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November 01, 2022
The Patience of God

Readings for today: Matthew 21:23-22:14, Mark 11:27-12:12, Luke 20:1-18, John 12:37-50

I've been thinking a lot about the patience of God. The endurance of God. The perseverance of God. One of God's great desires is that all should be saved and come to a knowledge of His truth. He's been working towards this great end since the Fall of humankind into sin. He will never let us go. Never abandon us to our fate. Never stop reaching out to us. Never stop relentlessly pursuing us. Jesus says as much in one of my favorite parables. He talks about a man who planted a vineyard and leased to a particular group of people and then went into a far country, entrusting what he had made into their care. Unfortunately, the tenants got it into their heads that they deserved to keep the fruit of their labor so they rebelled against the master. They beat his servants. They treated them shamefully. They even killed a few along the way. Still the master was patient with them. He kept reaching out to them. Kept calling them back to covenant faithfulness. Eventually, the master sent his son, hoping to convince the tenants to listen to reason and repent of their ways. Tragically, those wicked tenants took the opportunity to kill the heir and secure the vineyard for themselves.

Isn't this how humanity operates? Our inhumanity to one another knows no bounds. I am ministering in a recent conflict zone over in Ethiopia this week. The people here have suffered tremendously. Their homes have been looted. Their city stripped bare. War crimes have been committed. Attempts at ethnic cleansing have taken place. It's horrifying on so many levels. The same thing is happening all over the world. It happens in nations like Ukraine. It happens in major cities where violent gangs run the streets. It happens in homes where abusers take out their anger on the innocent and vulnerable. So much violence. So much pain. So much heartbreak. Why doesn't God step in? Why doesn't God pour out His righteous wrath and judgment on those who perpetrate such evil? Why doesn't God lay waste to the wicked tenants of the earth?

According to Jesus, it's because God is still holding out hope for some of us to turn to Him. It's why He continues to send servants into the deepest, darkest places on earth to spread the good news of the gospel. I think of the men and women we are training this week. They already face persecution on levels I will never come to understand. They live under constant threat. They face beatings and torture and imprisonment. Some will possibly even die. The wicked tenants of this region are very resistant to God. Not that it's any different back home where I happen to live. The resistance is just not as obvious. The reality is we are all "wicked tenants" to some degree. Taking what God has entrusted to us and seeking to usurp God's rightful claim. I know I've caused my share of suffering over the years with the things I've said and done to those I love. I wish I could take it back. I carry a lot of regrets. I know God is going to hold me accountable when I stand before His judgment throne. Thankfully, however, I did not reject His Son. When Jesus confronted me on the University of Colorado in Boulder in February of 1993, I responded with repentance. I got on my knees and gave my life to Him. The stone I had once rejected became the cornerstone of my life. It was the Lord's doing and it remains marvelous to my eyes to this day. What about you? Where do you find yourself in this story today? Are you like the "wicked tenants" claiming ownership over your life or have you responded in faith to God's Son?

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 22:15-23:39, Mark 12:13-44, Luke 20:19-21:4, 13:31-35

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November 2, 2022
Questioning Jesus

Readings for today: Matthew 22:15-23:39, Mark 12:13-44, Luke 20:19-21:4, 13:31-35

Let me start by saying God welcomes honest, heart-felt questions. God loves nothing more than comforting His people when they come before Him confused and hurting. Struggling to understand. Trying to make sense of life and tragedy and suffering. He understands our doubts and fears. He can handle our anger and frustration. When we are honestly seeking Him. Honestly asking Him. Honestly and transparently and vulnerably bringing all our insecurities before Him, He gently gathers us in His arms and lets us know it will be okay. He is with us. He is here for us. He will never leave us or forsake us.

However...if we set out to test God. To put Him on the witness stand and demand He answer to our notions of what is right and good. If we put Him on trial and require Him to answer to our human notions of justice. If we doubt His integrity and character and nature. If we push Him and press Him and seek to discredit Him. We are playing a very dangerous game. One that places our eternal souls in jeopardy.

The religious rulers of the day had no interest in following Jesus. Their only aim was to discredit Him before the eyes of the people. They were seeking to trip Him up with their questions. They wanted to make a public spectacle of Him. Humiliate Him in the eyes of the people. Stamp out His ministry and movement and send Him back to Nazareth in disgrace. Their questions are designed to get Him in trouble politically – “is it lawful to pay taxes or not?” Their questions serve as impossible riddles – “a woman married seven times goes to heaven...whose wife will she be?” Their questions present logical impossibilities – “which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” But Jesus is not limited to human understanding. His answers reveal a divine wisdom that silences those who would seek to destroy Him. Then Jesus goes on the offensive, exposing their hypocrisy. They are the ones in violation of the Law! They are the ones who lack understanding! They are the ones who play political games! Woe to you scribes and Pharisees! Judgment is coming!

It's sobering to say the least. And it forces us to self-reflection. What lies at the heart of my own questions? An honest desire to understand? Or a selfish desire to justify my own actions? A tender insecurity for which I need God's comfort? Or an arrogant desire to go my own way and do my own thing? A doubt or a fear that keeps me from experiencing the peace that passes all understanding? Or a sinful desire to cling to an idol in my life? What is it that drives my questions? What lies at the heart of my doubts and fears and confusion? Am I putting God on trial or am I truly seeking His will?

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

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November 3, 2022
Reality Check

Readings for today: 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 embrace 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? How are we to respond as Christians? We respond the way my Ethiopian and Ugandan and South Sudanese brothers and sisters do. They endure to the end. They persevere in their faith. They cling to Jesus. They sacrifice it all for Him. Friends, Jesus couldn’t be more clear. The world will hate us. The world will persecute us. Throw us into prison. Torture us and even kill us. They will restrict our rights. They will label 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 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. Now more than ever, the world stands on the brink.

So again, what’s a Christian to do? Stay wise. Be prepared. Make sure we keep doing the work God 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!

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

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November 4, 2022
Humility

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

I remember one of the first times I washed another person's feet. I was in seminary at Princeton. I was working as a prison chaplain at New Jersey State Prison. I was leading a Bible study on Thursday nights and we were studying the gospels. When we got to today's readings about Jesus washing the disciple's feet, I pulled out a bucket and suggested we do the same for each other. The reaction was overwhelming. Several men started to weep. Some resisted but eventually gave in. Some were ashamed of what their feet looked and smelled like. One man was so overcome with emotion that he got up and walked to the corner of the room. It was a powerful moment for us all. After we were finished, we spent some time talking about why foot-washing is so hard for us and what we learned by following the command of Jesus that night. Here are just a few of our takeaways...

Foot-washing is humbling. We don't like being served. Being served places us in a passive position where we have little to no power. It makes us feel uncomfortable. Vulnerable. Exposed. We live in a culture where feet are largely covered up. We wear socks and shoes most of the time. Our feet are not considered the most beautiful or attractive parts of our bodies. They are sensitive to touch and heat and cold. The experience feels deeply intimate. Like something you would do with a close friend and we frankly don't have a lot of close friends.

Foot-washing turns power dynamics on their head. Several of the men remarked on how deeply it touched them to have a white, upper middle class, highly educated, non-incarcerated pastor kneeling before them to wash the feet of incarcerated, largely poor, black, lower-educated men. I felt the same way when our roles reversed and the men served me. There was a sense in which foot-washing placed us all on the same level as people in desperate need of the grace Jesus offers in Himself.

All of these dynamics were in play when Jesus took the towel after supper and tied it around His waist. He was intentionally taking the place of the humblest servant. He was performing the service that none of the rest of the disciples would ever want to perform. No one wants to wash feet! Especially in ancient near east culture where feet were grimy and dirty and calloused and rough from daily activity. The reaction of Simon Peter is a common one. "Lord, you will never wash my feet!" We don't want to be vulnerable. We don't want to be exposed. We don't want to be put in an uncomfortable position. But Jesus is relentless. He pursues us. He serves us in the deepest and most profound ways imaginable. And our spiritual condition doesn't seem to matter much to Him. He washes the feet of those who betray Him. Those who deny Him. Those who do not understand Him. Those who resist Him. He simply, lovingly, graciously kneels before us right where we are to wash us clean. This is His heart for us.

Readings for tomorrow: John 14-17

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November 5, 2022
Spiritual Unity

Readings for today: John 14-17

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. 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. We abide in the Vine. We stand on the Rock. We drink from fountains of Living Water. Amen?

But what does union with Christ look like? Agreement. Submission. Surrender. It requires us to take our lives - all our thoughts, words, deeds, and 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 6,500 churches have been planted. Over 1 million 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 and southeastern 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.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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November 7, 2022
What Would Jesus Pray?

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

I spent time in Israel this summer and of the places we visited was the house of Caiaphas. A church has been built on the spot where it once stood but you can still descend to the depths to a storeroom in the bedrock where Jesus most likely spent the night after being condemned. It's a powerful experience. As you stand at the very lowest point in the home, you can look upwards and see the opening in the roof above where they either lowered or more likely threw Jesus into the depths and darkness. The courtyard where Peter denies Him is just outside. Gethsemane where Judas betrayed Him is just down the hill. As you stand there, the guides encourage you to read aloud the words from Psalm 88. A psalm Jesus must have prayed as He cried out to His Father that night.

“O Lord, God of my salvation, I cry out day and night before you. Let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry! For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol. I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am a man who has no strength, like one set loose among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand. You have put me in the depths of the pit, in the regions dark and deep. Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves. You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made me a horror to them. I am shut in so that I cannot escape; my eye grows dim through sorrow. Every day I call upon you, O Lord; I spread out my hands to you. Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the departed rise up to praise you? Is your steadfast love declared in the grave, or your faithfulness in Abaddon? Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness? But I, O Lord, cry to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you. O Lord, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me? Afflicted and close to death from my youth up, I suffer your terrors; I am helpless. Your wrath has swept over me; your dreadful assaults destroy me. They surround me like a flood all day long; they close in on me together. You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness.”

As I read those words in that place, I was deeply moved. I thought about my Lord and the “cup” His Father called Him to drink on my behalf. The cup of God’s wrath. The cup of God’s judgment. The cup I deserved. Jesus drank it to the dregs. He embraced His call to suffer on my behalf. To stand in my place. I abandoned Him just like His disciples. I betrayed Him just like Judas. I denied Him just like Peter. But He never abandoned me. He never betrayed me. He never denied me. He was faithful to His Father’s will and now I am saved. I will never forget the overwhelming feeling of gratitude that flooded my heart in that moment. Read the words of the psalm again and ponder again all Jesus has done for you.

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

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November 8, 2022
Who Crucified Jesus?

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

Who crucified Jesus? Who was responsible for His suffering and death? Was it the Jewish people? Was it the religious authorities of His day? Was it the Romans? Pilate? All of the above? Certainly this passage has been used to justify some of the most horrific anti-semitism in history. Christians blaming the Jewish people for killing the Messiah. It's a terrible misreading of the passage. Not all Jews wanted Jesus dead. Not all Jews even knew who Jesus was. A much better reading is to identify Jesus as the victim of a corrupt, 1st century political system. Trapped between the competing interests of ambitious religious leaders and their Roman oppressors. Caught up in the nationalistic currents that were sweeping the nation at the time. He was one of many would-be messiahs who would be killed during this particular stretch in history in Israel as the Romans tried desperately to maintain peace in a region where tensions were rising.

Who crucified Jesus? For the Christian, the answer is clear. I did. I was the one who put Jesus on the cross. It was my sin that held Him there. It was my unrighteousness and my ungodliness that required a sacrifice. I have one to blame but myself. I cannot wash my hands of my responsibility. Jesus' pain was the price of my salvation. Jesus suffered to make atonement for my sin. Jesus died to deliver me from death. If no one else on earth had ever sinned, Jesus still would have given Himself for me.

Make no mistake, Jesus was no victim. This was His plan from the beginning. From eternity, He was predestined to serve. Predestined to suffer. Predestined to die. He was not forced to do it for no authority in heaven or on earth or under the earth has any power over Him. He was not moved to do it as if Jesus were driven by emotion like the rest of us. He was not even asked to do it as if He was some kind of divine "plan B" just in case things with humanity didn't work out. No, Jesus Himself says He alone has the power to lay His life down and take it back up again. Theologically speaking, Jesus has existed from eternity as the "crucified Lord" so in that sense one can argue that Jesus Himself is responsible for His suffering and death. He is the One who set these events in motion. He is the One who was bringing His plan to completion. Rather than cast blame, we should pause and marvel again at His great love and faithfulness.

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

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November 9, 2022
The Tomb

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

I will never forget the few minutes I got in the empty tomb. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher is built over the place where Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus laid Jesus' body to rest. I know there is some debate between the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the Garden Tomb but for my money, I think it far more likely Jesus was laid to rest at the church. The Sabbath was approaching. The men simply didn't have time to take his body down, prepare it as best they could, lay Him to rest, and get the tomb closed before the sun went down. The tomb had to be close to Golgotha.

When you enter the church, you have the opportunity to see where Jesus was crucified, where His body was anointed, and where He was laid to rest. Seeing all these spots grouped together makes a lot of sense when you think about it from a 1st century perspective. You then get in line to go into the tomb. You first enter an outer chamber where you can light a taper and say a prayer. You are then ushered into the inner sanctum where you can kneel in the tomb itself and lay your hand on the stone where His body lay. It's a powerful, powerful experience to say the least. I found myself weeping as I prayed. Overwhelmed by God's great love for me. Within a couple of minutes, a knock on the door signals the end of your time and you leave to make room for the next group of pilgrims to come in.

If you've been a Christian for any length of time, it's easy to breeze through these stories. We've heard them so many times and familiarity breeds contempt. We don't take the time or make the time to linger in them a bit. Sit with the words. Feel the force of their power. Imagine ourselves in the story. This is why so many go to Israel. Once you've been there, you'll never read the Bible the same way. It's like moving from analog to digital. Black and white to color. SD to 4k HD surround sound. It's truly amazing and I'd encourage anyone who can to go. If you cannot make the trip, do your best to take advantage of all the virtual tours that are offered online. Immerse yourself as much as possible in the experience. Let the power of the gospel speak to you in new and fresh ways and renew your love for Jesus.

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

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November 10, 2022
Resurrection

Readings for today: 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. He then appeared to His followers and convinced them He was alive. Still others 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 never 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 ruled by a God who loves the world despite its sin 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 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 the 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. 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!

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 1-4, Psalm 110

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November 11, 2022
Repentance

Readings for today: Acts 1-4, Psalm 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 but 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 if Eustace is 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 a 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 you 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 our 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.

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 5-8

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November 12, 2022
Reformation

Readings for today: 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 dominating 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 by the apostles at Solomon’s Portico. Stephen, a man full of wisdom and the Holy Spirit, performing great signs and wonders as he preaches the gospel. 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? I believe 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. 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? (I am purposefully engaging in hyperbole here. Obviously, there are deep complexities involved especially as it relates to mental illness.) 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.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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November 14, 2022
The Beauty of a Multi-Cultural Community

Readings for today: 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 reaffirmed 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 recidivate 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 palate 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.

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 12-14

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November 15, 2022
Missionaries

Readings for today: 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.

Readings for tomorrow: James 1-5

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November 16, 2022
Authentic Faith

Readings for today: James 1-5

One of the great scandals of the western church is the number of Christians who confess Jesus with their lips but deny Him with their lives. They say they believe in Jesus but only in the abstract. They claim to have faith in God but only if He remains distant and unininvolved in our lives. They claim saving faith but never submit their lives to Christ. We call them “nominal” Christians. “C&E” (Christmas and Easter) Christians. “Cultural” Christians. Mainly because we don’t want to appear judgmental. The Apostle James, on the other hand, pulls no punches. “Faith apart from works is dead.” (James 2:26)

What does it mean to believe in God? The Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 10:9, “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” That seems clear enough except that far too many use this verse as an excuse NOT to obey God’s commands which certainly wasn’t what Paul had in mind. Clearly in James’ day, he was dealing with Christians who claimed a right belief in God but didn’t follow it up with right practice. This is why James makes this extraordinary statement, “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!” (James 2:19) He’s speaking to both the Jewish and Gentile believers of his own time and pointing out it isn’t enough to hold to an intellectual belief in the nature and character of God. Even the demons understand God’s divine nature! One must submit their life to God as well.

His argument is a persuasive one and deeply biblical. For support, he draws on the Abraham, the great paradigm of faith, and Rahab who ended up in the lineage of Christ. He makes the point that saving faith in their lives resulted in works. In fact, one would not be able to say that “Abraham believed God” unless Abraham willingly demonstrated that belief by offering up his only beloved son. In the same way, one would not be able to say that “Rahab believed God” unless she willingly demonstrated that belief by hiding the spies of Israel and sending the authorities on a wild goose chase. In both cases, faith was active alongside their works and faith came to completion or fulfillment by their works.

Now I can already hear the protests. What about grace? I thought we were saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone? Absolutely we are! But what is equally clear is that salvation changes us. It transforms us. It gives us a new heart with new desires. A new spirit with new passions. We find ourselves longing to do God’s will. Longing to serve God’s purposes. Longing to follow God’s commands. Jesus Himself says, “If you love me, keep my commandments.” (John 14:15)

When we try to separate our faith from our works, we are exposing our lack of authentic faith. If we approach faith looking for the absolute minimum we need to do to be saved, we are not saved at all. It’s like trying to separate the body from the soul according to James. Such a dis-integration of the human being would result in death. The same is true when we try to separate our faith from our works.

Readings for tomorrow: Galatians 1-3

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November 17, 2022
What does it Mean to be Truly Human?

Readings for today: 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 tending 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 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 a 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 hearts 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 Pharisical 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 - 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)

Readings for tomorrow: Galatians 4-6

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November 18, 2022
Exercising Christian Freedom

Readings for today: Galatians 4-6

“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”
- Galatians 5:1

We are born into sin. On this point the Bible is clear. We are not born innocent. We are not born neutral. We are not a “tabula rasa” when we come into this world. We are slaves. Enslaved to the elementary powers of this world. Demonic powers of darkness whose influence is far-reaching and against whom we are powerless in our natural state. We are enslaved to our own desires. Desires that, though originally God-given, have become twisted and disoriented and corrupted by sin. We are enslaved to idols. These are the things we fear losing the most. They are often the source of recurring nightmares. And we spend a ton of energy protecting them against any threats. How do we know we are enslaved? The test is fairly simple. If you are willing to commit sin in order to achieve some goal, fulfill some desire, or protect some asset or ideology, you are enslaved.

Thankfully, Christ has set us free. He has set us free by defeating the demonic powers of darkness through His atoning death on the cross and resurrection from the dead. He has set us free by giving us a new heart with new desires to replace the corrupt hearts of stone with which we were born. He has set us free by dethroning the idols of our lives and establishing His reign and rule over our lives. This is why the Apostle Paul tells his Galatian friends not to submit again to a yoke of slavery. If Christ has done all this work for you, why would you ever want to go back? Why would you choose to return to paganism? Or a life under the Law? Why would you choose to subject yourself to anything but the Spirit of God?

Now I can already hear the pushback. What about those who would choose to use their freedom as an opportunity to sin? Paul is equally clear here as well. “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) The freedom Christ offers us is not just a freedom “from” something but also a freedom “to” something. We are set free in order to serve. We are set free in order to love. We are set free in give our lives for the sake of those around us. And this is not something we do in our own effort. We do it by embracing and walking with the Holy Spirit. “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.” (Galatians 5:16) If you and I walk hand in hand and keep in step with the Spirit of God, we will not pursue sin. It will hold no attraction for us. It will have no power over us. Instead, we will be producing fruit like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The more we produce the fruit of the Spirit, the less room there is for the weeds of sin to grow.

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 15-16

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November 19, 2022
Navigating Church Conflict

Readings for today: [Acts 15-16](#)

Church fights are the worst. We have such a hard time “keeping the main thing, the main thing.” How many different denominations have sprung up over disagreements about Christ’s presence at the Lord’s Table? The mode and timing of baptism? Who’s eligible to serve in ordained office? Differing views over eschatology? The exercise or even existence of ecstatic spiritual gifts? Some estimate there are over 45,000 different Christian denominations globally. Each one claiming a nuanced theological view that sets them apart from their brothers and sisters. It must break the heart of Christ.

Imagine how different things would be if we simply followed the example of the early church. In those days, there could not have been a more explosive theological issue than circumcision. Circumcision had been the mark of God’s covenant people for thousands of years. It was the sign that set them apart. Thousands had died over the centuries rather than renounce circumcision and the faith it signified. The early believers - almost all of whom were Jewish - didn’t have a theological category for “uncircumcised believer.” It would have been an oxymoron to them. But then Paul and Barnabas show up. Two highly respected church leaders and missionaries. They start testifying to the fact that the Holy Spirit was being poured out on the Gentiles and this created all kinds of conflict. Now, in today’s world, we’d just pack up and head to the church down the street. We’d withdraw from fellowship. Our church would vote to secede and go independent, join a different denomination, or perhaps start their own. But that’s not what the early church did. Why?

They kept the main thing, the main thing. They understood the church’s primary mission was the preaching of the gospel. Nothing could be allowed to hijack the Great Commission. Not theological disputes over circumcision or uncircumcision. Not the historic ethnic divisions between Jews and Gentiles. Not persecution from their pagan oppressors or their Jewish countrymen. So when it came to the attention of the leaders of the church that there was a significant conflict brewing, they called for a council in Jerusalem. They listened to passionate arguments from either side. They acknowledged the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. They trusted the testimonies of Paul and Barnabas about the miraculous signs and wonders they had seen and performed. They searched the Scriptures for confirmation of God’s plan. And finally, they reinforced the demands of the moral law governing worship, fellowship, human sexuality which has formed the communal ethic of the church since her earliest days. Does this mean all their problems were solved? Clearly not. Paul and Barnabas get into it over the inclusion of John Mark. Paul, knowing he will be preaching to Jews on his next missionary journey, makes the decision to circumcise Timothy before they go so he won’t present a stumbling block to the gospel. Their journey is re-routed by the Holy Spirit from Bithynia to Macedonia. They end up in prison for casting out a demon. It’s a crazy, wild ride! And yet, the church remained united in their focus to evangelize the nations.

Imagine what would happen if we would do the same! Imagine a church that humbled herself under the authority of the Holy Spirit who blows where He wills and always does a new thing. Imagine believers submitting their will and personal experience to Scripture and the wisdom of the gathered Christian community. Imagine a church who kept the main thing, the main thing, and refused to let anything get in the way of the proclamation of the gospel. This is what Jesus wants from His church, friends.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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November 21, 2022
Defending our Faith

Readings for today: Acts 17:1-18:18

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.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Thessalonians 1-5

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November 22, 2022
World-Changing Faith

Readings for today: 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 peached 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?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Thessalonians 1-3

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November 23, 2022
Persecution

Readings for today: 2 Thessalonians 1-3

Amidst a rising tide of persecution and affliction, the faith of the Thessalonian Christians was rising. Their love for each other was growing. These are not surprising developments for anyone familiar with church history. In the face of hostility, the church seems to flourish. In the face of threat or danger or torture or even death itself, the church only grows more bold. Consider the witness of the underground church in Iran today which may be the fastest growing church in the world. Consider the witness of the underground church in China which may be the largest “Christian” nation in the world. Consider the revival taking place in the Horn of Africa among the Muslims who live there as church planters risk their lives to preach the gospel to them. It’s simply amazing.

This is why the Apostle Paul boasts about the Thessalonian church wherever he goes on his missionary journeys. He wants the churches he plants to follow their example. He wants them to be encouraged in the face of opposition. He wants them to show the same steadfastness and faith that their brothers and sisters have shown amidst all the persecutions and afflictions they were enduring. It’s the same in our world today. It’s why I love coming home to share about what I have seen over in Africa. Recently, I even had an elder in our church tell me, “I wish we could bottle up a little bit of the Holy Spirit energy you bring back with you to give to everyone here.” He’s not wrong. That’s my desire as well.

Now let me be clear. There was nothing superhuman about the Thessalonian Christians. There is nothing superhuman about the Iranian or Chinese or African Christians in our world today. The power to endure hostility and affliction and persecution does not come from us. It comes from God and it is His call to every single Christian. Friends, we simply do not have the power to live the Christian life on our own. 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.

Jump down to verses 11-12 of the first chapter. Here 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.

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.

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 18:19-19:41

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November 24, 2022
A Social/Political Gospel

Readings for today: [Acts 18:19-19:41](#)

Happy Thanksgiving! As many gather around tables for food and fellowship today, there are certain subjects bound to be off-limits. Politics. Religion. Hot-button cultural issues. Then again, maybe your family is like mine and we enjoy these conversations. We have strong people with many strong opinions and the conversation can be fiery at times. ;-) Our number one rule is that we can talk about anything, provided we remain respectful, humble, and loving towards each other. Sadly, far too many of us have a hard time navigating these kinds of conversations. The result is deep brokenness, hurt feelings, and a spoiled holiday.

I often experience the same challenges in the church. On the one hand it's not surprising. Healthy churches are full of people from all kinds of different backgrounds and life experiences. They are strung out along a spectrum of spiritual maturity. Some are brand new to the faith and just learning to walk like Jesus. Others have been walking with Jesus for years and have more practice. It makes for a difficult environment as people try to apply the gospel to their lives. It's equally challenging to apply the gospel to the culture around us. How many times have I heard the comment, "why can't the preacher just stick to the gospel?" Why does he or she have to bring politics into worship? 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 we read 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 the apostles followed His example.

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 one of the main centers of learning in the ancient world. It had an 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 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 the 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." He's already been accused of treason and sedition. He's already been accused of upending entire social systems and ways of life. He's 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 a different 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. A Kingdom 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 bows in heaven, on earth, and under the earth and every tongue confesses that He is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Corinthians 1-4

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November 25, 2022
Thanksgiving

Readings for today: 1 Corinthians 1-4

Today is a bonus day for many people in my country. It's part of a four day weekend of celebration with friends and family. Many use this time to sleep in. Eat leftovers from the Thanksgiving feast they enjoyed yesterday. Decorate for Christmas. Shop the "Black Friday" sales. Of course, not everyone has the day off. Some will head back to work. Someone has to man the stores for those who shop. First responders will continue to keep our communities safe. Doctors and nurses will treat patients. Airline pilots and flight attendants will start flying people back home on what promises to be another busy weekend at the airports.

Though the Thanksgiving holiday may be coming to a close, our passage for today reminds us that "Thanksgiving" is more of a lifestyle than a one day event. It's more an attitude of the heart than a meal around a table with those we love. I love how Paul begins almost every one of his letters with thanksgiving. "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in Him in all speech and all knowledge - even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you - so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." (1 Corinthians 1:4-9)

The Corinthian Christians were a mess. They were immoral. They were divisive. They were prideful and greedy. They were broken in all sorts of ways and yet Paul thanks God for them. He thanks God for the grace given them. For the spiritual gifts poured out on them. For the testimony of Christ among them. It's a great reminder that no matter how broken our churches may become, Christ is faithful. He will sustain us to the end. He will present us guiltless at the final day before the throne.

Yesterday, I gave thanks for many things. My family. My friends. The wonderful church I serve. The opportunities I've been given. Most of all, I gave thanks to God for the grace He has poured out on me. Without Christ, there's a strong chance I would be an alcoholic. Working odd jobs struggling to make ends meet. No marriage. No kids. No career. I was aimless before I met Jesus. I was lost and wandering with no sense of purpose or direction. Then Christ came into my life and changed everything. He enriched me in more ways than I deserve. He lavished gifts on me that I did not earn. He provided opportunities for me I could never have achieved on my own. My life is radically different because of what Jesus did for me so I take time to thank Him. Every single day. I hope you will as well.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Corinthians 5-8

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November 26, 2022
And Such Were Some of You...

Readings for today: [1 Corinthians 5-8](#)

One of the real challenges for the American church today is to overcome the perception that we are hostile and judgmental towards those who do not believe like us. Far too often, the loudest “Christian” voices seem to be the ones that are the harshest and most combative. I think of the preachers who get platformed on cable news or social media. They often make sweeping statements against entire groups of people due to their political beliefs or lifestyle choices. They are known more for what they are against than who they are for. They are often hypocritical, refusing to apply the same litmus tests to those they support or those who can get them access to power and wealth and influence. They are selective in their judgments, tending to elevate some sins and not others. And while this is an effective approach if one wishes to gain followers, likes, clicks, etc. It is counter-productive when it comes to spreading the gospel.

If only we could collectively remember where God found us. If only we could collectively remember how far God has brought us. If only we could remember the depth and depravity of our own sin perhaps we'd be more humble and gentle in our approach. In our reading for today, Paul addresses the pride of the Corinthian Christians. Though God has richly blessed them with every spiritual blessing, they have weaponized their spiritual gifts against each other. They have divided over who is the most holy. Factions have formed around wealth and influence or the lack thereof. It's heartbreaking. “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the Kingdom of God. And such were some of you...” (1 Corinthians 6:9-11a) Paul could easily have gone on to list a thousand more sins but his point is made. All of the Corinthians have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. All of them are unrighteous and therefore unworthy of the Kingdom of God. All of them were without hope of salvation until God delivered them through the shed blood of His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. They were washed in His blood. They were sanctified by His Spirit. They were justified by His atoning death on the cross. It is only by God's grace that the Corinthians have any faith at all so who are they to condemn those around them?

Yes, we should flee immorality. Yes, we should not turn a blind eye to the sin in our midst. Judgment begins at the house of God according to 1 Peter 4:17. But at the same time, we recognize we are not judge, jury, or executioner. It is not our job to pass judgment and condemn those around us. We are not given such authority. Our job is simply to speak the truth in love. To hold each other accountable with grace and truth. To walk with each other openly and honestly and transparently. Always seeking to build up rather than tear down. Always seeking to repay evil with good. Always offering a gentle answer to turn away wrath. How I wish Christians would listen to the Apostle James when he says, “The anger of man cannot bring about the righteousness of God.” (James 1:20) Two wrongs never make a right. Sin never produces righteousness. An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind. (Gandhi) Would that we could remember our own spiritual blindness and ignorance as we respond to the brokenness and pain and suffering and injustice and unrighteousness of the world around us! Perhaps it would result in more humility and grace and a greater, more effective witness for the gospel.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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November 28, 2022
Laying Down Our Lives

Readings for today: 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 enshrined 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 tell them 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 “human rights.” 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 that he is saved by the 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 assert his “rights”, he could claim a privileged place 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 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 or American citizens or whatever other identity we hold so dear. 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 - as important as they are - 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 they reveal 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. It doesn’t matter. Christ calls us to lay all of them down. To willingly and joyfully surrender them for the 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 are you holding onto? What privileges are you 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.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Corinthians 12-14

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November 29, 2022
The Body of Christ

Readings for today: 1 Corinthians 12-14

I love the church. I love the people who make up the church. They come from a wide variety of different backgrounds and life experiences. They represent different cultures and ethnicities. They hold to different political and social positions. They are diverse in terms of age and economic status. They find themselves at different points along the spectrum of spiritual maturity. They wrestle with all sorts of sin issues. There's no other organization in the world quite like it and none of it would be possible without Jesus. Only Christ is strong enough to hold them together in a world that is increasingly divided and fractured along ideological lines.

Nothing is new under the sun. The Roman Empire was intentionally pluralistic. It was made up of wide variety of cultures and ethnicities and languages and religions. Depending on where one went, one would encounter a wide variety of social and political norms. The one thing that held the empire together was a ritual that was performed once a year. Once a year a person had to present themselves before the Roman authorities, place a pinch of incense into a flaming brazier, and acknowledge the divinity of the emperor. Most of the pagan religions had no problem with this practice. They simply added the emperor to their pantheon of gods and goddesses. For Jews and Christians however, this practice was blasphemy. They refused to engage it. The Jews were largely given an accommodation due to their long history of exclusive monotheism but the Christians - being so new - were persecuted as a seditious, dangerous cult.

This is the cultural context in which the Apostle Paul planted his churches. He intentionally went to the largest and most cosmopolitan cities in the empire. Cities that sat at the crossroads of major, important trade routes that would draw people from every tribe, tongue, and nation. Corinth was perhaps the greatest of these cities outside of Rome herself. The people who responded to the gospel in that city were as diverse as you could possibly get. They had very little in common with each other which created all sorts of issues that Paul had to address in his letters. (Most scholars believe Paul wrote at least four letters to this church.) They were a gifted group of people. They were a relatively wealthy church as well. And yet they were plagued by divisions. Their fellowship was rife with competition. Their besetting sin was pride and it was literally tearing them apart.

This is why Paul writes so passionately about the Body of Christ. He wants to give them an image that will pull them together. He wants them to understand that each of them plays an essential role in helping the Body remain healthy and strong. He points out how they are “crippling” themselves when they cut off a “hand” or a “foot” or tear out an “eye” or an “ear.” He wants them to treasure their diversity. He wants them to see the variety of gifts God has given them as a strength not a weakness. Most of all, he wants them to understand that only the love of Christ can hold them together.

Some scholars suggest that the famous love chapter of Corinthians is an insert. It doesn't seem to fit in Paul's discussion of spiritual gifts. I think the opposite. I think it fits perfectly for it is love that binds us all together in perfect harmony. (Col. 3:14) Only the love of Christ “believes all things, bears all things, endures all things, hopes all things.” Only the love of Christ “never fails.” This was certainly true for the Corinthian Christians and it remains true for us today. The only hope we have as a church is to lean into the love of Christ together. If we try to organize our life together around anything else, we will fail. We will fall apart. The Body of Christ runs on the love of Christ. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Corinthians 15-16

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November 30, 2022
The Gospel

Readings for today: [1 Corinthians 15-16](#)

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 anything 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 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?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Corinthians 1-4

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