain want everyone else to feel their pain. Broken people often try to break others without even realizing it. Life in this world is full of suffering. Trauma. Abuse. Heartbreak. We face trials of various kinds. Temptations around every corner. And we bring all that with us when we join a church.

It wasn't much different two thousand years ago. James, the brother of Jesus, was one of the key leaders in the church in Jerusalem as it was just getting started. He lived in a violent, turbulent time. The Jewish people were beginning to rise up against their Roman oppressors. Each rebellious movement was put down with greater force and greater violence. National unrest would finally break out in open war, resulting in the utter destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD. Throughout this time period, James pastored the church. He pastored a group of Jewish Christians who were trying to figure out how to live the Jesus Life in the midst of all this uncertainty and conflict. They faced trials and tribulations. They suffered tremendously under the Romans as well as the Jewish religious authorities. They were persecuted on every side. One would think such hardship would bring them together. Cause them to link arms against their common adversaries. Unfortunately, this was not the case. They gossiped about each other. Showed partiality. Divided themselves along economic lines. Like all of us, they struggled with doubts and fears. They struggled with anger and frustration. Too many of them resisted putting their faith into action. They fought over position and influence and power. They aligned themselves too closely with the world and its corrupt values. Sound familiar at all?

Too often our response as Christians is to leave the church. We get our feelings hurt. We experience deep wounds. We are disappointed. Let down. Expectations go unmet. Rather than humble ourselves before the Lord and engage in the hard work of forgiveness and reconciliation, we simply walk out the door. We think this solves our problem. We think this resolves our pain. But it only compounds our situation. We stall out spiritually. It's like we get stuck in an endless time loop. Never moving on until we actually do what Christ commands which is to leave our gift at the altar and first reconcile with our brothers and sisters. I've seen it so many times and it is heartbreaking.

What's the answer? Follow the biblical guidance from James. Consider it all joy when you face trials of various kinds. Trust God for wisdom to know how to handle each and every situation. Remain steadfast under trial. Be quick to listen and slow to speak. Be doers of the Word not just hearers. Show no partiality. Let Christ tame our tongues. Set our minds on heavenly wisdom which is pure, peaceful, gentle, open to reason and full of mercy. Humble ourselves before the Lord and each other so we will not quarrel or be driven by sinful desire. Live vulnerably before our brothers and sisters so we can receive prayer for healing and strength and be restored gently when we fall into sin. Do these things over the long haul and you will find yourself reflecting more and more the image of Christ. This is what the church ultimately is all about! It is the crucible of our sanctification. The very place where iron sharpens iron and one person sharpens another.

November 15, 2018

JUSTIFIED

Readings for the day: Galatians 1-3

I have often wondered about the Pharisees. Cast as Jesus' enemies throughout the four Gospels, they have been caricatured throughout Christian history in a variety of ways. Theologians have tended to flatten them out. Make them two-dimensional. Convenient straw men to argue the superiority of the gospel. Thankfully, more recent scholarship is treating them with far more respect. We are seeking to understand them on their own terms. See the world through their eyes. Let them speak for themselves. This, in turn, is yielding deeper insights into our understanding of the four Gospels and especially the Pauline Epistles.

Many centuries ago, Martin Luther – an anti-Semite – projected his own insecurities back onto the Pharisees. Because he was consumed with how to get right before God, he assumed the Jews were as well. He perceived their faithfulness to the Law to be a form of legalism. A way of self-justification. He thought wrongly that the Jews kept the Law in order to earn God's love and favor. And this misconception persists to this day in Christian circles.

The Pharisees did not believe keeping the Law would earn them salvation. That's not what "justification" meant within their worldview. For them, justification was "about the whole business of being human; of being Jewish human; of living in a Jewish community; of living in a threatened Jewish community; of living with wisdom, integrity and hope in a threatened Jewish community; of living with zeal for Torah, the covenant and above all Israel's faithful God within a threatened Jewish community." (NT Wright) Justification, for the Pharisees, was about identity. It was not about going to heaven after one died. It was not about eternal life per se. It was wrapped up and intertwined with what it meant to be God's chosen people in a world full of pagan idolatry. Pharisees believed with all their heart that if one was faithful to Torah, God would resurrect them on the final day, thus "justifying" the way they had lived their lives.

So now imagine you are Saul the Pharisee. Advanced even among his Pharisaical peers. Saul encounters the Risen Christ on the road outside of Damascus. Immediately he is confronted with the reality that if Yahweh has raised Jesus from the dead – the eschatological hope of every Pharisee - then Jesus must be the Justified One. And if Jesus is justified, then Saul is in real trouble. All his zeal is misdirected! All his ferocious loyalty to Torah is misplaced! Everything he has been taught. Everything he believes. Everything he has given his life to is upside down, turned around, and backwards! Jesus rising from the dead changes everything for Saul/Paul.

"We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified." (Galatians 2:16) Saul, now the Apostle Paul, has undergone a radical transformation. All his hopes which once rested on faithfulness to Torah are transferred to Jesus Christ. To crib the NT Wright quote above...Jesus now shows us what it means to be human. Jesus shows us what it means to be Jewish (expanded now beyond the boundaries of race to include those who are "Jewish" by faith) human. What it means to live in community as God's chosen people. What it means to live with wisdom, integrity and hope when the community is threatened as it always is by the pagan forces of this world. Jesus shows us true faithfulness to Torah, to the covenant, and above all, to Yahweh.

Justification comes then – not through faithfulness to Torah – but through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. As we place our faith in Him, we are justified by His work on our behalf. His faithfulness in place of our unfaithfulness. His sinlessness covering our sin. His righteousness exchanged for our unrighteousness. This is why Paul exclaims in one of the most beautiful passages in all the New Testament, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal. 2:20)

November 16, 2018
FREEDOM AND THE SPIRIT

Readings for the day: Galatians 4-6

Galatians is the manifesto for Christian freedom. The freedom we have in Christ. The freedom Christ won for us on the cross. Without Jesus, we are enslaved. Enslaved to our sinful desires. Enslaved to our corrupt thoughts and feelings. Enslaved to the ways of this world. Enslaved by the enemy of this world. It's why when we look at the world around us, we see such pain. It's why human beings are often so hurtful. So abusive. So evil. It's why man's inhumanity to man often knows no boundaries. Paul knew this himself. He had experienced this himself. Before Christ set him free, he was enslaved to his own passions and desires. He persecuted the church. Celebrated their pain and suffering. Rejoiced in their deaths. He relentlessly pursued them. Chased them down. Drug them from their homes and families. He was the chief of sinners. But then Christ came into his life and he was set free. So this freedom of which he speaks is not an abstract concept for him. It is something he experienced deeply, viscerally, and powerfully.

It's why he's so concerned for his Galatian friends. He is in anguish over what is happening to them. Having been set free by Christ, they are submitting themselves again to the yoke of slavery. Having begun so well in the Spirit, they are again seeking to ground their identity in something other than Jesus. Having been saved by grace through the gift of faith, they are now turning to their own work for justification. How often do we make the same mistake as Christians?

So how can we guard our hearts and minds from falling into this trap? Paul lays it out for us in the readings for today. "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." (Galatians 5:1) A great verse to memorize and meditate on. A great verse to remind yourself of when you start to feel the sting of temptation. A great verse to cling to when you feel trapped or defeated or depressed or anxious or afraid. You have been set free! Christ has accomplished all you need! Simply stand in this freedom. Rest in this freedom. Trust this freedom and do not return to the old ways of slavery.

"For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another." (Galatians 5:13) Our world doesn't understand true freedom. The freedom it offers is an unfettered freedom. A freedom without boundaries. A freedom without restraint. A freedom that is centered ultimately on the gratification of our own selfish desires. This is not Christian freedom, friends! It is a lie from the pit of hell! It is the path back into slavery! Christian freedom results in service to God and to one another. Christian freedom means offering our lives back to God and to His people. It is a freedom constrained by love. A freedom bounded by grace. A freedom fettered by faith in the Son of God who gave Himself up for us. This is the freedom we were called to in Christ.

And we gain this freedom as we walk by the Spirit. "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh." (Galatians 5:16) As we surrender our lives to the Spirit and His sanctifying work, we will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. We will stand firm and resist the yoke of slavery. We will refuse to go back to the old ways of living. "If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit." (Galatians 5:25) As we keep in step with Spirit – through daily prayer and Bible study and weekly worship with God's people - we will find our lives being transformed. Our awareness of the depth and the breadth of the freedom we have in Christ will grow. Our experience of God's presence will deepen. Our desire to love and serve both God and His people will increase. This is what Paul hopes and prays for his Galatian friends and it is my prayer for all of us as well.

November 17, 2018
NAVIGATING CONFLICT

Readings for the day: Acts 15 -16

Occasionally I come across people who seem surprised when there is conflict in the church. They have this impression that because we all love Jesus we would never have a difference of opinion. Never have an argument or disagreement. They seem to think “unity” is the same as “unanimity” which simply is not true. From the very beginning, the church has struggled over significant issues. Struggled to come to one mind and one accord on various things. Because we are all sinners, it is not easy to discern the will and call of God.

Today’s passage highlights a number of different conflicts. Conflict over circumcision and the role of the Jewish law in a Christian’s life. Conflict over restoring an individual who has proved untrustworthy in the past. Conflict over where the Spirit was leading the different evangelism teams to go. Conflict in Philippi over the deliverance of the slave girl. Conflict in prison which results in the conversion of the jailer. It is messy. There is division. The process of discernment often involves trial and error. Mistakes are made. I imagine feelings get hurt. Frustrations mount. But through it all, the Spirit is faithful to make His will known. And the result is the churches are strengthened in their faith and increase in numbers daily as God adds to them those who are being saved.

Is it possible that Acts 15 and 16 are paradigmatic for today? Do they reflect real life in the real church? Should we expect conflict? Expect disagreement? Expect arguments over where to go and what to do and who to involve? And if so, how can we resolve conflict peacefully? In a way that glorifies God and brings honor to His name?

One of the keys to navigating conflict in a godly manner is mutual submission. In Acts 15:1, a question is raised. Is circumcision required for salvation? This is no small matter. It’s a question of identity. For centuries, the rite of circumcision has set the Jewish people apart. Marked them as God’s chosen people. They have suffered for this belief. Been persecuted for this belief. No matter where they found themselves, they were easily identified by the fact they had been circumcised so there was never any place to run or hide. Since Abraham, circumcision has formed the core part of their shared identity and linked them intimately with the covenant promises of God. Now it is being threatened...what should they do? Paul and Barnabus have strong opinions. Based on what they have seen and experienced, it appears the Holy Spirit is moving among the Gentiles. Non-Jews. People who are not circumcised. Why add to what the Spirit is doing? There is quite a bit of dissension and debate. So they decide to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles to make their case. Again, there is much debate. Strong opinions being offered on all sides. Finally, Peter stands up. Shares his heart. Shares his experience. Once again, Paul and Barnabus share about the signs and wonders they have seen in their travels. James calls for a decision and the council decides to let circumcision be a secondary matter. Non-essential when it comes to salvation.

This has huge implications and it is notable that their conclusion “seemed good to the apostles, elders, and the whole church.” Though the issue will continue to come up throughout the rest of the book of Acts, this moment represents a turning point. A general willingness of all parties to mutually submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Another aspect that’s highlighted is their ability to differentiate between essentials and non-essentials when it comes to the gospel. Again, just because a compromise was reached doesn’t mean everyone agreed. Unity is not the same as unanimity. I imagine quite a few of the Pharisees who had come to faith walked away with serious reservations. But they set those reservations aside for the sake of the unity of the church. They recognized the danger of division and how much harm would come should the church fracture over this issue. They made sure to focus on the essentials – not getting mixed up in idolatry, sexual immorality, and maintaining purity which are all more matters of the heart - rather than force Gentiles to become Jews before becoming Christian.

Would that modern-day Christians were able to do the same! Instead of fighting over secondary matters like baptismal practices, worship styles, spiritual gifts, etc., can we not exercise mutual forbearance and submission and keep the main thing the main thing? Rather than pull up stakes the moment we disagree with the preacher or the elder board, can we not put aside our differences for the sake of the unity of the church? Rather than bounce the moment we are disappointed or let down, can we not obey the gospel's call to forgive and reconcile? Unity does not mean unanimity so we should never expect we will always agree. The key to doing life together is navigating conflict in a way that honors God and keeps Christ at the center.

November 19, 2018
FAITH ON TRIAL

Readings for the day: Acts 17:1-18

One of the more common misunderstandings in Acts is Paul's appearance before the Areopagus in Athens. Because of Luke's editorial comment, "Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new" (Acts 17:21); there is this assumption that Paul was appearing before a kind of debate society. Nothing could be farther from the truth. New Testament scholar, NT Wright, points out in his most recent biography of the Apostle Paul that the "Areopagus" was actually the Athenian Supreme Court. Paul was being charged as a "preacher of foreign divinities" which is actually the same charge that condemned Socrates. As such, Paul had a lot more at stake than winning an argument. His life was on the line. In a very real sense, the validity of the Christian faith was on the line as well.

Paul's defense of his faith is brilliant. Marks him as one of the pre-eminent intellectuals of the ancient world. He truly belongs in the same pantheon as Plato and Aristotle and Cicero. "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you." (Acts 17:22-23) Paul understands that God has revealed Himself in all kinds of ways. As pagan as the Athenians were, one thing that could be affirmed was their desire for God. They built all kinds of shrines to all kinds of false gods and while this practice was idolatrous, Paul was able to see past the surface to the deeper reality of their spiritual hunger. He plays on this spiritual hunger by affirming their search and uses it as a springboard to present the gospel. He even goes on to quote their own poets back to them, demonstrating how widely read and engaged he was with Hellenistic culture. This is remarkable for a former Pharisee and deeply instructive for us.

It is so easy in our world to fall into the trap of fundamentalism. Believing our way is the only way and any deviation represents a departure from truth. Fundamentalism infects both progressives and conservatives. It seems to touch ever debate these days whether the issue is race, sexuality, gender, abortion, etc. We cast these conversations in sharp binaries. We demand grace and nuance for our position but refuse to extend that same courtesy out to others. We spend so much of our time and energy dissecting every single tweet, FB post, or IG story in an effort to uncover deception. We assume the worst about the motivations of our opponents. We seem to feed off the negative energy.

You might have heard the saying – oft attributed to Benjamin Franklin – that a "half-truth is a great lie." You might even agree with such a statement. However, there is a flip side. A half-truth does contain half a truth. And in our rush to point out the "lie" we often miss the opportunity to affirm what may be true and noble and right. This is especially important when engaging seekers. Those engaged in an authentic search for God. They have legitimate questions. Important concerns that need to be heard. Doubts and fears that need to be expressed and taken seriously. Not dismissed. Not diminished. Paul affirms what he can about the Athenians. He affirms their religious hunger. Their spiritual thirst. Paul sees the half-truth reflected in their shrine to the "unknown god" and he makes Him known to them. Even though he is on trial for his life, Paul is so confident in Christ that he finds a way past self-defense and instead uses his time on the witness stand to share Jesus.

Every day our faith is put on trial. By the people we meet, work, and interact with on a regular basis. They ask all kinds of questions. Make all kinds of assumptions. Issue all kinds of statements. As Christians, we can spend our time and energy deconstructing everything they have to say. Pointing out the intellectual and spiritual inconsistencies. We can focus on winning the argument or we can focus on winning the person's heart. Asking good clarifying questions. Honoring what we can about their beliefs. Pointing out where their truth may unwittingly intersect with the Truth of the gospel. Because our confidence flows from Christ, we don't have to take things personal. Don't have to be defensive. Don't have to feel threatened. We are at peace because we know Jesus has overcome the world and is making Himself known.

November 20, 2018
TURNING THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN

Readings for the day: 1 Thessalonians 1-5

“For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything.” (1 Thessalonians 1:4-8)

I cannot imagine a greater compliment than to be told that my witness had “sounded forth” throughout the region I live and my faith in God had “gone forth everywhere” so that the need for evangelism ceased. And yet this is exactly what happened through the Christians at Thessalonica. Paul and Silas (Silvanus) traveled through their city on their way to Athens. They stopped and preached for three consecutive Saturdays on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Many Jews and Greeks and several leading women came to faith as the Word came in power and authority and conviction. However, some disbelieved and they stirred up a mob to attack Paul and Silas. When they could not find them, they attacked Jason and a few others. Dragging them out of their homes into the streets. They brought them before the city authorities with the hope they would be charged with treason for proclaiming a king other than Caesar but Jason paid off the officials and they were released. They then helped Paul and Silas escape during the night. This is the affliction Paul is referencing in his letter to them. But despite the persecution, they held onto to their joy in the Holy Spirit and clearly remained steadfast in their faith to the point that their reputation had spread thus making a return trip from Paul unnecessary.

I love how the crowd puts it in Acts 17:6, “These men have turned the world upside down...” Would that we would live such gospel-centered lives that we too might be accused of such a thing! Turning the world upside down is exactly what the gospel does. It completely reorders all we love. It redirects all our thoughts and desires. It reorients all our priorities. The things we used to hold dear no longer have much of a hold on us. The idols we cling to so tightly become empty and worthless. All our pride and achievement and cast down before the throne of Jesus. All our wealth and privilege and influence and power pales in comparison to the riches and authority Christ offers us in Himself. Our concern for our reputation and the esteem of others diminishes as our fear of God increases. This is what happens when we come to Christ. He fills us with His love. His affections. His joy. His peace. His righteousness. As these things begin to flow in and through our lives, we are transformed. We are renewed. We are set free. And because we have been set free, this world no longer has anything for us. No longer has any leverage over us. No longer can threaten to undo us. For we live for Christ and if we die, we gain!

So what does this all mean for you today? How are you turning the world upside down at your work or school? In your home or neighborhood? As you gather around your table with friends and family for Thanksgiving, what will the conversation sound like? Will the people you spend time feel blessed for having been with you? Will they hear and experience the love of Jesus through you? Will you set the example for those who do not yet believe through your sacrifice and willingness to serve?

November 21, 2018
WITH GOD'S HELP

Readings for the day: 2 Thessalonians 1-3

“To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power...” (2 Thessalonians 1:11)

A common misconception in the Christian life is that while God performs the act of salvation, the rest of life is up to us. We raise our hands and come forward as a response to the Holy Spirit's work of regeneration in our hearts but then leave the sanctuary with this inner resolve to live by our own will-power. How many sermons have we heard over the years that could double as secular motivational talks? How many Bible studies turn into self-help sessions with a little Jesus thrown in? How many conferences and retreats have we attended where the main message was simply work harder? Do more? Be better for Jesus? I cannot tell you how many times I have picked up a book, downloaded a podcast, or attended a conference hoping to hear the gospel only to be told overtly or covertly that the quality of my life really depends on me. My self-discipline. My ability to resist temptation. The intentional way I live my life.

The Bible is clear. We simply do not have the power to live the Christian life. We do not have the will or the discipline to make it happen. Left to our own devices, we will struggle. Left to our own resources, we will fall. Trusting in our own strength, we will fail. Living the Christian life is not a matter of learning some new techniques. It's not a matter of turning over a new leaf. It is about transformation. Total-life transformation from the inside out and it is the work of God.

In the verse above, Paul prays for three things for his Thessalonian friends. All of them come from God. Not a single one is rooted in the human heart. He prays God will make them worthy of His calling. Essentially, he is praying for God's Spirit to so root and ground them in the righteousness of Christ that every facet of their lives – home, community, work, school, etc. - would reflect His glory. He prays their lives might become a living reflection of the reality God has already brought about through their salvation in Jesus Christ. In Christ we are the very righteousness of God. Those called by Christ are constantly being formed and re-formed into His image, thereby being made worthy of the initial call God placed on their lives when He first saved them.

This involves human activity of course. A change in human behavior. But even that is not accomplished through our own willpower alone. The second thing Paul prays for is for God to fulfill their every resolve for good. Each and every day, we are faced with a fundamental choice. Will I live for God or will I live for me? Will I live selflessly or selfishly? Will I seek to honor God or will I gratify the desires of the sinful nature? This fundamental choice works itself out in lots of different situations in every facet of our lives. It pops up in every conversation. Every task assigned to us. Every chore we perform. Every interaction we have with another divine image-bearer who crosses our path. However it manifests itself, the fundamental choice is always the same. Will we do good or evil? And because we are predisposed through our sinful nature to do evil, we need God's help to do good.

The final thing Paul prays for is the power to perform every work of faith. Once God has called us and set us apart for Himself. And once He has reoriented our desires away from evil and towards the good. The final piece we need is the power to actually perform the action. We need the power to actually take the next step. To confirm our calling by acting on our resolve to walk by faith and not by sight. Only by tapping the limitless power of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit will we ever find the strength to live for Christ. And this is why we must spend so much time with Him. Learning to hear His voice. Seek His wisdom. Surrender to His strength. This is why prayer and meditation on Scripture is absolutely vital to the Christian life. It's why weekly worship with a local body of believers is essential for every single Christian. It is through these ordinary “means of grace” that God makes us worthy of His calling. Fulfills our every resolve for good. And gives us the strength to perform every work of faith.

November 22, 2018

THE SOCIAL/POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE GOSPEL

Readings for the day: Acts 18:19-28, 19:1-41

Happy Thanksgiving! As many gather around tables for food and fellowship today, there are certain subjects bound to be off-limits. Politics. Religion. Many others. Probably for good reason!:-) No one wants to be “that” guy or gal who spoils the meal by creating division.

I often hear the same sentiment expressed in church circles. Why can’t the preacher just stick to the gospel? Why does he or she have to bring politics into the equation? Or social justice? Or economics? As my southern friends used to say, “Stick to preachin’! Stay away from meddlin’!” The problem with this approach is clear when you read passages like the one for today. We’ve already seen how the early Christians were accused of “turning the world upside down” with their preaching of the gospel. It is impossible to separate the preaching of the gospel from the implications of the gospel. Preaching Jesus by definition challenges our notions of justice, power, social class, economics, etc. because He Himself challenged those same things through His preaching and ministry.

Ephesus was one of the great cities of Asia Minor in the 1st century. A commercial trading center. A major port. In the early second century, the great library of Celsus was built here, housing over 12,000 scrolls and putting Ephesus on the map alongside Alexandria as a center of learning. It had amphitheater that held over 25,000 spectators. But perhaps the greatest draw was the famed Temple of Artemis. One of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Pilgrims came from all over to pay their respects to the great goddess. As a result, tradesmen and craftsmen made a lot of money supporting the cult by selling idols and little shrines for the people to carry home with them. Enter the Apostle Paul. He comes preaching a gospel of a God not made with human hands. A God who cannot be represented by idols here on earth. A God who is the maker of heaven and earth. A God greater than Artemis (the moon goddess) and many of her former adherents came to faith. Sales drop. Profits crumble. Money is lost. A riot ensues as the entire economic structure of the city is now in danger.

Such accusations are nothing new to Paul. He’s already been accused of preaching a “king other than Caesar.” Already been accused of treason and sedition. Already been accused of upending entire social systems and ways of life. Already been accused of blasphemy by his fellow Jews. No wonder he’ll remark to his Corinthians friends, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.” (2 Corinthians 4:8-10) Paul understands to preach the gospel places one at odds with the social systems of this world. The economic systems of this world. The political systems of this world. The gospel is the good news of another Kingdom. A Kingdom that is in this world but not of this world. A Kingdom ruled from a heavenly throne not an earthly one. A Kingdom driven by eternal values not temporal ones. A Kingdom that is pure and noble and righteous. Unwilling to compromise with the sinful and broken ways of this world. So one cannot preach without meddlin’ in politics, social systems, economics, and justice. The gospel cannot be privatized. Jesus will not rest until He is Lord over every facet of human existence. Until every knee will bow in heaven. On earth. Under the earth. And every tongue confess that He is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

November 23, 2018
“REAL, REAL CHURCH”

Readings for the day: 1 Corinthians 1-4

I woke up this morning to a tweet storm. A post was put out by someone I follow describing how thankful he is for the church he serves as pastor. In it, he declares, “I pastor a church, not a Twitter following. A real real church in Missouri...for 37 years. We have all kinds of people—from newborn to 99, Trumpers and progressives, ICE officers and undocumented immigrants (for real). What we have in common is JESUS...and a culture of kindness.” The response was sadly predictable. Many of my progressive friends were quick to pounce. How could he allow Trump supporters in his church? How could he tolerate ICE officers? As the rhetoric heated up, he was accused of fostering an environment of abuse, racism, fascism, concentration camps, and supporting the American Gestapo. Many pledged to stop following him for His obviously white, privileged perspective. Conservatives weren’t any easier on him. How could he give sanctuary to illegal immigrants? Clearly he was more about social justice than the gospel! Was he for open borders? The destruction of the American way of life? Isn’t this what happens when the purity of the gospel is compromised for the sake of cultural accommodation? It was swift and brutal and it exposes a heretical reality at the heart of the American church. We simply do not believe Jesus is strong enough to hold the center. Though we claim to believe Jesus’ sacrifice was enough to tear down the dividing wall of hostility between us and God, we do not believe it is enough to tear down the walls that divide us from one another.

Paul clearly believed Jesus was enough. “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.” (1 Corinthians 1:2) This is an extraordinary statement in light of what’s about to come. In this first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul will confront divisions and factions. He will confront sexual immorality, lawsuits among believers, and idolatry. He will confront the abuse of spiritual gifts and the self-righteous pride of the Corinthians who lived with power and privilege and wealth. As Paul’s own rhetoric heats up – he pulls no punches throughout - it is easy to lose sight of Paul’s fundamental belief that despite all their problems. Despite all their foolishness and sin. Despite all their deep-seated divisions and factions. Paul believed with all his heart that they were sanctified in Jesus Christ. Called to be saints together in one body, one local church, as a witness to the world of the unconditional love and grace of Jesus.

Is Jesus enough? Does His unconditional love exert enough centrifugal force on our lives to keep us together? Or does His grace fall flat in the face of the powerful cultural forces that swirl all around us? What does it mean to be part of the “real, real church?” Does it mean we only gather with people who look like us? Think like us? Spend money like us? Vote like us? Or does Jesus push us out of our homogeneous spaces? Is it possible to be part of a local community of believers who come from all walks of life? All kinds of backgrounds? Different ethnicities? Different social classes and tax brackets? Is it possible to honor one another in those differences by sitting down together? Listening to one another? Seeking to walk in one another’s shoes rather than be so eager to condemn? Give one another the benefit of the doubt before rushing to judgment? Grant one another the grace to grow rather than be so quick to cut them off?

Clearly division is nothing new in the church. Jesus himself counted tax collectors and zealots among his closest friends. Paul was planting churches where Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free came together in Christ. Their social, economic, ethnic, and political differences could not be more stark. And yet they found a way to do life together. Found a way to process through all their mutual frustrations. Found a way to forgive and reconcile and walk together in humility. It was never easy. Never neat and tidy. It required daily death to self and yet it was these fledgling communities of faith that would eventually change the world.

How could this happen? A relentless focus on Christ. Paul describes it in all kinds of ways...

Christ is the power and wisdom of God
Christ is our righteousness, sanctification, and redemption
Christ is our sure foundation
Christ is all things to us and for us
Paul also exposes the folly of the ways of this world...

The foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

God chooses the foolish to shame the wise.

God chooses the weak to shame the strong.

God chooses what is lowly and despised in this world to shame the proud.

Ultimately, then, God leaves us no other options but to trust Christ. To cling to Christ. To follow Christ. Without Him, the center of our life together cannot hold. Without Him, the foundation of our life together will crumble. Without Him, the forces that threaten to tear us apart will be too great to resist. Unless Christ holds us together, we will fall apart. Unless Christ holds the world together, it will plunge into chaos and ruin. Death and sin and evil will have their way. Christ truly is our only hope.

November 24, 2018
LET'S TALK ABOUT SEX

Readings for the day: 1 Corinthians 5-8

Homer's Iliad. The poetry of Sappho and Ovid. Pindar's Odes. Plato's Symposium. The Sacred Band of Thebes. Horace's Odes. Without a doubt the Greek and Roman world was a highly eroticized one. Sexuality in all its forms was celebrated and embraced. Men were encouraged to build homoerotic relationships with young protégés. Homosexuality and lesbianism was known and commonly practiced. Temple prostitution was normalized as farmers slept with high priestesses to ensure the fertility of their crops for the coming year. Sexual promiscuity and adultery were not seen as taboo. Sexuality was a widespread theme permeating art, comedy, poetry, and philosophy. Sex was even used to bond men together in some of the great militaries of the period.

By contrast, Jews and Christians practiced sexual restraint. They saw sex as a sacred act that bonded one man with one woman for a lifetime. Created to symbolize the "one flesh" God intended for man and woman to experience with each other, Jews and Christians maintained a healthy respect for its power. This is why they established strong taboos against any sexual activity outside the bonds of covenant marriage. They recognized that sex was not purely physical but bonded people emotionally and spiritually as well. To disregard the depth of the sexual experience or share it with more than one partner was to commit a sin against one's own body which itself was a temple of the Holy Spirit. Sexual promiscuity was therefore intimately tied to ritual purity which is why transgressions took on a more serious tone.

The Apostle Paul was steeped in the Judeo-Christian world of sexual restraint. The Corinthian Christians were coming out of the Greco-Roman culture of sexual promiscuity. You can easily see where these two worlds would clash. Paul confronts the Corinthian believers with some of his strongest language yet. Calling for the excommunication of a man who slept with his father's wife. Commanding the Corinthians not to associate with the sexually immoral. Most certainly they should avail themselves of the temple prostitutes and local fertility cults! At the same time, husbands should not deprive their wives of sex nor should wives do the same to their husbands. Celibacy is not God's design for marriage. I truly see this as Paul at his pastoral best. Applying the gospel to the complex social and cultural realities that existed in this particular part of the world.

So what about us? Do these same principles hold true for us today? Absolutely. The Bible is univocal from Old to New Testaments about the sanctity of the sexual relationship. It is to be shared between one man and one woman within the covenant of marriage over the course of a lifetime. Certainly one could point to deviations from this pattern throughout the Scriptures like the polygamy of the patriarchs. But those exceptions only serve to prove the rule. As Christians, we are called to sexual purity. We are called to sexual holiness. We are called to honor the sexual act as one of God's great gifts and thereby exercise it under His divine authority. We are witnessing one of the greatest moral shifts in history. Western culture is becoming increasingly hyper-sexualized as it reverts back to pagan, Greco-Roman sexual norms. Sexual promiscuity has been on the rise since the so-called sexual revolution of the 1960's. Serial divorce is rampant. Same-sex relationships are celebrated. The concept of "throuples" is quickly being embraced as definitions of marriage shift and change. The impact of all this rapid change is devastating. Sexually transmitted disease. Unwanted pregnancies. Broken relationships. The objectification of the human body. Pornography. Harassment. Abuse. Violence. Depression. Anxiety. Fear. These are a lot of the reasons the Greco-Roman world embraced the Judeo-Christian sexual ethic in the first place! They could clearly see the positive impact on families and communities who committed to practicing Biblical sexual restraint. Sadly, our world has no such examples as Christians themselves do not seem committed to practicing sexual purity.

As our world rapidly plunges into sexual chaos, it has become imperative for Christians to follow Paul's words to the Thessalonians, "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God..." (1 Thessalonians 4:3-5) Lust is defined biblically as those emotions/passions that drive one to behavior outside the will of God. In the area of sexuality this means any sexual activity outside the covenant of marriage between one man and one woman. It is true that most human beings experience sexual desires that tempt them to act outside this bond. Heterosexuals, bi-sexuals, and homosexuals alike all suffer from the same disordered loves. These have been present within us since birth but they are a result of the Fall not the good and perfect creation of God. They contradict what God has clearly revealed in His Word and therefore the only appropriate response is self-denial not self-indulgence. Surely this is what Paul means when he writes, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:1-2)

November 26, 2018
WAIVING OUR RIGHTS

Readings for the day: 1 Corinthians 9-11

As Americans, we believe every human being is endowed with inalienable rights. Among these are a right to life. A right to liberty. A right to pursue happiness. These rights are embodied in our Constitution. They are explored in further detail in our Bill of Rights. Indeed, one could say our entire legal code is an attempt to flesh out how we define our “rights.” We have “bills of rights” for taxpayers, patients, students, etc. When we arrest people for crimes, the first thing we do is apprise them of their rights. We advocate in the global community for the enforcement of human rights and we often take action if we feel such rights are violated. Most of our hottest political debates center around what we perceive to be our “rights.” The right to life vs. the right to choose. The right to bear arms vs. the right to keep our children safe. The right to defend our borders vs. the human rights of immigrants/refugees seeking asylum from extreme poverty and violence in their home countries. Even on an individual level, we cling to our “rights” and react strongly if we feel they are being infringed upon or violated.

The Apostle Paul could not be more different. Because he believes with all his heart in the saving grace of Christ, he willingly surrenders all his rights for the greater glory of the gospel. Paul has every “right” to assert his authority as an apostle. Every “right” to get married. Every “right” to work for a living. Indeed, he has every “right” to make his living off the gospel just like the Levitical priests. Paul has every “right” to eat or drink whatever he wants since God has set aside the kosher food laws of the Old Testament. He has every “right” to circumcise or not circumcise, depending on the situation. If Paul were to really assert his “rights”, he could claim privilege as a Jew among Jews, “circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” (Phil. 3:4-6) But Paul is more than willing to relinquish any and all of his rights...why? Because “he counts everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ.” (Philippians 3:8)

Part and parcel of becoming a Christian means waiving whatever rights we believe we are entitled to as human beings, American citizens, you name it. We have to be willing to lay these things down for the greater privilege of serving Christ. Christ demands total and complete allegiance. He will not allow our “rights” to get in the way of His glory and the advancement of His Kingdom. Not even those most fundamental rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Does this mean Christians can never be happy? Never be safe? Never be free? Of course not. What it means is that even these things that we hold so dear cannot get in the way of the gospel. As Paul writes, “we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 9:12)

Ultimately, “rights” have to do with identity. Wherever we ground our identity, we will guard and protect those rights fiercely. Think about the culture wars that are currently raging and what that reveals about where so many find their identity and thus their “rights” as individuals. Gender. Sexuality. Race. Political affiliation. National citizenship. Economic status. Educational level. All of these things become part of our identity. Some we are born with. Some we achieve over the course of our lives. Christ calls us to lay all of them down. To willingly and joyfully surrender them for the even greater privilege of becoming His disciple! Once our identity is grounded in Him, we realize all the “rights” we’ve been clinging to are rubbish compared to the magnificence of His amazing grace. This, in turn, gives us unbelievable freedom. I love how Paul puts it, “For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I

became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.” (1 Corinthians 9:19-23)

Friends, what “rights” have you been holding onto? What privileges have you been clinging to? What parts of your identity still need to be surrendered to Jesus? Let go. Open your hands. Open your heart and experience anew the freedom that comes only from the gospel.

November 27, 2018
NO SALVATION OUTSIDE THE LOCAL CHURCH

Readings for the day: 1 Corinthians 12-14

Irenaus. Origen. Cyprian. Cyril of Jerusalem. Ambrose. Augustine. All of them believed in the doctrine of Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus - "There is no salvation outside the church." This idea, of course, doesn't sit well with us. We are highly individualistic. Suspicious of outside authority. Resistant to authentic community. Distrusting of institutions. We prefer to be more gnostic when it comes to our relationship to the church. We much prefer to describe our relationship to the church in generalities and abstractions. We'll say things like, "I don't need to be part of a local church." "I'm a member of the universal church and that's enough." "I can worship and serve God just fine on my own." For a lot of us, these are not simply flippant comments. They are rooted in very real hurt. Very real pain. Very real betrayal that we've experienced at the hands of a local church. Perhaps it was a priest or pastor who abused us. The legalistic and pharisaical environment we grew up in. Maybe the church failed us in our hour of greatest need. Or maybe our protests truly are simply culturally conditioned. We reject the church for her hypocrisy. Reject the church for her bigotry. Reject the church for her outdated morality. Whatever our issues, too many of us keep the local church at arm's length.

Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus. There is no salvation outside the church. Would it surprise to know that the Apostle Paul believed this? Listen to what he says in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."

There are several key ideas to ponder and pray over from this passage...

The Spirit of God makes us all one in Christ Jesus. Unity is not homogeneity. Unity is not unanimity. Unity is not about the erasure of our social, racial/ethnic, or economic distinctions. It is the submission of those things to the greater identity we share in Christ.

The local church is like a body. It has hands and feet. Eyes and ears. Head. Heart. Muscles. Organs. Bones. Each member of a local church is created and equipped by God to play a particular role. No role more or less important than the other. But not all roles are the same. A body is not made up of all feet. Or all hands. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of smell? God has ordained that all the members of the local church working together make up the one body of Christ.

The local church has many parts. We are NOT a church of one! We CANNOT be the church on our own. We cannot say to our brothers and sisters, "I have no need of you." That would be like cutting off your hand or tearing out your eye. There are parts of the body that are weaker. Parts of the body that are stronger. Parts of the body that are younger. Parts of the body that are older. Parts of the body that are richer. Parts that are

poorer. Parts that are white. Parts black. Parts brown. Parts more educated. Parts less educated. Not all parts are the same. Not all are gifted in the same way. But all are necessary. All are equally important. All have value in God's sight.

We are a part of the body of Christ and individually members of it. There is no salvation outside the church because there is no identity outside the church. Our love for God gets expressed in our love for one another. Our unity together reflects the unity of the Godhead itself. To keep the church at arm's length. To never commit oneself to a local body of believers. To try and do the Christian life on our own is oxymoronic. It doesn't make any sense and it certainly isn't biblical.

I know we live in a time where we feel pulled in a lot of different directions. We have a lot of things competing for our time, attention, and resources. Furthermore, we tend to take a consumeristic approach to the local church and judge it by its ability to entertain us or hold our attention. As soon as life in the local church gets hard, we tend to bail. As soon as we feel let down or disappointed, we leave. Such immature behavior only stunts our spiritual growth and prevents us from experiencing the fullness of God's grace and love. The next time you think to yourself - "I don't need to go to church" or "Maybe it's time for me to find a new church" or "I'm done with church" - take a moment and read through 1 Corinthians 13. It was not written for weddings! It was written for the local church. You cannot love Jesus without loving His bride, friends. And love is defined, not as a feeling, but a conscious decision to bear all things, believe all things, endure all things just as Christ did for us.

November 28, 2018
THE HEART OF CHRISTIANITY

Readings for the day: 1 Corinthians 15-16

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.” (1 Corinthians 15:3-8)

Boil the Christian faith down and what do you get? A man hanging on a cross, buried in a tomb, rising from the grave three days later. This is the heart of our faith. Without it, we preach in vain. We pray in vain. We live in vain. Without the death and resurrection of Christ, we are fools. We would be better off to eat and drink and party and make the most out of life because death wins. Literally everything rests on this fundamental truth...Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.

This is what sets Christianity apart from all other religions on the face of the earth. It's what makes us unique. It's what makes us different. It's what makes Christianity true. We preach a crucified Lord and a Risen Savior. No other faith tradition makes anywhere close to the same claim. Sure, we might share the same moral code. Their gods might have some of the same attributes as our God. Their worship might look strikingly similar in terms of music and prayer. They might be good people with great families who live wholesome lives. They might make positive contributions to our society. But if they do not believe in the literal, historical, bodily death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; then their preaching is in vain. Their faith is in vain. They are still enslaved to their sins. Their dead are eternally lost. All because they are found to be misrepresenting God by denying the glory of His one and only Son.

Paul is very clear. The physical death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the THE essential cog in our faith. It is the key to unlocking saving faith. It is the lens through which we now see all of life. It is the cipher that cracks the code of the Bible. Christ has been raised as the firstfruits of the resurrection. He is the foretaste. The forerunner. The first to be raised so that He can go before us and prepare the way. His physical body was laid into the ground perishable, dishonored, and weak. It was raised imperishable, glorious, and in power! He is the first to be changed. The first to be transformed. The first to be raised. By His resurrection, we know death has lost! Sin has been defeated! The works of the evil one destroyed! The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is nothing short of the total and complete victory of God!

And it is God's victory that makes us immovable. Steadfast. Always abounding in His work. It is God's victory that makes us watchful. Firm and strong in the faith. Persistent in love. It is his complete confidence in God's victory that gives Paul courage to face the stones at Lystra. The beatings and imprisonments. The shipwrecks and torments. Paul considers all of it loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ! What about you, my friend? Do you share this same confidence in the death and resurrection of Jesus? Do you place your trust in a Risen Lord and Savior? Has He become the filter for your life? The lens through which you now see the world?

November 30, 2018
RECONCILIATION

Readings for yesterday: 2 Corinthians 1-4

Readings for the day: 2 Corinthians 5-9

Reconciliation is a radical act in our day and age. We live in such a divided world. We are divided along social lines. Political lines. Racial/ethnic lines. Sexual lines. Economic lines. Educational lines. All of it taking on a religious fervor as each person seeks to defend their position over and against their perceived enemies. Differences of opinion devolve into personal animosity. Policy differences become litmus tests for morality. Ideological purity must be maintained at all costs lest one fall down the slippery slope to compromise. Social media throws gasoline on this dumpster fire on a daily basis. Cable “news” organizations fill their programming slots with partisan opinion shows designed to reinforce confirmation bias. It even filters down to the personal level in our day to day relationships. I cannot begin to count the number of times I’ve had someone tell me about a situation where their feelings were hurt. Rather than follow the gospel-call to forgive and reconcile, they began attacking the other person’s character. Impugning motives. Words like “betrayal” and “wounded” and “abuse” get thrown around far too casually. All in an attempt to justify cutting that other person out of their lives.

None of us are immune to these cultural pressures. None of us have clean hands when it comes to this issue. Reconciliation is hard, hard work. And it is impossible without Jesus Christ. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.” (2 Corinthians 5:17-19) The Apostle Paul lived in a similar world. A world of great pluralism and diversity. A world full of political, social, sexual, and religious intrigue. A world where different groups literally came to blows, often in violent and brutal ways. Into this world, Paul believes God has sent His church. His people. And they have been entrusted with a very special task. Reconciliation.

What is reconciliation according to Paul? It is God reconciling the world to Himself. It is God laying down His life for us while we were still sinners. It is God making peace with us while we were still at war with Him. It is God sacrificing Himself for His enemies...namely you and me. Reconciliation requires we do the same. It requires us to relinquish our need for vengeance. It requires us to not count a person’s trespasses against them. It requires a conscious decision not to hold a person’s past actions against them. Most of all, it requires us to “regard no one according to the flesh”, meaning we no longer let a person’s political, social, sexual, or racial/ethnic identity get in the way of a relationship. We love them as Christ loves them. Unconditionally. This doesn’t mean we try to “erase” their uniqueness. This doesn’t mean we try to “whitewash” or “homogenize” everyone. This doesn’t mean we make them become like us. No, we love them as they are. We love them where they are. We love them for who they are. Image-bearers of God. Born with a dignity that, while broken utterly by sin, can never fully be lost.

I can already hear the protests in your heart. What about an abuser? What about the man who murdered my child? Raped my daughter? Stole my life savings in a Ponzi scheme? What about the corporate criminals at places like Enron or dictators who use chemical weapons on their own people? Evil is legion in our world and you are suggesting we meet such evil with reconciliation and love? How weak! How stupid! How insipid! Only a white, privileged, cisgender, heterosexual male would ever say such a thing! And perhaps that’s partly true. I am fully aware of my cultural location. Fully aware I have never had to battle systematic oppression. Fully aware I have never suffered abuse. Fully aware I have never been the victim of a violent crime. But I have sat with many who have. I have listened to their stories. Perpetrators and victims alike. I worked for two years in a

maximum security prison. I know many murderers personally. I have seen their hate up close and personal. I have spent the last twenty years in ministry. Spent countless hours counseling with victims of abuse. I have seen their pain up close and personal. I have been overseas many times. Met survivors of genocide. Survivors of civil wars. Survivors of holocausts no one has ever heard of. I have seen life-threatening poverty up close and personal. I have stood at the mass graves. I have listened to the stories of trauma and tragedy. It is heartbreaking on a level I am at a loss to comprehend.

But I have also seen the power of reconciliation. I have seen it in the Gacaca courts of Rwanda where perpetrators of genocide confess their crimes, are confronted by their victims, and the local community is able to move towards healing and restoration. I have seen it in the church plants of Ethiopia where former tribal enemies become brothers and sisters through the saving work of Jesus Christ. I have seen it in the New Jersey State Prison where murderers received parole because the family of their victim was willing to forgive and reconcile. I saw it in a local church I served whose history included no record of African-American members though they were located in a neighborhood that was racially diverse. The courage of one young African-American man changed the hearts and minds of so many who had grown up with segregation. His Christ-like love overwhelmed their natural prejudice and they were set free. I have seen it in my counseling office as husbands and wives lay aside their "record of wrongs" and marriages are renewed. I have seen it in my own life as my heart is shaped and formed by the influence of godly mentors from all walks of life. An African refugee pastor who has forgiven those who persecuted and imprisoned him. A female Old Testament professor who has successfully battled misogyny with forgiveness and grace. A gay man who faithfully serves the LGBTQ community though they consider him a traitor for choosing the path of celibacy out of obedience to Christ. These are just a few of my heroes. Just a few of the men and women who are taking God's message of reconciliation to the world. I pray for the courage to do the same.