

Translating the Gospel in Our Lives

Pentecost 9+

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Genesis 15:1-6, Psalm 33, Colossians 4:2-6, Luke 12:32-40

Almighty and merciful God, it is only by your grace that your faithful people offer you true and laudable service: Grant that we may run without stumbling to obtain your heavenly promises; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

One of the things I've loved about the early Celtic monasteries is the diverse kind of expressions. Within Celtic community, there could be a school, a hospital, a hotel, an arts workshop for cultivating poetry and illuminated manuscripts, a day center and night shelter, and at times even a prison. At the same time, the typical functions of a monastic community would also be present like a church, a retreat center, and the ministry of the cure of souls. In fact, spiritual formation is at the heart of Celtic spirituality. Spiritual discipline was seen as sort of a medicine for the soul and the spiritual director functioned like a spiritual doctor. People also found deep formation in lifelong soul friends where they learned to share their lives, their stories, and their brokenness.

This is a kind of openness or hospitality that makes room for all sorts of gifts and serves all sorts of needs. While the ideal may not have always reflected the attempt, it still left us a picture of a way loving and serving that is ever open to new expressions. The many and varied ways God's people have expressed their love for God and desire to share his life and love.

Though we are always called to be share the good news of Christ this may take shape in vastly different ways both in our personal lives and in the life of the church. How does the Gospel take shape in our lives?

In Colossians 4, Paul offers some final thoughts to the Colossians. Most of the letter has been about the community and their life in Christ and the life of Christ in them as the hope of glory. In his final words, Paul turns that life outward to the people beyond the community of faith and then he offers a few final greetings from friends who are serving him and the Colossians in ministry. I want to focus primarily on turning outward to those beyond the church community.

In Colossians 4:2-6, Paul writes,

² Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. ³ At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison— ⁴ that I may make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.

⁵ Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. ⁶ Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

Paul uses four images in these verses that I want us to consider:

Being Watchful
Opening Doors

Redeeming time
Speaking wisely

Paul begins with an image of watching. “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.” While this image of watching has a long history in Scripture, he appears to be focusing it in one specific way. We are being watchful in our prayers with thanksgiving. In other words, we are praying with expectancy. We are like the watchman on the wall who is looking expectantly for divine deliverance. He is watching for the morning.

We pray earnestly and steadfastly with expectancy. When we pray, we cry out on behalf of our needs and the needs of family and friends, at the same time we are also crying out earnestly for the world around us. Alexander Schmemmann reminds us that in daily prayers and in the prayers at gathered worship, we are in fact praying for the life of the world. We stand as a holy priesthood, praying for a world in need. Even as we pray, we watch in thanksgiving.

Our news and our culture seems tuned watching for bad news, but we watch for the morning, for the rise of the kingdom of God. Like the servants in our Gospel reading today, we keep our lamps trimmed and burning. In the middle of the dark, we hold up our lamps and look out with expectation for signs of His coming, for glimpses of his grace and goodness in the world around us. This does not mean we deny the darkness, the struggle, the pain around us. It means that as we watch and wait we are reoriented in Christ. This is like Patrick’s Breastplate:

May Christ be with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ within me

Where some people only see fault and problems and failure, I learn to see hope. As Jesus explains in the sermon on the mount, ²² “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light (Matthew 6:22), and in a similar way, Paul writes in Titus 1:15, “To the pure, all things are pure.”

By his grace, our eyes and ears become attuned to His kingdom and his glory, and even the doors He has opened before us.

Paul asks the Colossians to pray that he might have an open door for the word to declare the mystery of Christ. Paul is in prison or under some kind of house arrest, and yet he believes the Lord can open opportunities for him to share the goodness of God revealed in Christ Jesus.

As we learn to watch for God’s goodness and grace, we begin to see where He is moving, where is He opening doors. I would suggest that in some sense, we ourselves become the door that opens with God’s blessings for the world. Think of Paul and Silas as they are thrown into jail after being beaten. They lift up their voices to God in praise. An earthquake breaks open the door of the prison, but they remain. They want to step through another door. The door of the jailer’s heart.

The ancient Celtic idea of a thin place might apply here. Instead of looking for a sacred forest or glen where spiritual communion opens between heaven and earth, we ourselves become that thin place, that open door. Where our prayer, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done” resound in the

very ground where we tread. Our feet and hands are becoming attuned to the kingdom and we learn to walk and serve in Christ.

For many of us, this first and foremost means being present to those around us: at work, at home, in the community. We are present, we are listening, we are opening our hearts and lives in hospitality, and we are ready to serve and speak as the Spirit leads.

This brings us to our final two images: redeeming the time and gracious speech seasoned with salt.

This word for time, Kairos, has to do with the crucial or decisive moment. The coming of Christ was a crucial moment that forever changed all moments in time. In Christ, every moment is pregnant with the glorious possibility for the revealing of Christ. The hope of God in Christ breaks into what appears to be an ordinary, mundane moment and changes everything.¹

Thus time is not running out, it is running toward. It is always moving toward the now moment of salvation in Christ. In this very moment, Christ is rescuing people from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. We follow Him into the places of suffering and hopelessness and struggle, knowing that He can lead us. The place and time we serve changes in each season of life. At one moment, it is in the home. Another moment, in the workplace. Another moment, at lunch with friends. And possibly another moment with complete strangers in need.

Each moment can become the moment to bear witness to the goodness and grace God. Today is the day of salvation. We are redeeming the time by laying claim to everyone and everything we see for the sake of Christ.

For in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.²

We turn toward those outside the faith in and with wisdom and with gracious speech seasoned with salt. When Paul is writing this letter, the phrase “seasoned with salt” refers to witty speech or excellent conversation. He is not suggesting that we become humorists for the sake of Christ, but rather that we need the wisdom of God to know how to speak in a gracious and attractive way that will draw men and women to Him. This is not the hateful shouting down of the sinner online or in the public square, it is the word of love, of grace, of hope. It is the word that captured the heart of the woman at the well.

As we seek to live in Christ and move toward our vocation as individuals and as a community, we might consider the following questions:

¹ Markus Barth also associates another image with Kairos moment, with redeeming the time. He suggests that there is an ancient image of someone buying up everything in a shop. This is taking possession. In this sense, we step out into a world where evil and darkness and hatred seem to be getting stronger. We know that according to Scripture this darkness has already been defeated in the death and resurrection of Christ. This world of rebellion and hatred and sin and evil is not growing stronger but passing away.

² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Col 1:19–20.

What are you watching for? Or where is the kingdom being revealed in your world?
What doors are you stepping through in your life right now? What doors are calling you?
Think of the moments from last week and in the coming week. What might it look like for each moment to be pregnant with God's redeeming grace?

And finally, what are some ways you might translated the hope of Christ in your present activities, obligations, and relationships?

These answers will take shape in vastly different ways. From conversation over lunch to writing poetry to creating art to sharing our story and our time with those around us. We are simply present listening, watching, waiting, and trusting that the Spirit is leading us and will give us the words and the wisdom to act as His witnesses to redeeming grace of God revealed in Christ Jesus.