

“Living the Gospel”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, September 24, 2017
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Readings from Scripture: Matthew 20:1-16 and Phillipians 1:21-30

Matthew 20:1-16

For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the labourers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right." So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?" They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard." When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the labourers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first." When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat." But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?" So the last will be first, and the first will be last.'

Philippians 1:21-30

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again. Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well—since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power of your holy spirit. I pray that you would take the words and images that each of us carry within, the words that we've heard read from sacred scripture, the words that we've offered in song and in prayer, and the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to

share. Touch, bless, and transform all of these into the living word of Jesus Christ and let that word do its work within us, among us, and through us, in our own lives and in our community of faith, so that whatever we do would be faithful to your call in word or in deed. We ask this in the name of the faithful savior, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

I've spent the week sitting with the line of the passage, verse 27, "Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ", and I've been wondering--what exactly does that mean? At the contemporary service, at 9:05, I explained that for some people, the gospel of Jesus Christ that we need to live our life worthy of, is the good news that Christ was nailed to the cross, died for our sins, was buried in a tomb, and was resurrected so that we might be forgiven and have new life. I said, "Maybe that's the gospel that we need to live our life in a manner that's worthy of." And when I shared that, a young son leaned over to his father and said, "Dad, I hope not [laughter]." Oh, out of the mouths of babes.

But in a sense, it is, in fact, what we're being called to do. We're being called to plant our lives in the reality of what Jesus Christ has done for us and makes available for all people. Christ did die for our sins and through his sacrifice, we have access to the throne of God, we have freedom to be God's people, we have welcomed unconditionally to this table and to fellowship with each other, all of it through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. So in a sense, Christ is the center of our lives. Many people see it this way, but I want to claim that Christ is the ground of our being, that it's even deeper than that, that we are rooted and growing in that gospel presence of Christ that gives us freedom, and salvation, and wholeness, and welcome, and nourishment, and encouragement, and comfort, and peace, and mercy, and grace, and love. All of this is because of what Christ Jesus has done for us. And if this is true, it would seem that all of us who are here in this particular body of Christ should have exactly the same belief, and the same faith, and the same manifestation of-- oh, wait a minute. Wait a minute. Wait a minute. That can't be true because I know that some of you are pretty conservative and some of you are liberal, some of you-- no, no, no, you can't have the same faith. You need to be grounded in the same truth. But the way that gospel gets lived out by you is up to you and your gifts. In a sense, we are not called to be exactly the same. And it may sound like that when you hear that we're told to live out the gospel and in it, Paul says, "I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side-by-side with one mind of the faith of the gospel and are no way intimidated by your opponents."

It sounds like what Paul is saying is, "Y'all need to agree on everything." You need to agree on-- you name the issue that's divisive, we all need to be on the same side of it because we have one spirit and one mind and we're all striving in the same direction. But, in fact, that is not what Paul is saying. He's saying that all of us together are grounded in that one spirit and what he is saying is not one mind like it's translated in our scriptures because that word means life, soul, heart, being. And what it means is that all of us are grounding ourselves in the faithfulness of the gospel or the faithfulness of Christ. It's kind of like landscaping when you have barren ground and you get to decide, what kind of plants are we going to put in here? Is everything going to look exactly the same or are you going to mix it up? Recently, my wife and I, in anticipation of all the relatives showing up for a wedding, decided to do our front flower bed. And we put in all these different flowers, different shapes, different sizes, different colors because we wanted sort of this contrasting, complimentary beauty to begin taking place. Instead, what we have is a lot of leaves dropping because it's been too hot. And our water bill going through the roof. But you get the point. One of the beautiful things about us as a community of faith is our diversity of opinions. Some of us look at scripture very conservatively, some of us hear it very liberally, some of us look at it and think, "Oh, we're going to be empowered to go change the world," some of you are thinking, "No, it takes me to my closet to

pray." All of these things come from a life grounded in the spirit. When that life and that spirit is allowed to take our gifts and to grow them and strengthen them so that we might share them with others.

What kind of gospel life might you live? Here are a couple options for you. One of them comes from the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus is sitting at a table and a woman comes up and begs him to release the demon from her daughter and he says, "No, go away," and she stays at it and keeps pestering him, and then, finally, she says, "Lord, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table." And Jesus says, "Woman, wow! Your faith is amazing." You might live out the kind of faith where you think you're doing God's will, where Jesus was out to get the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and instead gets distracted by this woman pleading for help. And he turns and he's talking to her and he's helping her and he does it and her daughter is healed and he realizes, wait a minute, maybe my call isn't just to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Maybe this gentile woman-- wait, maybe God's call in my life is for all people, not just the people of Israel. So maybe if we live a gospel life, we allow ourselves to be distracted by the needs of those who are different from us. Or maybe our gospel life is one where, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus confronts religious hypocrisy. He says 6 times in the 23rd chapter, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees." For some of us, confronting oppression is what we're called to do in the name of Christ. For some of us, calling religious hypocrisy by its name is what we're called to do. It is an option that is laid out for us. Or, as Larry read in the Gospel, maybe our job is to be merchants of abundant grace and to pay out to everyone we meet, whether those that are doing the right thing or those that have just started, the same amount of goodness, and grace, and mercy. We're supposed to love equally those that do well and those that don't. And we need to be prepared if there will be grumbling because people don't like it when grace abounds.

I want to invite you to think about what kind of Gospel life you live out. What kind of presence of Christ do you embody? And what are the gifts that you share? As I thought about this for my own life, what immediately came to my awareness was that I want to live out the Gospel message that comes to us in Psalm 23. I want to be a pastor of a congregation that does not want anymore. I want to be able to invite all of us to be calm, and to breathe, and to be beside still waters, and to have our souls restored, and to walk humbly in God's ways, to be gentle of spirit. Gentle with ourselves and gentle with others. I want to be able to accompany you or your loved ones through the valley of the shadow of death. I pray that I would be a comfort and a peace to you and to them. I want to officiate at a table that is not in the presence of our enemies, but in the presence of everything that's trying to destroy our faith and trust in God and our peacefulness as a people and as a community, as a nation, and a world. In the midst of everything we're hearing, this table is here, a tangible sign and symbol of God's grace coming to us, feeding us, encouraging us, loving us.

And finally, and this is a different way of thinking about it-- the passage says, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long." Every time I think about that passage, for some reason what comes to mind is the wake of fragrance that I leave when I exit a room. I want to leave behind a feeling or a smell of goodness and mercy. I want to be a blessing. And I share this, not to be proscriptive of how we all need to do it, but as an example of something that came to me by the spirit in prayer. That the Gospel is found in the Bible, but maybe not necessarily in the New Testament for you. You might hear the words of Isaiah, or Proverbs, or Exodus, and be called to live that kind of a life. But it is goodness and mercy that we are to give. And for that, and for the opportunity to share this table, I am grateful today. Let us be grateful together. Amen.