

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 29, 2009
Lessons: Isaiah 49:1-6, Romans 16:25-27 and II Corinthians 4:5-7

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO . . . US?

“We believe there is hope for this world because Christ has suffered and died for it.” With that declaration, we begin the Vision Statement for our church, developed from a two-year search for answers to three questions: *Who are we the people of First Presbyterian Church? Where are we in time and place among our neighbors where we live and worship? and What is Jesus Christ calling us to be and to do?*

The rest of the Vision Statement affirms our respect for the dignity of each person, our willingness to let each think for himself or herself, and our openness to the questions and doubts that are not only natural for thinking people but also crucial to the growth of our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Faith not only allows for freedom of thought but requires it. Telling people, “Just believe all these things and don’t ask questions,” not only ignores the freedom and dignity of the person but simply doesn’t work. Faith is a living day-by-day trust in God, not a list of doctrines to which we nod our heads without question. Faith wrestles with doubt just as courage wrestles with fear. Simply repeating beliefs as truisms does not engage our minds and our lives in faith at all.

The Vision Statement affirms our need to be open to newcomers seeking a faith community where they can find peace, comfort, and hope. It concludes with Christ’s call to reach out in ministry and service, teaching and expressing something, but what? There are choices, and what a church’s teaching expresses to people has lasting impact. So, what do we want to express to people? We chose “the grace and mercy of God, in keeping with Christ’s command” – not our own purity as distinct from the messiness of the world, not our own certainty as distinct from the confusion of the world, not our own successes in contrast to the many failures of the world. Perhaps simply drawn toward the redemptive love of God, we chose not to hate this world or scorn its people, not to stand apart as the commendable ones in a sordid society. We chose not to retreat from the world’s temptations into a Christian castle to be secured and defended, lowering the draw bridge to admit only those who would promise to become just like us, renouncing their questions, their doubts, their experiences and insights into life, and maybe even the people they loved.

“We believe there is hope for this world because Christ has suffered and died for it.” You might call those words our introduction to the gospel of Jesus Christ according to First

Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton. Now, wait a minute! Doesn't saying there is a gospel according to us sound overdone, even arrogant? Who are we to have our own gospel?

At the end of his Letter to the Romans, which has sometimes been called "The Gospel According to Paul," the apostle writes, "Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to *my gospel* and the proclamation of Jesus Christ" Is Paul being arrogant? Is he making himself equal to Jesus? No, I think Paul is being honest and realistic.

Suppose I met you for the first time over coffee after this service and we had an extended conversation because something clicked between us – some kinship of understanding, vision, or spirit. Then, suppose I told someone else about you later in the week. Is the person I portray really *you* or just my very partial understanding of you? True, the better I get to know you the more faithfully I can represent you to someone else, but you will always be *who you are*, which will always be greater than *who I can say you are*. Only God knows you completely and loves you completely.

There is and must be a gospel according to First Presbyterian or any other church. What we present to people is not the one and only gospel of Jesus Christ but our own understanding of that gospel, so far. That's all – our experience of God's redeeming love and our understanding of Jesus Christ and his gospel, *as far as we have come*, which means we need to keep growing – asking questions, wrestling with our doubts, being wrong sometimes and listening respectfully to other people inside and outside the circle of the church.

One evening after supper, a woman said quietly to her husband, "You never tell me you love me." Glancing up from his newspaper, the man replied, "I said I loved you when we were married; if anything had changed, I would have told you."

The church that refuses to change because it believes its presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ to be eternal, unchangeable truth, is deluding itself and misleading people. The one constant truth we have been given is the redemptive love of God that refuses to give up on this world and let its people go to their own destruction or oblivion, and we cannot master that truth. Even human love remains a mystery we cannot fathom but can only receive, respond to, and learn to trust. So our gospel is the good news of hope and salvation we have found so far in Christ, communicated to other people as well as we can manage to put it at this point on our journey in faith. To claim any more is to claim too much and risk misrepresenting Christ.

To the proud Corinthians who thought they had it all just right, the apostle Paul says, "For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake." Then Paul goes on to point out something crucial: "But we have this treasure in clay jars" Our human bodies and the human bodies of our churches are

those clay jars, vessels of flesh and blood. If we think that's a weakness, then we misunderstand the way God works in this world.

Christian faith is incarnational, which means God's love works in the flesh. From Jesus, the Word made flesh, we learn that incarnational is compassionate, suffering with those who suffer in the flesh. We are in a recession, and many people are suffering, and they're frightened, and they're angry. We could preach about the love of money being the root of all evil and blame nearly everyone. We could especially point the finger of blame, not only at a Bernard Madoff who ran an illegal Ponzi scheme, but at all the swappers of bad debts leveraged to hundreds of times their false worth, turning our whole economy into a sort of foolishly legalized Ponzi scheme. We could blame, scorn, and daydream of revenge. But because the truth of God is incarnational, we cannot preach anything rightly if we do not share the pain, if we do not care about the people who are hurting. Jesus Christ doesn't do, "I told you so." He does compassion, all the way to his self-giving love on the cross.

I hear people say we need to get rid of the gangs in Bridgeton. Indeed, but gangs are made up of people, surrounded by other very frightened, grief-stricken people who love them but can't reach them to help and may too soon have to bury them and try to raise their children. Do we understand the needs of their members the gangs meet, however wrongly and destructively, and do we have alternatives? Sometimes we find ourselves wishing life could go back to the way it used to be, but there are two problems. One, we can never go back. Two, life was never the way we think it used to be, at least not for everyone. The alternative to change is death or else detachment from reality, and that's insanity.

When we are comfortable, we don't want change. As Christ's church, we are called to be uncomfortable in this world because we let people's fears and sufferings bother us. Where others see only issues, we are called to see people. Where others see clear blame, we see blame mixed with injustice, pain, and deprivation. Life is messy, complicated, entangled. Issues may seem clear-cut, but life is not. As Christ's church, we need to stop pontificating about issues and immerse ourselves in life. Jesus never hesitated to get dirty. He embraced those others called disgusting, welcomed home the rejected and outcast, and offered the healing of forgiveness to the guilt-ridden. I am not suggesting we don't need informed opinions on issues. That would be extremely hypocritical of me because I have plenty. But we must not isolate our opinions from dialogue with the real people doing the suffering. God loves the people, not the answers to the issues. Jesus Christ calls us to incarnate the gospel of God's redemptive love in our living bodies and in the living bodies of our churches, the vessels of clay through which God chooses to work because God loves the world.

Jesus says, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Amen.