

The Shape of the Good News

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*Jeremiah 17:5-10; Psalm 1; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Luke 6:17-26*

Over the last several weeks, our lessons have pointed us to the Good News. When Jesus enters the synagogue in Nazareth, he declares that the Good News from Isaiah is being fulfilled in your midst. While the people in Nazareth seek to kill him, the people in Capernaum seek to keep him in their region. The ministry of Jesus elicits both joy and anger. As he departs Capernaum, he tells them “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose.” (Luke 4:43).

Even as Jesus proclaims the Good News, he is the Good News. His whole life bears witness to the love of the Father who seeks to restore communion with all his creation. The Good News of God’s Redeeming Love has echoed across the ages in the midst of dire situations when the world seemed to be falling apart. The disciples of Jesus Christ have translated this Good News in and through their lives.

As we continue meditating upon the Good News, I want to briefly think about how this Good News is embodied. The Good News is both proclamation and lived reality. Fr. John Roop has said that if a person were looking for a church, he should meet with the pastor/priest and ask, “Do you have saints in this church?” If the answer is no, then leave. If the answer is yes, then ask, “What are your plans for making me one?”

Fr. John is pointing out a fundamental aspects of the Gospel. The Good News takes shape in the life of the hearer. The Gospel is not simply about the afterlife or about therapy or about self-help, it is about becoming a new creation. Without formation, our Good News could devolve into good words and bad deeds.

You may have read about the miracle worker John of God in Brazil whose power seemed to heal many people over the years. This last week he turned himself into the police for rape and sexual abuse. In the last few weeks, we’ve also seen reports of many different churches with extensive stories of abuse. This same pattern has been repeated in government, in the entertainment field, and in other institutions meant for societal good. If the Good News is not embodied in holy lives, it can easily become bad news.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus is teaching about what a Gospel-shaped life looks like. This Sermon on the Plain parallels the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. The pattern of these sermons is like the shape of Moses giving instruction from Mt. Sinai to the people of Israel. In the middle of the Sermon of the Mount, Jesus says, “For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.” (Matthew 5:18).

How is the law related to Jesus? Didn’t Paul tells us in Romans 8:2, “For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.” I want to suggest a way of thinking about law or Torah that keeps the primacy of grace in Gospel while focusing on our transformation. This is my own poor attempt at articulating an idea shaped by the Reformers.

First, I want to think of the story of Moses and the children of Israel. We usually speak of this as God’s redemption of the Hebrews. The church has sometimes used the language of justification, sanctification, and glorification to speak of this present and future work. I was trying to think of way to speak about it using non-theological words, so that it might be easier to share the story of Scripture and our story with an Biblically illiterate culture. We might speak of God’s Rescue, God’s Instruction, and God’s Promise.

God's rescue is the story of the Lord rescuing the Hebrew slaves from Egypt. This story is pure grace or charis or a gift of love. The Lord in his love rescues the Hebrews from a place of enslavement and oppression. He overthrows their oppressors and leads them to freedom at the foot of Mt. Sinai.

In one way or another, all of us could tell our story through the lens of rescue. For some who were trapped in sin and struggle and loss, the Lord rescued them. For others, you have enjoyed the grace of God throughout your life because of God's rescue in the life of your family.

In recent years, I learned that my dad's mother was unwanted by her mother. In fact, the mother had even tried to kill her. My grandmother was rescued from that life and raised by her grandmother. She was one of the most joyful people I ever met, and I have experienced the joy of her rescue in my own life. The children of the Hebrews who were born after Egypt were told to rehearse the story of the rescue from Egypt as their own story. We continue this pattern today by recalling the grace or gift of God's love that has rescued us from sin and death.

The story of the Hebrews doesn't begin with law but with love, with gift, with rescue from enslavement. Moses leads the people to the foot of Mt. Sinia where they see and hear the voice of God. It is a terrifying, yet glorious event. In some ways, this encounter could be seen as a formalizing of the relationship between God and his people. Both the language of adoption and marriage carry the sense of this moment. The Lord and his people are bound together in legal relationship. A covenant of love.

Now we can begin to speak of God's instruction. The law or Torah is the wisdom of a Father teaching his children. The rescued slaves are taught by the Lord through Moses. He is teaching them how to survive the wilderness and not descend into chaos. He is training them to become a new people different from the slave thinking they learned in Egypt.

Every parent gives their children some form of instruction. If a child is running toward a hot stove, the parent screams out, "Stop!" The parents teach their children how to live in the family and eventually how to live in the world. Parenting is a form of imparting wisdom. At times, there are strict yes and no directives. Other times, the instruction may adapt to specific situations. The parents not only want to protect the children, they want to help the children mature enough to make wise decisions and wise actions in the world. This is the shape of Torah. It is about formation.

The people are taught to trust in the Lord even as they are instructed to live as God's people through the law. Without that trust in the Lord, the law is reduced to an empty ritual system, which is how some people view the law today. Without relationship, instruction can become mere ritual or oppressive legalism.

Torah trained the Hebrews how to live in a way that avoided the dehumanizing patterns of the cultures around them such as Baalism. This way of life taught people to seek power through oppressive and destructive behaviors. I would suggest that still happens today. People fail to trust in God's provision and end up rehearsing other patterns of life that are dehumanizing and destructive.

In addition to instructing the ancient Hebrews on how to live and grow up into their call as God's Holy people, Torah was always pointing beyond itself to fulfillment. This is God's Promise.

I spoke of God's rescue and God's instruction, but there is also God's Promise. It pointed to the Promised Land where Israel would make a home, but even beyond that, it pointed to the fulfillment of God's rescuing action in the whole world. We see glimpses of this great Promise in Genesis 12 and all through the early books of Scripture.

This promise speaks to the deep longing of the human heart. We still understand this promise through longing or desire. Jesus is the fulfillment of this promise, of Torah, and of all the ages. He is the embodiment of God's salvation and God's holy and just character. The books of Hebrews and Revelation remind us that we are still yearning to see the full unveiling of Jesus Christ in glory. His revealing will also be our unveiling in glory.

As we long for this glorious revealing, we live in this world by His Spirit and in His wisdom. In our lessons today from Psalm 1, Jeremiah, and the Gospel, we hear the instruction of God. He is teaching us how to grow up into a people who embody his Good News in word and deed. In a culture that often thinks of itself as morally superior to the church, we are called bear witness to the Good News of Jesus through lives shaped by His love.

This involves disciplines of worship and prayer and meditating upon God's Word. It can also involve disciplines of hospitality, of service, of giving. The life of discipline is not a life opposed to grace, but a life of growing up into love. Just as a child grows up to bear the image of her parents. One discipline we might practice is recognizing the saints who are among even now.

On Friday, I attended my neighbor Dennis's funeral. He moved into the neighborhood a year and a half ago, and we enjoyed talking together about the life of faith and other things. During the funeral, his children shared about the deep impact he made on their life and their faith in God. The son told how Dennis would take the family down to a lake for picnics, swimming, and overall times of celebration. You might call it a sacred spot for the family.

But as a child this lake held terrible memories. Before Dennis was adopted, he was a foster child and has been horribly abused. His pain was so great in life that he assumed he would spend his life wondering alone and away from people. After encountering the Good News of Jesus Christ, his life was completely changed. Dennis became a new creature: a man of joy and deep love for his wife and children. He even transformed the lake from a place of bad memories to a place of joy for his family.

You may have some people like Dennis in your life and you may not even realize it. People who were rescued by grace and whose lives became the very shape of grace, of gift, of transforming the places around them into places of peace and healing. As we meditate upon God's wise instruction today, let us celebrate that he continues to reshape lives in love. Let us pay attention to the people around us, looking for clues or glimpses of this grace. Let us also ask him to reshape us into the very form of his love, his hospitality, his healing for the world.