

WHAT IS THE
GOSPEL?

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Acknowledgments

The Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod, living as a single community of faith with tens of thousands of individual members, naturally experiences life and ministry in a great variety of ways. But the experience of living through an extended period of population decline is generally true across our ten counties. The generational weariness of this experience ought not to be underestimated. And yet, in every place where our people gather around Word and Sacrament and Service, there remains hope, faith, joy. The action of our 2021 Synod Assembly, to identify as first among our strategic initiatives our desire to “rekindle a passion for the Gospel,” has in part led to this little book. Above all else, I wish to acknowledge the witness of the faithful, hopeful, joyful people of this synod.

For decades, the synod staff has brought tremendous gifts for ministry and personal dedication to the life and ministry of this synod. Lauren Wolcott, Sandy DeLorenze, Pr. Melissa Stoller, and Pr. Peter Asplin have been particularly engaged in the editing process of this project. Pr. Robert Hawk and Bishops Ralph Jones and Craig Satterlee were gracious and gentle in their roles as intentional readers.

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Foreword

In the fall of 2018, the Synod Council of the Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod identified four strategic initiatives to guide its life and ministry. At its 2021 Synod Assembly, the synod affirmed as first in importance the strategic initiative to “rekindle a passion for the Gospel.” This little book is an invitation to do exactly that by asking and answering the question, “What is the Gospel?”

The very way in which we ask that question already engages the lively tension of faith and failing within each of us. Behind the word “rekindle” lies the image of getting a fire going again by kneeling down close to it, carefully placing kindling directly on the glowing embers and blowing gently and repeatedly until the kindling flashes into flame.

So let us ask the question, “What is the Gospel?” with this image in mind. That is, as a holy exercise of faith. The invitation to kneel down in spirit anticipates a posture of humility on the part of the reader to be open to thoughtful answers to the question, “What is the Gospel?” The invitation to blow gently and repeatedly on the glowing embers is a prayer to the Holy Spirit, without whom all our efforts are in vain, to accompany this work.

So what about the kindling? What are the practical, tangible actions and exercises that may be brought to the effort and placed on the glowing embers carefully, eagerly, confident that if they catch flame, larger and more substantive pieces of our shared life and mission as a synod will burn with a passion for the Gospel? Kindling must be very small and very dry for lingering heat and steady breath to burst into flame.

It is likely that individual readers or a group reading together will best identify what serves their reading as bits of kindling to bring. Some might name dry places in a life of faith, either as a person or as a congregation. Others may want to renew small and specific faith practices, like daily Bible reading or praying before meals. A dormant adult Christian education program could be something that gets started again through a congregation’s study of this book, or perhaps a meaningful way for a congregation to put its faith into words.

Bring your kindling, whatever it is, and place it carefully on each of these chapters; kneel down in your spirit and invite the Holy Spirit through prayer to accompany you with steady, holy breath. My prayer is that a passion for the Gospel catches fire anew in you and in your community of faith.

+ Kurt

Prayers to Accompany Reading and Conversation

Holy Spirit, light my way.
Illumine my thoughts.
Soften my heart.
Be present.
Come.

Lord Jesus, your story draws me toward you; I want to see and hear and learn your love as fully as I can. But coming close to your cross makes me afraid, for it is a cause of great pain and suffering. Receive me, welcome me, and shield me as I come close to you, that I may find the joy of receiving your gift of life greater than the fear of joining you on your path through suffering and death. Lord Jesus, live in me that I may live in you. Amen.

God, our creator, you have made us out of the dust of this earth so that we cannot be who we are without being connected to this place. You have made us in your image and breathed into us your own spirit so that we cannot be who we are without living in you. You have given us to each other and have joined us to the story of Jesus so that we may find our purpose and meaning most fully in the community of faith. Lead us into conversation today that our listening and our speaking may reflect and reveal who you have made us to be. Amen.

Eternal God, we seek you in this moment of reading and conversation. Reveal yourself to us in our time together. Enlighten our minds, rejoice our hearts, and lead us into your good and gracious will, for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord, who died and lives and has promised to be with us to the end of the age. Amen.



CHAPTER ONE

Why Ask the Question?

This little book seeks to invite the reader into rekindling a passion for the Gospel. But what, after all, is the Gospel? Answering that question turns out to be more of a challenge than we might imagine, for while the simplest response, “The Gospel is the story of Jesus,” is perfectly true, this answer leads us rather quickly into a landscape of next-questions with their own inviting and troubling answers.

To begin with, the Gospel is not the story *about* Jesus; it is the story *of* Jesus. And Jesus is a living person whose story continues to grow as it includes the lives of the people who hear it. The story of Jesus changes people so that the Gospel becomes their story as well. Or, to say it more carefully, when the event of hearing the Gospel works to create faith within people, then the story of Jesus, as told by those people, takes on the accents and contours of their lives as well. The story of Jesus is always told by an actual person whose life is being changed by that story. So there is no Gospel, we could say, apart from “The Gospel According to So-And-So.”

The living nature of the story of Jesus is a thrilling thing to discover and to be part of! Those who have heard the story of Jesus, and have found faith growing within them because of it, belong to a community of people that together tells the story of Jesus to each other and to those who have not yet heard it. This community has lived through many ages, it has grown across continents, and it has found itself within and outside of any number of institutional arrangements. Being part of the community that proclaims the Gospel is an extraordinary experience of welcome and belonging that has the capacity to clarify the purpose and meaning of being human.

And it is also a sobering thing. For the story of Jesus invites people into the way of Jesus, which is a path that leads through death to life. But since it is so deeply ingrained in our nature to avoid death at every turn, we carry within us an almost irresistible tendency to re-shape the Gospel into a story that will lead us to life without first having to walk through suffering and death! This ever-present threat is why we ask the question, once again, “What is the Gospel?”

When we turn our attention deeply to this question, we find our conversation about the Gospel to reside in the lively tension of a paradox, for we see that:

- the Gospel is the one true story of God’s gift of life and love and welcome for all, embodied in the one living person of Jesus Christ; and
- the Gospel story lives in and is told by many different people, each struggling daily with facing the truth about

themselves and their own ability to love and welcome others.

Rekindling a passion for the Gospel, then, is not just a matter of learning more information about Jesus; it is a matter of engaging the struggle into which the story of Jesus invites us.

As we live in the lively tension of the Gospel paradox, we find that the story of Jesus that we tell to each other and to those who have never heard it is made all the more powerful and engaging when it is told from the perspective of our faith. This is most certainly true! And we find that we are always in danger of changing the story of Jesus into a narrative that justifies our own interests and comforts, that is limited by our own capacity to love and welcome others, which turns the story of Jesus into something else entirely. Sadly, this is equally true.


So what keeps us in an authentic place? How can we know that the story of faith we have to tell resonates with the story of Jesus first told within the Church? The “check and balance” built into the Church’s practice of telling the story of Jesus includes consulting the written record of the Biblical narrative and active deliberation within the community of faith, which is both an ancient tradition and a contemporary reality.

Toward that end, each chapter includes specific Scripture references that shape the authentic Gospel and concludes with a number of conversation starters. Some of these will draw readers into friendly relationship with others or with their own faith history; others are intended to pose real challenges to faithful thinking and living in order to press us ever forward in telling the story of Jesus with increasing confidence and humility.

And so, with eagerness and in wonder, with fear and trepidation, emboldened by hope and troubled by our own failings, we ask, again and again, “What is the Gospel?”

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

1. Did the insights and claims of this chapter seem pretty obvious and basic to you? Or did these introductory steps already make you feel in over your head?
2. Did this first chapter make you want to find others to read this book with you? Or are you eager to go clear to the end solo?



CHAPTER TWO

The Gospel Is the Story of Jesus

Let's start to answer the question, "What is the Gospel?" with the most simple definition: It is the story of Jesus. The most basic introduction to the Gospel begins with the four books in the Bible that have the label "Gospel" attached to them. They are Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These four books narrate the story of Jesus as it was told within the Church a few decades after his death and resurrection. The Church rightly calls their authors the Four Evangelists, but it is being somewhat careless in our language to call these four books The Four Gospels, for each of them is presented to us as "The Gospel."

The Gospel According to St. Matthew is the Gospel. *The Gospel According to St. Mark* is the Gospel. *The Gospel According to St. Luke* is the Gospel. *The Gospel According to St. John* is the Gospel. We give thanks for the varied witness of the Four Evangelists¹, and at the same time, we confess that there is only one Gospel. The Gospel is the story of Jesus, and Jesus is one person, so the Gospel is one story.

But since the Gospel is a *story*, it must be *told* to be anything at all. And because a story requires both telling and hearing, we can rightly say that "the Gospel" is a thing that only happens when people are engaged with each other in some way around telling and hearing the story of Jesus.

The Gospel is therefore not the collection of documentable data related to the life of Jesus of Nazareth. The Gospel is the *story* of Jesus. If you have heard the story of Jesus, you can tell the story of Jesus. And when you do, that will be the Gospel, happening, between you and those to whom you are telling the story!

Now, not every story is the Gospel, but the one story of Jesus may be told in many different ways. A single verse of a hymn² may tell the story of Jesus as surely as it is told in reading *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* from start to finish. We expect the story of Jesus to be told in preaching; we trust that it is told in the liturgy of Christian worship. The story of Jesus may also be told in a conversation with a neighbor, in a painting, in the shape of our life as a community (see Acts 4:32-35, for example).

So what is the story of Jesus that it may be told in all these ways? Any faithful answer to this question must resonate with

¹ The title, "Evangelist" means "Gospel-teller." "Evangel" is an English form of the Greek word for gospel found in the New Testament: εὐαγγέλιον.

² For example, verse 4 of Samuel Crossman's hymn, *My Song is Love Unknown*. "We cry out, we will have our dear Lord made away, a murderer to save, the prince of life to slay. Yet cheerful he to suffering goes that he his foes from thence might free."

the image of Jesus hanging on the cross, where the eyes of faith see both the disastrous result of human willfulness and the inexhaustible will of God to save.

St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”³ In writing this, he indicated to them that when the story of Jesus is compressed to its most critical narrative, its most essential ingredient, that central element is the event we call “the cross.”

The creeds tell the story of Jesus in this way. They leave out all the narratives of Jesus’ teaching and healing ministry, his miracles, and his fiery challenges to the religious establishment. The creeds narrate the specific events we mean to include when we speak of “the cross of Christ.” That is, they link the historical event of Jesus’ crucifixion directly to his incarnation and to his resurrection in a faith narrative that contains the hope of salvation.

We do the same thing in our celebration of the Eucharist when we proclaim the mystery of our faith; that is, when we tell the story of Jesus together in this compact liturgical form: “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.”

A bit earlier in I Corinthians, St. Paul defined his mission when he wrote, “Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.”⁴ For Paul, the story of Jesus can only be authentically Gospel if it resonates with the cross of Christ.

You may listen for that story in its most essential form by gazing at length on the cross of Christ. I mean this literally. Find a cross in your home, one that pictures the body of Jesus crucified. This may be as small as a necklace ornament, or it may be a large wall cross. If all else fails, search “crucifix” in your web browser and select one image to focus on, or use the picture at the start of this chapter.

Do nothing but look for as long as you can. Just look. See as much as you can see. If you are unable to see, you could invite a close friend to describe a specific crucifix to you, an exploration guided by your questions that ask, “What else is there?” If the crucifix you have is a tangible object that you can reach, hold it in your hands. Close your eyes and use your fingers to encounter the artist’s work. Then listen, through your eyes or through your fingers, for the artist is telling you the story of Jesus.

How is the disastrous result of human willfulness shown to you in this artist’s work? How is the inexhaustible will of God to save found in what you see or feel? Listen in every way you can for as long as you can, and return day after day as often as you can until you begin to hear clearly the story of Jesus that is being told through the cross of Christ.

Sometimes images we have gazed at for a long time remain imprinted for a while on our retinas so that we can still see them even when we close our eyes, or songs we have heard get stuck in our heads and won’t let us go. Allow your heart and mind to carry the image and story of Christ on the cross into every context of your daily life and overlay it with images and stories of events taking place around the world. What happens when you begin to see the cross of Christ in all suffering? What does the story of Jesus sound like in the context of local and global events?

Continue this meditative practice by putting what you have heard and seen into words. Write your words down. Edit them for power, and clarity, and fervor. Memorize them if you can, or create poetry or song out of them if that seems like a more powerful way to communicate what you have heard. What do you find so compelling in what you have heard and in what you have written that you would be eager to share it with someone else? Capture that story. Tell that story.

The Gospel is what happens when people are engaged with each other in telling and hearing the story of Jesus, especially in ways that they have become passionate about.

³ I Corinthians 2:2.

⁴ I Corinthians 1:17.

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

1. Can you remember when you first heard the story of Jesus?
2. If not, can you recall a particular time when you heard the story of Jesus told in a new and powerful way?
3. When someone tells a story that you already know, what makes it worth listening to again?
4. Do you find that some members of your family can tell family stories that everyone already knows better than others? Why is this?
5. Are you in the practice of making the sign of the cross over yourself? If so, when do you do this? And why?
6. What is it about “the cross” that it can stand for the whole narrative of the Christ event?
7. What emotional response do you find in yourself when you look at a crucifix for a long time?
8. The word “gospel” means “good news.” What would you say is the good news in the cross of Jesus?



CHAPTER THREE

The Gospel Is the Power of God for Salvation

The Gospel is actually defined in the first chapter of Romans. Very early in his letter to the church in Rome, St. Paul writes, “I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.”⁵

“Power of God” and “salvation” and “faith” are definitely churchy terms that could stand a little explanation. In fact, we might say that the rest of St. Paul’s letter to the Romans is his explanation of the phrase, “the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.” We’ll get back to those words in a minute. “Shame,” on the other hand, needs no introduction.

Why might St. Paul have to say that he is *not* ashamed of the Gospel? What is it about the Gospel that could cause shame?

The early Christian sermon that we know as the book of Hebrews gives us a clue. The preacher says that “for the joy that was set before him,” Jesus “endured the cross, *disregarding its shame*, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.”⁶

As that preacher’s first audience would have known full well, crucifixion stripped its victims of their clothing, physical mobility, and dignity. The clear message delivered through the agonizing public death of crucifixion was simple: *This fool is a failure.*

Shame is tied to all these things. We feel ashamed when we are exposed before others and when we fail. We feel ashamed if we can’t do for ourselves, if we have to ask for help. We feel ashamed if we appear to be foolish in the eyes of others. The cross of Jesus was meant precisely to be a cause for shame by those who had the power to crucify him.

But the preacher of Hebrews proclaims that Jesus *disregarded* its shame, and St. Paul says that he is not ashamed of the Gospel. Why is that? Because both Jesus and St. Paul knew something about the power of God—that it is not simply human power ratcheted up a notch or two. The power of God to save is something quite different from the power that put Jesus to death.

St. Paul puts it this way in his second letter to the Corinthians: “power is made perfect in weakness.”⁷ It’s God’s power

⁵ Romans 1:16.

⁶ Hebrews 12:2.

⁷ II Corinthians 12:9.

that St. Paul is talking about here, of course, for human power is undone by weakness.

We naturally think of power as control or conquest, the ability to do something or gain something even if someone or something is trying to stop us. Everything from sports to war to business follows this pattern. Power politics and Powerade®⁸ have this in common: They are designed to overcome obstacles by force. There is no place for weakness in either.

So what is it about the power of God that it is made *perfect* in weakness? We may begin to approach this mystery by thinking about some experiences that are familiar to us. We find, for example, that the delicacy of a snowflake is directly connected to its powerful aesthetic pull on our sense of wonder and beauty. Snowflakes would not be nearly as wondrous to us if they were made of cast iron or plastic. There is an inherent power to elicit wonder in their physical *fragility*.

Similarly, the tenderness of a small child who instinctively gives away anything she has in hand to comfort an adult she thinks is sad pulls at our heartstrings with power that is directly proportionate to our assessment of her innocence. We may be moved to tears just at the thought of such a gesture, and of course, it is the social weakness of the child that makes such a story so powerful.

Holding these familiar experiences close, look again at how St. Paul defined the Gospel: It is the power of *God for salvation*. The power of God that is made perfect in weakness is not the power to control or conquer; nor is it exactly the power to inspire or the power to move us emotionally (although glimpsing the power of God at work may, in fact, do both!), but it is the power to save. That is, the power to love people who have gotten lost from each other, and even from themselves, and to bring them back into mutual relationships of trust and respect with each other and with God.

The power of love is made perfect in weakness because love is given as a gift. The response of love, when being loved in return, is nothing to write home about. But God's love for people who are lost, a love embodied in Jesus, is a love that suffers rejection and abuse and insult and scorn, even shameful crucifixion and death, and yet loves in return. God's powerful love is made *perfect* because it is given from a place of perfect weakness. And yet its power is found to be stronger than hate, stronger than rejection, stronger than death. We call that inexhaustible love, which is God's will to save, "the Gospel."

So what of "faith," the last of the churchy words that needs some explanation? Faith is the word we use to describe the specific change that happens in us when the story of the Gospel catches our attention.

If the wondrously powerful delicacy of a snowflake inspires you in any way, it has changed you. If the emotionally powerful gesture of a small child offering to help moves your heart at all, it has changed you. When we hear the story of Jesus, and it moves us, when we find we can't get away from it, when the story fills our imagination and draws us in to learn more about Jesus, we can say that faith is being created in us.

Faith tells us that the story of Jesus we have heard is true and important and life-changing. Faith tells us that the Gospel matters. And faith looks for ways to put into words the wonder it has encountered, even if those words initially, or even primarily, take the shape of questions.

⁸ Powerade® is a registered trademark of the Coca-Cola company. Its marketing slogans include the phrases: "More power for you," and "We've taken hydration to the next level so you can power through every run or ride."

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

1. Can you think of a time when you have experienced the power of love?
2. How would you describe the kind of power that is inherent in fragility, in innocence, in weakness?
3. Have you ever been able to return love for hate? If so, what happened to you when you did that?
4. When you look at a picture of Jesus on the cross, do you see love?
5. How would you put into words the love that Jesus had for those who mistreated and killed him?
6. Why does the story of Jesus' love for those who killed him matter to you?



CHAPTER FOUR

The Gospel Is Inherently Elusive

There are all kinds of things that we find to be elusive. Some of these things do not actually exist. The end of the rainbow, for example, or the fabled Fountain of Youth. The Gospel is an elusive thing, something we find nearly impossible to catch and hold, but not because it is an imaginary thing. The particularly elusive character of the Gospel is that once it is obtained, it changes into something else. I'll try to describe what I mean by that observation.

The Gospel is the story of Jesus. It's a story that has been told in the family of faith for many generations. Some people have a knack for telling family stories perfectly well. Others hardly get started before another family member complains, "You're not telling it right!" When this happens to the telling of the story of Jesus, well-meaning people sometimes strive to resolve the situation by chasing down every detail that must be included, just so, for the story of Jesus to be the *true* story. St. Luke, for example, admits to something very much like this! ⁹

But that noble effort rather soon turns out to be like trying to photograph the elusive snow leopard. St. John replies to St. Luke that it is not really *that* important to get every detail of Jesus' ministry written down in just the right order as long as the telling of the story of Jesus creates faith.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, John's telling of the story of Jesus is notably different from the other three, but each of the Four Evangelists includes some details that the others omit. Each Gospel book in the Bible, then, leaves some bit of the story of Jesus out of its photograph—a paw, an ear, the tip of the tail.

Efforts have been made to corner and catch the ever-elusive Gospel by mashing all four Biblical stories of Jesus into one narrative that includes EVERY DETAIL. The earliest of these is called the *Diatessaron*, and it was written by Tatian in Syria about the year 160. The work was done well enough that it enjoyed popular use in Syria for nearly three hundred years. Yet, Tatian couldn't resolve the two different genealogies of Jesus from Matthew and Luke¹¹, so he left them *both* out.¹²

This effort strikes me as looking at a photograph of a snow leopard in captivity. All the details of the animal's physical form may be in the frame and available to the viewer, but something critical to its nature as a living creature is completely missed. A blurry picture of a portion of the big cat leaping behind a rock captures the reality of this living creature more accurately. I find the irreconcilable genealogies of Matthew and Luke to be an inherent blurriness that retains the never-

⁹ Luke 1:1-4.

¹⁰ John 20:30-31.

¹¹ Matthew 1:1-17; and Luke 3:23-38.

¹² Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, Oxford University Press, 1968, p. 89.

completely-accessible nature of a living story.

The story of Jesus is a living thing. The Gospel happens in the telling and the hearing of the story of Jesus among people who are engaged with each other in a particular place and time. If the story of Jesus could be captured sufficiently well to catalog each important detail, put them all in proper order, and authorize the final result to be told in just this way and this way *only*, it would cease to be a living thing. The very act of getting it *exactly right* would change the living story of Jesus into a museum piece that had no more impact on human lives than a curious bit of history kept safe behind glass!

More importantly, the story of Jesus intends to mean something of personal significance to those who tell it and to those who hear it within the circumstances of their particular lives. It is not unimportant that the New Testament includes the Gospel *according to Matthew*, and *according to Mark*, and *according to Luke*, and *according to John*, for each of the Four Evangelists tells the story of Jesus in a way that includes personal engagement. The Gospel is a thing that happens between actual people who tell and hear the story of Jesus and who find that the story creates faith within them or stirs up again the faith that was already there. The Gospel matters to people. It matters deeply.

And yet, precisely here, the Gospel scoots away once again! In our very desire to articulate for others the profoundly personal meaning of the Gospel *we* have found for ourselves so that *they* also may know God's inexhaustible will to save, it is almost inevitable that the story of God's love gets exchanged for a repeatable formula, or a transferable deal, or a one-size-fits-all offer, or a plan of salvation that includes blank lines into which other people's names may simply be inserted, which, of course, is extraordinarily impersonal! Worse yet, *my* enthusiasm for the promise of the Gospel can take on the character of a demand that *others* must say and do and believe in their response to the story of Jesus just as I had done when I heard it. When this happens, we find to our dismay that the Gospel that we have *finally* got so securely in hand has turned into Law. That is, it has become an obligation rather than a gift.

The Gospel is not a commodity to be possessed, or intellectual property to be copyrighted, or even a moral standard or command to be followed.¹³ It is a living story, for it is the story of Jesus, who is a living person.

Our relationships are generally healthier when we do not try to capture and possess other persons but seek to live together with them in mutually respectful freedom. Just like people you have learned to live with in healthy ways, the Gospel continues to surprise and delight and confound those who rejoice in its company, and especially those who have given up trying to possess it!

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

1. Have you heard a family story told wrongly? What happens to the story when that happens? What happens to the family when that happens?
2. What other things can you think of that get lost as soon as they are gotten exactly right? What do these things have in common?
3. Does it trouble you that Matthew's genealogy of Jesus and Luke's genealogy of Jesus differ? Does this difference need to be resolved somehow? Can it be?
4. Can you imagine sharing your home with the Gospel as with a living companion? What might that be like?
5. Can you find the one line in the creed that uses the present tense for Jesus? How does the witness of Romans 8:34, that Jesus is currently interceding for us, help you think about your day-to-day relationship with Jesus?

¹³ Robert Jenson, *Story and Promise: A Brief Theology of the Gospel About Jesus*, Fortress Press, 1973, p. 2.



CHAPTER FIVE

The Gospel Is the Gift of Life

The Gospel is most simply the story of Jesus, and more specifically, the redemptive narrative of his death and resurrection, in which the disastrous result of human willfulness meets God's inexhaustible will to save. Of course, both of these powerful expressions of will were already active in the world before Jesus died and was raised. St. Mark acknowledges this when he tells us that Jesus preached the gospel as the very first of his ministry actions.

Mark 1:15 records Jesus' first sermon as this punchy, one-sentence invitation: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the gospel." If some brave soul had raised a hand in church that day and asked, "Um, Jesus, exactly what is the gospel?" what would Jesus have said in reply? For as yet, Jesus had not suffered or died or been raised or ascended into heaven. Is there a "Gospel" before Jesus' death and resurrection?

Of course there is. Because the Gospel is the story of Jesus, and Jesus' story begins before the very first acts of creation. St. John says this explicitly: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people."¹⁴

Paul and Timothy make the same point in Colossians, writing of Christ, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created."¹⁵

The stories of creation preserved in Genesis include both the expansive narrative of the cosmos, and all things in it, being spoken into existence by God's word: Light! and Matter! and Life!¹⁶ and the poignant picture of the Creator kneeling down close enough to breathe the breath of life into the clay-creation, Adam.¹⁷ Both accounts narrate the gift of life being given on purpose.

This gift of life encompasses everything we know and can imagine. None of us can remember a time before we were alive. And none of us did anything at all to bring ourselves into being. "Gift" is a shorthand way of talking about something that comes to us from outside of us, from another person, and that we have and experience apart from any action of our own to

¹⁴ John 1:1-4.

¹⁵ Colossians 1:15-16.

¹⁶ Genesis 1:1-2:3.

¹⁷ Genesis 2:7.

obtain it. Our lives can hardly be understood in any other way than as gift.

Ephesians describes the Gospel in gift language. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”¹⁸ The Gospel is a gift. It is the gift of salvation, given by the one who gives life. The gift of salvation is given as freely and as expansively and as personally as life itself is given. This is not an unimportant point.

We think of John 3:16 as “the Gospel in a nutshell,” and well, we might, for it describes God’s love and God’s gift of life.¹⁹ And yet the predominant meaning of this verse in our time and place has become so focused on the word “believe,” that the “Gospel” in this particular “nutshell” often slips away, leaving behind at best a formula by which believers may attain salvation, and at worst an implicit threat of eternal perishing for any who fail to believe.

Martin Luther called Romans 1:1-4 “The Gospel in a nutshell.”²⁰ Here is what he said about that:

“For at its briefest, the gospel is a discourse about Christ.... This may be seen clearly and well in his greeting to the Romans [1:1-4], where he says what the gospel is, and declares, ‘Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord,’ etc. There you have it. The gospel is a story about Christ, God’s and David’s Son, who died and was raised and is established as Lord. This is the gospel in a nutshell.”²¹

For Luther to find “the Gospel in a nutshell” in the book of Romans should come as no surprise to us, for he invites us to find in all of scripture “that which bears Christ.” St. Paul indicates in this passage that the hope of the Gospel was a story that was already being told before the birth of Christ, for it was “promised beforehand through the prophets.”

Reading scripture this way, we may say things like this about the Gospel story: That it was launched in the first act of creation, glimpsed in the stories of the children of Israel, longed-for in the Psalms, anticipated by the prophets, accomplished in Christ Jesus, expounded upon by the early Christian writers, and is harbored as hope in the hearts of believers today.

If the Gospel is truly found in all of this astounding narrative, we may propose an appropriate answer that Jesus could have given as early as Mark 1:15 to the question, “What is the Gospel?” It is the good news of the kingdom of God, that the One who gives the gift of life expansively, personally, redemptively, and eternally has come to you today.

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

1. “Gift” is one way to talk about our experience of life. Are there other ways to talk about life?
2. Do you find it to be an energizing idea or a troubling one that the Gospel may be found in all of scripture?
3. What do you think and feel when you see the “John 3:16” sign held up between the goalposts at football games?
4. How might the creation itself be thought of as a Gospel act?
5. If the Gospel can be found in St. Paul’s letter to the Romans, perhaps it can be found in your life too. Can you point to the Gospel in your life?

¹⁸ Ephesians 2:8.

¹⁹ “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

²⁰ Timothy F. Lull and William R. Russel, eds., *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, 3rd Edition, Fortress Press, 2012, p. 72.

²¹ Ibid. Luther’s work that is cited here is *A Brief Introduction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels*, 1521.



CHAPTER SIX

The Gospel Is Being Forgiven

There's just no getting around it. Clearly built into the story of Jesus is the story of relationships that are not as they should be and the story of God's work to put those relationships right. What is not as clear is how best to talk about that. Sadly, the Church's long history of trying to describe exactly how the Gospel puts relationships right has at times only further complicated them!

The word "sin" is an example of this. Lists of things you shouldn't think or do may immediately come to mind, but this word is meant to be a shorthand way of referring to a deeply complex and pervasive human experience. That is, the experience of

- *futility*, that no sooner do we have one thing sorted out than two others begin to fall apart; and of
- *tragedy*, that in the very effort to put things right, we end up making them worse; and of
- *finitude*, that no matter how mightily we struggle, all good things come to an end; and of
- *self-defeating willfulness*, that our natural tendency to pursue our own interests ironically ends up being the very thing that makes the achievement of our interests impossible.

The principal service of Christian worship²² speaks of sin in this way when the rite of Confession and Forgiveness invites us to confess that "we are in bondage (or captive) to sin and cannot free ourselves."²³

Christian worship also declares that God forgives us of all our sins. We hear this announcement both in the words of absolution and also in the Words of Institution at the center of the Eucharist when we recall that Jesus called the cup the new covenant in his blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins.²⁴ This really is good news; in fact, it is precisely the Gospel. But what does it mean? How does forgiveness of sins actually *work*?

In its noble efforts to explain this article of faith, the Church has at times turned to the concept of sacrifice. St. Paul, for example, reaches for that frame of meaning in Romans 3:25, describing Christ as the one "whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood." Cast in this frame, forgiveness works inasmuch as Jesus became the sacrifice that pays our debt to God. While this way of talking about forgiveness made perfect sense to people who lived in some periods of human history, it ends up being very unhelpful to others, who hear in the language of sacrifice an indication that God harbors

²² This phrase is found in the brief essay, "Pattern for Worship" in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Augsburg Fortress, 2006, p. 91.

²³ *Lutheran Book of Worship*, Augsburg Publishing House, 1978, pp. 56, 77, and 98; *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, pp. 95, 117.

²⁴ See Matthew 26:28.

wrath against humanity and is somehow reluctantly “bought off” by Christ’s death on the cross.²⁵ This does not come across to everyone as good news.

Similarly, the language of justification, which has found a lot of use in Lutheran preaching, but which frames forgiveness as a courtroom decision, can leave us looking for a more personal (perhaps less criminal) way of framing our relationship with God. Remarkably, we find this image used by St. Paul in the very place he also speaks of sacrifice, Romans 3:23-24. “Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift.”

In his treatise, *The Freedom of the Christian*, Martin Luther employs the image of a marriage to describe how forgiveness works. Using this frame, Luther claims that Christ “shares in the sins, death, and hell of his bride. In fact, he makes them his own and acts as if they were his own.” In exchange, Christ gives to the Church “eternal righteousness, life, and salvation.”²⁶

This happy exchange is a powerfully relational one. And it may become even more meaningful to us when we learn that the word that the New Testament uses for forgiveness is the same word that is used for divorce.²⁷ In this frame of meaning, forgiveness happens when Christ “marries” the Church, and the people of God are thereby “divorced” or “dismissed” or “let go” from the human condition of sin. Being forgiven, in this view, means to be released from the power and control of futility, tragedy, finitude, and self-defeating willfulness, as though from an unhealthy relationship, and to be welcomed into a new relationship of mutual love, respect, and freedom.²⁸

In this new relationship, futility is overcome in purpose, tragedy resolves in serendipity, finitude is reborn into resurrection life, and self-defeating willfulness is transformed by self-giving love. Also, in this frame, we find an emphasis on the “being” part of “being forgiven” rather than on how the mechanics of the deal that somehow cancels our sin actually work. It’s worth taking the time to dwell on the “being” part of being forgiven.

Being forgiven means being given the gift of *purpose*. Being married to Christ means that his story is also our story. We share a story that moves inexorably toward the redemption of all things. This confident claim finds expression in St. Paul’s words of encouragement, “your labor in the Lord is not in vain.”²⁹

Being forgiven means being given the gift of *resurrection life*. Since we anticipate the gift of a new and reconciled life with all others in the human community, we find value in continually working to restore relationships here and now, even with those from whom we are now estranged, as St. Paul wrote: “we regard no one from a human point of view.”³⁰ People of resurrection life are “ambassadors for Christ,” he writes (v. 20), calling always for reconciliation even when we cannot see that we are making any actual progress toward that end.

Being forgiven means being given the gift of *confidence* that God works all things together for good for those in a relationship of love with God.³¹ People of faith often say they can see, especially looking back, the gift of the Spirit in their lives, bringing things together for good.

Being forgiven means being given the gift of *finding personal fulfillment* in the posture of *self-giving love*. Jesus gives us this way of life as a gift when he says, “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it.”³²

We might be so bold as to say that the Gospel of forgiveness restores human *being* to those once lost in the human *condition*.

²⁵ Jenson, pp. 9-10.

²⁶ Lull, p. 410.

²⁷ This is the Greek word, ἀφίημι, which means “cancel, forgive, remit, allow, leave behind, forsake, neglect, let go, dismiss, and divorce,” according to Kurt Aland, et al., eds., *The Greek New Testament*, 3rd edition, United Bible Societies, 1983, pp. 29-30 in the dictionary appendix.

²⁸ Great care should be taken in the use of any extended metaphor, especially in community conversation. Not every divorce has been experienced as release from an unhealthy relationship, and not every marriage has been a cause for joy. Hold this metaphor lightly.

²⁹ I Corinthians 15:58.

³⁰ II Corinthians 5:16.

³¹ See Romans 8:28.

³² Mark 8:35.

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

1. Does it make sense to you to talk about “the human condition?” How do you experience the context or climate or setting of human life?
2. Why might lists of sins be different from place to place and from time to time?
3. How do you think forgiveness works?
4. Does the idea of the happy exchange sound like good news to you?
5. If Jesus receives our futility and tragedy and finitude in exchange for giving us his righteousness, life, and salvation, why in the world would he want to marry us?
6. Can you identify any ways in which you have been willing to exchange the good things you have to take on the challenges of another? How did that turn out?
7. Can “being” ever be enough for humans?



CHAPTER SEVEN

The Gospel Is Welcome

The posture of Jesus' body as he suffered and died on the cross clearly inspired this powerful and poignant expression of praise from Eucharistic Prayer V: "In great love you sent to us Jesus, your Son, who reached out to heal the sick and suffering, who preached good news to the poor, and who, on the cross, opened his arms to all."³³

We literally open our arms to each other to communicate a sign of welcome or to signal an invitation to embrace (knowing when we do this that there is an inherent risk in placing ourselves this close to others).³⁴ Small children sometimes play at stretching their arms as wide as possible to compete in a game of "I love you *this* much!" Wide-open arms can communicate safety and belonging, even when verbal language is a barrier. Adults who kneel down and open their arms to a crying child intend to offer themselves as a place of refuge.

We use the image of opening our arms or our hearts to others when we mean to communicate an active interest in positive engagement with them. St. Paul, writing to the Corinthians, both chides and embraces them when he writes, "Our heart is wide open to you... open wide your hearts also."³⁵

The story of Jesus is a story of open arms, both metaphorically and literally. Beyond describing the physical, open-arms posture of Jesus' body as he died on the cross, the scriptural witness of his life includes this description of his way of living: "He welcomes sinners and eats with them."³⁶ Jesus himself said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."³⁷ The Church's vision of the final redemption of all things includes these words of welcome:

The Spirit and the bride say, "Come."
And let everyone who hears say, "Come."
And let everyone who is thirsty come.

³³ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p. 65

³⁴ The risks include rejection, an embrace that becomes more intimate than expected, and personal exposure to pathogens. The current risk of transmitting the COVID virus has made even the thought of physical embrace unsettling for many. Quite apart from the new fears of the pandemic, some carry physical or emotional wounds that make actual embrace painful. I trust that readers with these experiences will be able to hold this chapter's image somewhat apart from the present persistence of the pandemic and to distinguish the act of welcome from physical touch enough to contemplate God's generous act of welcome in Jesus as a good thing.

³⁵ II Corinthians 6:11-13.

³⁶ Luke 15:2.

³⁷ Matthew 11:28.

Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.³⁸

If the Gospel needed to be said in just one word, that word could be “Welcome,” spoken in direct address from one person to another. If the Gospel needed to be said without using any words at all, open arms might just do it, for in that physical gesture is both an invitation of welcome extended to another and the vulnerability of the self that is risked in the act of extending welcome.

We are reminded of that dramatic scene in the parable of the lost son³⁹ when his father sees him from a distance and runs to him, opens his arms, and embraces him in joy. Before even a word is said, Gospel is communicated, for Gospel is the unrestrained embrace of one who cannot imagine receiving such a gift because he knows that he does not deserve it.

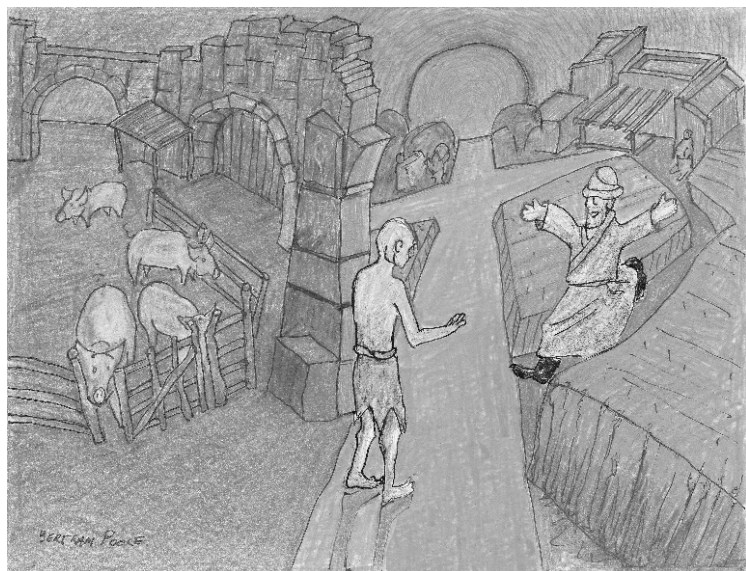
Like the wayward son who balks at this unexpected gift of welcome, we may find it hard to believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ when we hear it. The good news of undeserved welcome we hear preached to us may sound too good to be true. That is, it may feel like a trap more than a gift. “What is the catch?” we may ask, suspecting that so generous a gift must come with *some* strings attached.

In fact, there *are* strings attached, although not in the way that phrase is normally used. The gift of welcome that Jesus gives, his open arms of embrace, his self-giving as a place of refuge for us, is all genuine and true and without malice or a hidden intent or any trap waiting to be sprung once our defenses are lowered. But it is also true that Jesus opens his arms in welcome to all others, including those whom we are quite certain do not deserve his love, for they have certainly not warranted ours. The “strings” here are *our* issue—how complicated we find Jesus’ prodigal gift of welcome to be.

You may have heard the witty quip, “The problem with inviting Jesus into your heart is that he will want to bring his friends with him, and they are sinners and tax collectors.” While our faith teaches us rather clearly that the invitation of the Gospel actually comes from Jesus to us and not the other way around, the punch line holds true. The trouble we encounter with the unconditional welcome that Jesus extends to us is that he extends it also to people we find odd, uninteresting, unappealing, even odious. Jesus opens his arms to all.

This was literally true on the cross, where Jesus’ arms remained physically spread wide-open while the crowds jeered and the women looked on from a distance, while his mother and the Beloved Disciple stood near and when the soldiers lifted both sour wine to his lips and a spear to pierce his side. Jesus’ physical posture remained identical for every person and every action directed to him.

“Well, what else could he do?” any cursory glance at the cross might lead us to conclude; “His body was fixed in that position by nails!” True enough. And yet, as the witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection sustained their contemplation of the cross through the first several decades of the Church’s life, they came to realize that it was actually love that held his arms open to all. We see glimpses of that realization in the memory of these words of Jesus, which call us to extend a broader welcome than we might naturally think to provide: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”⁴⁰



³⁸ Revelation 22:17.

³⁹ Luke 15:11-32.

⁴⁰ Matthew 5:44-45.

The story of Jesus told in Holy Scripture is the fruit of sustained contemplation of his miraculous self-giving love for friends and enemies alike. The story of Jesus, we come to realize, embodies the very nature of God, who gives life to all, who provides for all, who welcomes all. It is this grand and complex story, made visible in Jesus, that we mean to identify when we use the shorthand phrase, “Gospel.” The Gospel is, in a word, welcome.

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

1. Do you remember ever competing in a game of “I love you this much?”
2. What happens to you, physically, when you open your arms as wide as you can now? Does anything stretch? Does anything hurt?
3. What happens to you, emotionally, when you do this? Does it make you feel generous? Silly? Vulnerable?
4. Are there people you wish to welcome with open arms but who are not themselves open to you?
5. Are there people you could not bear to welcome into the space defined by your open arms?
6. What happens in your heart when you think of Jesus opening his arms to all in welcome?



CHAPTER EIGHT

The Gospel Is for the Poor

When John the Baptist sent two of his disciples to Jesus to account for his ministry, Jesus replied, “Go inform John what you have seen and heard: the blind get to see again, the lame walk, the lepers get cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead awake, the poor get Gospelized.”⁴¹ Wait...what?

Our familiar English translation makes the last part of this verse a little more readable by saying that “the poor have good news brought to them.” The single Greek word found here (εὐαγγελίζονται) is a third-person, plural verb in the present indicative tense and in the passive voice, all stacked on top of the root word for Gospel (εὐαγγέλιον). It means, roughly, “they get Gospel preached.” Making all this fit into one English word that also makes sense to our ears is an impossible challenge!

What is much simpler to comprehend than the finer points of Greek grammar or the complex work of faithful translation is the stark verbal pattern established and kept through this whole verse. We can make the pattern visible using two columns and the simple, primary forms of each word pair:

blind	see
lame	walk
lepers	clean
deaf	hear
dead	awake
poor	Gospel

Wait...what? Shouldn't the last pair be “poor – wealth?” If the second word in each pair is the remedy for the condition described in the first word of each pair, then the logic seems to stumble at the end. *Poor* and *Gospel* seem an odd pair to use as the exclamation point of this litany of redemption. Much better, we would think, to end this list with this more expected culmination, “and the poor want for nothing!”⁴² Is Gospel any remedy for poverty?

⁴¹ Luke 7:22; author's translation.

⁴² We do find exactly this in the story of the first Christian community (Acts 4:34), which pooled personal possessions so that “there was

People have long noted a link between poverty and faith, an example of which we see already in the letter of James: “Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom?”⁴³ We may raise this same rhetorical question in our day, noticing that the Church is growing most rapidly in the poorest countries of the world while in the world’s wealthiest countries, the Church continues to diminish relative to the population.⁴⁴ There does seem to be a link between poverty and faith.

St. James attributes this observed reality to God’s will. Modern social theory would perhaps find different explanations that make faith an affordable treasure for the poor and, at the same time, a useless trinket for those whose wealth can obtain other ways of providing comfort and meaning and security.⁴⁵

Viewed through either lens, the odd pairing of *poor* and *Gospel* in Luke 7 that at first surprises can be softened enough that neither *poor* nor *Gospel* retains very much of its arresting power. This is not good. On the one hand, this can lead us to remain content with poverty as God’s presumed will for many people. On the other, it can lead us to think of the story of Jesus as something that people and civilizations might learn to outgrow through personal wealth and national market development.

But if *Gospel* really is meant to be the perfect remedy for *poor*, and if together the pair are meant to provide the exclamation point of Jesus’ ministry report to John the Baptist, then we are invited to think of *Gospel* as something that is powerfully corrective of the world’s profound wealth and health and human value imbalance and to see *poor* as a description that also applies to all people who do not yet hear the story of Jesus as their hope and salvation. Thinking about Gospel as the remedy for poverty and poverty as the need that Gospel addresses may be difficult to grasp, so let us begin with more familiar things.

The ability to see is taken for granted by those who have not lost their vision. Anyone who wears glasses understands that. (Ironically, we might say that we remain blind to the astounding gift that seeing truly is until we lose our sight!) The blessing of being able to walk remains my heart’s great desire for as long as my ankle is in a cast (as though healthy legs may actually be an impediment to a deep realization of the blessing of personal mobility). Hearing aids open the world of conversation and social engagement as a pure gift for those whose hearing loss has led to isolation. (Are most of us deaf to the good news that God has given us the gift of hearing simply because we are able to hear?) We can imagine or relate to all these physical realities and grasp their ironies without much difficulty.

By extension, we may have some idea of what it must have meant for those people identified as lepers in the Bible to be declared clean. In the miraculous act of healing that Jesus gave in his touch or by his word, a physical ailment that had caused social isolation and personal shame was gone, and all the blessed joy of normal life in community, most likely taken for granted until it was lost, was restored.

Similarly, the experience of dying⁴⁶ can make us suddenly and profoundly aware of the indescribable gift that just regular, normal, everyday life is, even though we are prone to amble inattentively through most of it.

For whom, then, is the Gospel the same bright, joyful blessing? For whom is the story of Jesus their heart’s desire, the gift of life restored? Who is truly distant enough from other false promises of salvation to treasure the Gospel? Jan Bender’s hymn paraphrase of the Beatitudes gives us an answer: “Those who know their need of God.”⁴⁷ Or, we might more simply say, the poor.

People for whom the human condition is a pressing daily reality tend to know their need of God more acutely than those living at ease. Lack of money narrows options for navigating life and increases the experience of pure need. Failed health can

not a needy person among them.”

⁴³ James 2:5.

⁴⁴ Krish Kandiah, “The Church is growing, and here are the figures to prove it,” *Christian Today*, March, 2015.

<https://www.christiantoday.com/article/a-growing-church-why-we-should-focus-on-the-bigger-picture/49362.htm>

⁴⁵ We think, for example, of Karl Marx’s famous dictum, “Religion is the opium of the people.”

⁴⁶ We may experience dying by watching people we love come to the end of their life, or we may ourselves have lived through a near-death experience. Still, even more general experiences like diminished physical strength that comes with age, or the loss of social status or influence can produce the same result.

⁴⁷ *Lutheran Book of Worship*, Canticle #17, *How Blest Are Those Who Know Their Need of God*.

magnify the experience of human frailty and make more evident the deep mystery and gift that a healthy human body is. Social isolation imposed by the larger community because of race or gender or world view makes simple belonging and welcome the heart's desperate desire. The darkness of mental anguish, depression, and grief leads the stricken heart to cry out, "O, God! O, God! O, God!" and mean it. That is, "I need something, someone not stuck in the human condition; something, someone who cares, who gives life, who forgives, who welcomes, because nothing I am and nothing I have will do it." If all this is what we mean by *poor*, then *Gospel* is most certainly the remedy.

Or, to turn this the other way around, to the extent that anyone in any life situation hears the story of Jesus and finds in it hope and joy, welcome and life and salvation, that person is responding to the Gospel out of some kind of poverty, whether seen by others or hidden by an apparently contented life. Hearing the Gospel as good news brings us to realize, "Without the cross of Christ, I am lost. Without Jesus' love, I have no hope." Or, as the great hymn-writer Isaac Watts was moved to write when he surveyed the wondrous cross, "My richest gain I count but loss and pour contempt on all my pride."⁴⁸

The blessed irony of the Gospel is that if you have to ask how much it will cost, you can't afford it, *and* the Gospel is perfectly free for those who have nothing left to cling to. As truly as resurrection is for the dead, the Gospel is for the poor.

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

1. Do you think of yourself as poor? Do others think of you as poor?
2. In the two places where the Beatitudes are found, Matthew 5:3 uses "poor in spirit," whereas Luke 6:20 uses "poor." Is Matthew softening and spiritualizing the crushing trauma of poverty? Is he widening its application to include people with material wealth?
3. Have you had the experience of losing your sight or mobility or hearing or social belonging? What was that like?
4. How have you faced death in your life? What did that teach you about life?
5. Does thinking about Gospel and poverty in this way help make sense out of things Jesus said about the relationship of wealth and the kingdom of heaven? (See Mark 10:17-31.)

⁴⁸ Isaac Watts, *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*, verse 1. ELW, #803; LBW, #482.



CHAPTER NINE

The Gospel Is Love

*My song is love unknown,
my Savior's love to me,
love to the loveless shown
that they might lovely be.⁴⁹*

Gospel love is not readily familiar to us. “Love unknown,” hymn-writer Samuel Crossman calls it, even though he knows he has received it. The love of which he sings he finds strange to him and different from other loves he has known, for its object is “the loveless,” which is not a thing of apparent beauty or value. While Gospel love is most certainly worth singing about, it could use some introduction.

But first, how might we describe that love which is more familiar to us? What is the nature of the love we know so well? We know love as an expression of personal interest, as in the confession, “I love Netflix.” We know love as the emotional state of being fully occupied with an object that strongly appeals to us, as in the swooning declaration, “I am in love with this new app!” This kind of love might be called reactive love, in that it names our emotional reaction to something we find interesting or affirming, something we desire.

The love that we have for other people is more complex than our fondness for things because it can be given back; at its best, this love is relationship also and not desire only. A description of love in its relational form must include more noble qualities like caring and nurture and empathy and listening. “We want the best for the ones we love,” we say, and we mean it. And, when our ability to listen and speak in the context of relational love is great enough, we find ourselves moving past self-interest and into self-giving.

The Love Chapter of I Corinthians 13 presents some of the finest qualities of relational love in compelling language: Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way. Love is not irritable or resentful. Love rejoices in the truth.⁵⁰

Familiar love can be petty, and it can be profound, but Gospel love, “love unknown,” is something else altogether. Gospel love is generative. It is transformative. It is “love to the loveless shown, that they might lovely be.” Gospel love is more than

⁴⁹ Samuel Crossman, *My Song is Love Unknown*, ELW #343; LBW #94.

⁵⁰ I Corinthians 13:4-6, edited.

attraction, more even than a commitment to relationship. It is a creative act.

Gospel love has the power to transform the loveless into the lovely. We may call this conversion or redemption, we may call this salvation or resurrection, but by any name, the work of the Gospel is to create new and lovely life out of the very things that disrespect life, that diminish and destroy it, that lead inexorably to death. The love that induced the tomb of Jesus to give birth to the first fruits of a new creation on Easter Sunday is what we call Gospel.

St. Paul gets at the generative quality of Gospel love when he writes to the Romans (5:8), “God proves his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.” We correctly confess that God loves sinners. But if when we say this, we are thinking of reactive love or relational love, we rather completely miss the point.

When we say that “God loves sinners,” we do not mean only to say that God finds sinful people to be desirable, although we ought not to rule that out.⁵¹ But if reactive love is all that we can imagine when saying that God loves sinners, as perhaps when we say with innocent amazement, “God loves me just the way I am!” we may then conclude that God affirms and encourages my failure to love my neighbor, my unwillingness to forgive those who have hurt me, and all the other sinful things about me that are “just the way I am.”

Nor do we mean only to say that God is committed to a relationship of care for sinners, even at great personal cost, although that is also most certainly true. For when we can imagine no more about God’s relationship of love with us than the snarl of complexity we experience in our relationships with others, we may despair about our own track record of “backsliding” or feel let down by God when things don’t turn out well for us.

Rather we mean to say that God’s generative love finds even in sinners a suitable context in which to accomplish the Gospel work of the renewal of all creation. Luther’s Small Catechism speaks of Gospel love in his explanation of the Third Article of the Creed: “I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith.”⁵² Gospel love is out to redeem the world and finds a place to engage that work in me, even though (or especially because!) I am a sinner.

Celebration of the work of Gospel love in sinners led St. Paul to declare, “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”⁵³ Reflection on what it means for Gospel love to be active *in his own life* produced a somewhat more bracing realization: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is 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.”⁵⁴ “Love unknown” indeed!

To put it most bluntly, the Gospel leads the sinner it loves to crucifixion and lays the dead body of that sinner in the very tomb where Jesus lay, so that, “as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we, too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”⁵⁵

Coming back to the compelling language of I Corinthians 13, we find that it is Gospel love that concludes Paul’s reflection on love: “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” These words describe God’s work of redemption in Christ Jesus. And that work, we trust, never ends.

⁵¹ Carlo Carretto, in his book, *The God Who Comes*, writes: “But there is another thing, perhaps the most beautiful. The Holy Spirit, who is love, is capable of seeing us holy, immaculate, beautiful, even if we are dressed as rogues and adulterers.” Rose Mary Hancock, trans., Orbis Books, 1974, p. 194.

⁵² *Luther’s Small Catechism with African Descent Reflections*, Augsburg Fortress, 2019, p. 38.

⁵³ II Corinthians 5:17.

⁵⁴ Galatians 2:19-20.

⁵⁵ Romans 6:4-5.

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

1. Did the music of Samuel Crossman's hymn, *My Song is Love Unknown*, immediately come to your mind when you read these words? Are you aware that our two most recently published hymnals (LBW and ELW) have different tunes for this hymn? Which do you find more attractive?
2. Are you a dog person or a cat person? What is it about your preferred pet that you love so much?
3. Herman Melville, in his short story, *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, narrates how an honest desire to care for another person can turn quickly to hate if that act of love is not acknowledged or reciprocated. Have you ever experienced anything like that?
4. Saul's life was changed by the Gospel (see Galatians 1:11-24 and Acts 9:1-22), and after a while, he became known as Paul (Acts 13:9). Was Saul's life saved or lost in that event?
5. If I die and rise with Christ in Holy Baptism, as St. Paul claims in Romans 6, is that good news for who I think I am or imagine myself to be?



CHAPTER TEN

What Makes the Gospel True?

The story of Jesus, according to St. John, includes a riveting scene at Jesus' trial when Pontius Pilate pressed, "So you are a king?" In reply, Jesus disclosed, "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth." Pilate scowled in response, "What is truth?"⁵⁶ Why would Pilate think to ask this question? Isn't the truth, by definition, self-evident?

Our nation's *Declaration of Independence* certainly appeals to that view, listing a number of claims as true without offering any more documentation or support than the assertion, "We hold these truths to be self-evident." And yet we find that other truths we encounter in our lives need to be proven by the scientific method, resolved in a court of law, or settled by appealing to a recognized authority. Is there a difference between some truths and others? Is truth itself relative?

We are living in a time when the notion of a self-evident truth seems quaint. "My truth" and "true for you" are phrases meant to affirm the reality of the experiences people have without necessarily affirming their experiences as true for others, or even factually true in the most straightforward sense! We may be tempted to consider this relativizing of the truth to be a recent thing, but Pilate's dismissive question reveals that for many long ages people have found the simple truth to be anything but. In fact, as early as God's investigation into the world's first crime, both Adam and Eve determined to speak "their truth" in order to relativize blame.⁵⁷

What makes the trial of Jesus in John 18 so arresting is that although Pilate does not find Jesus' answer to be self-evident, Jesus clearly does not mean for his claim on truth to be understood by Pilate as relative. When he says to Pilate, "I was born to testify to the truth," we hear Jesus speak of something he knows personally to be true, but that is also as true for Pilate as it is true for him. We have a phrase in our language that is used to describe this sort of thing: "the Gospel truth."

We use the phrase, "the Gospel truth," to mean something like this: "the thing that I have just said is true; in fact, it is *implicitly* and *actually* true. I have no more supporting proof to offer than my assertion that it is so, but honest and fair investigation into the matter would certainly authenticate it."

There are two distinct characteristics to this kind of truth: actual personal experience that is not presumed to be shared by others and a matter general enough in nature that it is actually accessible to others. Let's look at each in turn.

Any appeal to "the Gospel truth" must first have the force of personal testimony if it is to have any weight at all: things we have seen or heard or said or done. For example, "I put the car keys in the top left drawer on Thursday morning, and that's the Gospel truth." This claim on truth is quite different from "self-evident" truth, which assumes a shared experience,

⁵⁶ John 18:37-38.

⁵⁷ See Genesis 3:12-13.

and “my truth,” which makes no claim of truth for others.

Then, secondly, the substance of something claimed as “the Gospel truth” must be actually accessible to others in some way. In the example given above, other people could actually go and look in the top left drawer (on Thursday afternoon or later) and see that the car keys are there—or not. The point here is that the matter is available to others to certify or disprove in a way that a thought or feeling simply isn’t.

It is the combination of these qualities (actual personal experience that is not presumed to be shared by others and a matter that is generally accessible to others) that has carried the Gospel through the ages to our ears as true. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us,” the Gospel According to St. John declares, “*and we have seen his glory.*”⁵⁸ John’s appeal to truth begins with the personal experience of a small group of people, not presumed to have been shared by very many others; and it moves to an invitation to the reader to come and see something that is also accessible to them: “that *you* may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”⁵⁹

Subsequent generations of believers have heard the Gospel to which the earliest Christians testified in writing and then also found it to be true in their own experience through the gift of faith growing within them. A moving story in John, Chapter 4, the story of the woman at the well, records what we might think of as the prototype of this phenomenon.

As the encounter of Jesus and the woman at the well unfolds, she shares as “the Gospel truth” her experience of meeting a man who told her “everything she had ever done.”⁶⁰ That is, she shares her experience of Jesus, which she relates as something that could be true also for others. When her neighbors come to meet Jesus, they invite him to stay with them, and he does for two days; and in that time, their own experience leads them to say, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”⁶¹ The witness of the woman at the well had become for them “the Gospel truth.”

Personal testimony to Christ has a long tradition within the Church, from the corporeal witness of the martyrs to verbal accounts of conversion shared within the community of faith. The Gospel seems always incomplete when it remains only what someone else has said or written about Jesus; the story of Jesus blossoms in fullness in a person’s or a community’s response of faith to what they describe as an encounter with the living Christ.

But what keeps these professions of faith from becoming “my truth” instead of “the Gospel truth?” As the Gospel is clearly not self-evident, what tests my experience of Jesus for authenticity? The witness of Holy Scripture does this, for the testimony of the first believers remains the normative Gospel story for every generation to hear and for every generation to test its own experience of Jesus against. The resonance between these two things is what makes the Gospel true for any given generation of believers.

We have a fancy Latin phrase to name the function of Holy Scripture relative to the preservation of the truth of the Gospel: *norma normans non normata*,⁶² but you don’t need to be a Latin scholar, to understand how it works. Put most simply, when our personal experience of faith in Jesus finds expression in a claim contrary to the record of the Gospel in Holy Scripture, our experience turns out to be something other than the Gospel. It may still be “true for me,” but if it does not resonate with the witness of the Holy Scripture, it can’t properly be called “Gospel.”

On the other hand, the Gospel, properly speaking, is the living story of Jesus that touches the lives of living people and creates faith within them. So it is just as true to say that as long as the written narrative of his story remains in a closed book on a shelf, or is preserved in a language that isn’t understood, that written narrative has turned into something other than the Gospel as well!

⁵⁸ John 1:14.

⁵⁹ John 20:31.

⁶⁰ John 4:29.

⁶¹ John 4:42.

⁶² Translating this phrase into English is not difficult, but the simplicity of the Latin phrase does get lost in the process. Understanding “norm” to be a “standard” or “measure,” and also an action by which errors may be corrected by comparing them to the standard, we might translate the phrase, “the norm which norms but is not normed.” Or, in plainer language, “Holy Scripture is the standard by which we measure other claims of truth to correct them, but it is not itself changed by our experiences of the truth.”

What makes the Gospel true is when the written Biblical narrative and the personal, lived experience find agreement, the truth of each being validated in the other. That has actually been found to happen, one generation after another, all over the world. And it is the goal of this book that you may come to know the story of Jesus as the Gospel truth.

CONVERSATION STARTERS:

1. When you think about the trial of Jesus before Caiaphas and before Herod and before Pilate, do you think any documentation would have changed the outcome?
2. Do you think all truth is relative? Is any truth relative?
3. Do you find it to be a lovely thing or an unsettling thing that it is the Spirit that creates faith in others and leads them to believe in Jesus rather than your ability to prove the Gospel?
4. Was there a time in your life when the story of Jesus changed from being something you had heard about to something that is “the Gospel truth?” How would you describe that time?



Afterword WITH YOU IN CHRIST

The preceding chapters have described the Gospel about as fully as I know how, opening several different doors of access in the hope that perhaps through one of them, you can find yourself in the living story of Jesus.

I have stopped short of attempting to provide a single, comprehensive definition of the Gospel, mostly because I believe very deeply that the Gospel is an active engagement between people who tell and hear the story of Jesus. As that activity is inherently unique to the actual people so engaged, generic definitions will always seem to lack the personal and poignant punch that reflects how the story of Jesus truly touches our lives.

So instead of concluding with a summary definition, let me tell you the Gospel.

Being raised in a Christian family that went to church regularly together and prayed together before meals and at bedtime, I cannot remember a time when I did not know that Jesus loved me. Our daily morning routine included reading from the Bible every day at breakfast, so the stories of Holy Scripture were as much a part of my childhood as the stories of our family were.

In fact, the people in the Bible felt more like my family than my actual extended family did because we lived far away from them. My childhood home was in Malaysia and Singapore, half a world away from aunts and uncles and cousins and grandparents, in a time when international phone calls were reserved for the most dire emergencies, and when letters written on super-thin blue air forms had a turn-around time measured in weeks! To the degree that I felt distant from my American family, I identified with the family of the Bible as my own.

So whenever I heard, for example, that after Jacob stole his blessing, Esau cried out in anguish, “Bless me, me also, father!”⁶³ it seemed to me that it was our Uncle Esau whose voice I heard, carrying the burden of our family’s internal strife. Or when Joseph replied to his brothers who had sold him into slavery, “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good,”⁶⁴ it was the voice of our brother Joseph whose words forged healing and hope in the same family that had been so deeply wounded.

I felt strongly in my childhood that I belonged to the family whose story was told in the Bible. But I also wondered often how the people among whom we lived fit into that story, for they were not Christians and did not claim the family of Abraham and Sarah as their own.

I see more clearly now than I did in my childhood that the family whose story is narrated in Holy Scripture is actually the

⁶³ Genesis 27:34.

⁶⁴ Genesis 50:20.

whole human family. We may fail to notice this because twice the story tightens its focus: first to follow the people of just one branch of the family, the children of Abraham and Sarah, and then again to follow the life of just one member of that branch, Jesus of Nazareth.

A surface reading of the Bible that does not notice this or fails to ask about these two significant shifts in focus can come to unhelpful conclusions. For example, that God is only interested in and engaged with a portion of the human population (those people in what we once called the Judeo-Christian faith tradition), and then only in matters of personal belief.

But the narrative of Holy Scripture really does mean to tell the story of the whole human family, and all through its pages, the focus suddenly and intentionally pans out again from its general focus on the children of Abraham and Sarah or from its laser focus on Jesus. The prophets of Israel persistently draw attention to God's work in and through other nations, and the apostles remind us that Jesus is the eternal Word, through whom all things were created and in whom all things hold together.⁶⁵

The story of Jesus is the concentrated version of God's creative and redeeming work that is eternally being done in all the world and among all the human family, made visible to us in one person through the lens of one branch of the human family. But what we see in Jesus is true for all the world.

So, what do we see in Jesus? Here's what I see: I see the Creator's personal engagement in the created order. I see the Holy, Mighty, and Immortal Mystery made accessible to human minds and hearts and touch. I see human arms open wide in divine welcome. I see revealed in Jesus' capacity to suffer rejection and scorn patiently and passively, a strength of will to restore far beyond our ability to imagine, and infinitely greater even than our collective capacity to exclude and shame and harm. I see the one in whom God's inexhaustible will to save meets the disastrous consequence of human willfulness and prevails. I see the world's savior, saving the world from the cross it has nailed him to.

Or, to put it in simple, personal words, I see in Jesus God's never-ending love. I find God's love in Jesus to be most visible to me in those times when my own wisdom and strength fail me, and that seems to happen most often when I am trying my best to do good and useful things!

I would like to save the world from the destructive forces that assail it or even put a small portion of it right. I would like for my prayer to heal the sick or for my preaching to convert wayward hearts. I would like for my open arms of welcome to be received by others as genuine safety and refuge. But I find that my efforts to model the love of Jesus in these ways, especially my most ardent efforts, rather consistently fail to accomplish these good intentions, and on occasion, spectacularly so. I am quite sure that I am not anyone's savior—most specifically, not my own.

But I am even more certain that Jesus Christ is. And not my savior only, but the hope and redemption of all the human family. And I also know this: Because you are in the human family, you are in Christ's love. And because this is true, I am certain that we belong together in a promise of reconciliation that is more than I can explain, let alone accomplish, and perhaps more than either of us can even imagine. And so, when it comes to the end of all things, or even the end of a simple conversation or mundane letter, I am bold to declare the one thing that I know for certain: That I am with you in Christ. And that is enough.

⁶⁵ Colossians 1:15-17.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kurt Kusserow was born to Reverend Ralph and Carol (Zigler) Kusserow and grew up in Malaysia and Singapore, where his parents served as missionaries from 1966 to 1982. He was confirmed at Jurong Christian Church, Singapore, on Christmas Day, 1977.

Bishop Kusserow received a Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in English from Thiel College in 1985, and a Master of Divinity degree from Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, in 1989. He was ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament on September 10, 1989, by Bishop Paull E. Spring, at Mt. Lebanon United Lutheran Church in Pittsburgh. His first call was to a cooperative ministry, Town and Country Lutheran Ministry, where he served Faith Lutheran Church in Oklahoma Boro and Hebron Lutheran Church in Avonmore. In 1997, he was called to serve St. Paul Lutheran Church in Trauger until his election to the office of bishop of the Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod (ELCA) in June 2007. Bishop Kusserow was re-elected to a third six-year term in June, 2019.

Bishop Kusserow resides with his wife Pam in Hampton Township, in Pittsburgh's North Hills.

IMAGE CREDITS

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