

Good News and Mended Nets
Matthew 4:12 – 23; 1 Corinthians 1:10 – 18
Sunday, January 26, 2014

If I were to say, “I’ve got *good news* and I’ve got *bad news*,” which would you want to hear first? Let me see a show of hands from those who would want to hear the *good news* first. And now those who would want to hear the *bad news* first. I really think that the way in which you answer that question reveals something about your personality.

I asked this question to a few people this week to see what their responses would be. Some people wanted to hear the *good news* first because, as one person said, “A spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down.” The good news makes the bad news more tolerable. Some people wanted to hear the *bad news* first because they wanted to end on a high note. Save the best for last. One person said they couldn’t enjoy the good news first if they knew the bad news was coming; they would be *dreading* it.

I think when you watch the evening news, they subscribe to the *bad news first* philosophy. I mean, how many times have you turned on the news and the first thing you heard was, “Something really *great* happened today!” When I lived in Atlanta, I was friends with a reporter from the local ABC affiliate who told me about meetings where the producers would actually tell them, “If it *bleeds*, it *leads*.” Start with the big, dramatic, *bad news*, because *that’s* what gets people’s attention, and then end with a nice human-interest story to leave them feeling good about everything.

I have *become*, in recent years, a good news first kind of person. As I strive to become a more *positive* person, I try to focus on the *good* rather than the *bad* (which hasn’t always been *easy* for me). So it’s something that I have been very *intentional* about.

The Bible talks a lot about *good news*. The Greek word is *euangelion*, and it's where we get the word *gospel*. So *gospel* literally means *good news*. When we talk about the *gospel* of Matthew, we're talking about the *good news* of Matthew. The story of Jesus is a story of *good news*.

Now, if you asked the average Christian, "What *is* that good news? What *is* the gospel? Give me a brief summary of the gospel," most people would say something along the lines of, "Jesus Christ died to forgive our sin so that we could have eternal life." And that *is* good news! Here's the interesting thing, though: it wasn't *Jesus'* gospel. That message was not the good news that Jesus went around proclaiming. That was *Paul's* gospel; the good news that *Paul* proclaimed. *Jesus* had a *different* gospel. And we see it in today's scripture reading.

Matthew says in verse 17 that after John the Baptist was arrested, Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near," which is the same message that *John* had been going around proclaiming. So Jesus picks up John's message and carries it on. And then in verse 23 it says that "Jesus went throughout Galilee...proclaiming the good news of the kingdom." What *was* the good news of the kingdom? That it has *come near*. That was the core of Jesus message. That the kingdom of heaven has come near. (That phrase *come near* also gets translated *at hand*, so the kingdom of heaven is *at hand*.) It is *here*. It is *available*. It is *accessible*. It is *right in front of you*. It is *so close*.

So *what is it?* What *is* the kingdom of heaven? If that's the core of Jesus' message, then we need to understand what that's all about. So I want to unpack that a little bit.

In Matthew Jesus talks about the kingdom of heaven. In the *other* gospels, he talks about the kingdom of *God*. So what's the difference? Why the kingdom of *heaven* here? It is thought that

Matthew was either a Jewish Christian and/or that he was writing to an audience that was predominantly Jewish (or Jews who had become Christians). Traditional Jewish theology holds the name of God to be so sacred, so holy that you didn't even *say* it. So Matthew, to avoid offending his Jewish audience (or his own Jewish sensibilities), instead of saying the kingdom of *God*, says the kingdom of *heaven*.

Either way, it's talking about the same thing. The terms are essentially interchangeable. What we're talking about is the realm of God's rule; where God has power and authority. We get a great understanding of the kingdom of God/heaven from the Lord's Prayer, where Jesus teaches us to pray, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The kingdom of God is when/where God's will is done on earth, in our lives, the way it is in heaven.

So Jesus comes along proclaiming *that*; God's rule, God's power and authority, the ability to live out God's will here and now, in our lives, it has come near. It is *at hand*. It is *here*. It is *now*. It is *available, accessible*. It is *so close*.

So if the kingdom of God has come near, if it is at hand, and the kingdom of God is God's will being done, lived out in our lives, then *what is God's will?*

You hear people say all the time (mostly when something bad happens), "We can't know God's will. It's a mystery." But we *can* know and understand God's will, because Jesus shows it to us! Jesus embodied it, lived it out, demonstrated the will of God in his own life. So we look at Jesus and we can know the will of God. So what does Jesus *show* us about that here?

Jesus proclaims that the kingdom of God has come near; that the realm of God's rule, where God's will is done, is at hand. What's the very next thing he does here? He walks by the Sea of Galilee and sees Simon and Andrew in their boat, fishing. And he calls them to follow him. Then he sees James and John in a boat with their father, mending nets. And he calls *them* to follow him. Then he goes all around Galilee, and all these people who were sick and needed healing started following him. Then he goes all around the region, and people from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan started following him. The people who *lived* in those areas were Jewish, Roman, Syrian, Greek; all different kinds of people representing different cultural and religious backgrounds.

So Jesus proclaims the kingdom of God to be at hand, and then the very next thing he does is to *bring people together*. All different *kinds* of people. People who might not normally get along. The first act of God's newly proclaimed administration is to make *one* what was previously *divided*.

God wills unity, oneness, harmony, wholeness, love. God has come near to make all things *one*, to make us *whole* again, overcoming all the false dichotomies that we create that only serve to separate us from one another and from God.

We pick up on this in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. Paul is writing to a church that is *divided*; a group of Christians who are in *conflict*. He says, "I appeal to you by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose." I mean, that seems pretty unrealistic, right? That they all be in agreement and there are no divisions among them? Any time you get a group of people together to *live life* together and to talk about *God* together, there are *going* to be

disagreements. Does Paul, does *God* expect us to all be the same, totally in agreement all the time, with no conflict?

I think we all know that's not what Paul is getting at here, right? That Paul is saying you can *have* disagreements and differences, but you can't let those *divide* you. You still have to strive together toward a bigger picture. That we can be *one* in the midst of our differences. That we can disagree and still love one another. When Paul says, "I appeal to you to be in agreement," the Greek word he uses for *in agreement* also means *together*. Read it *that* way, "I appeal to you to be *together* and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose."

What Paul is saying is what Jesus *showed* us when he called all those people together: that you can have *differences* and still be *together*. *That* is good news! *That* is a gospel that the world desperately needs to be proclaimed today. Because we live in a world that defines us by our *differences*. Male or female, black or white, rich or poor, conservative or liberal, citizen or immigrant, pro-life or pro-choice, Christian or non-Christian. All these are *false dichotomies* because, as Paul says elsewhere, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; for you are all *one* in Christ Jesus."

We are all *one* in the kingdom of God, where the false dichotomies that separate us are overcome because God wills harmony, wholeness, oneness, and Jesus says that that kingdom is *at hand*. It is *here*. It is *now*. It is *available*. It is *accessible*. It is *right in front of you*. It is *so close*. But like Paul is saying to the Corinthians, if we can't do it *here, together*, with *each other*, then we're never going to be able to do it out *there*.

I want to ask you all to stand up. I need your help with something. Stand up and hook your arm with the person next to you. I want us to try to get it so that we form one long chain winding around the sanctuary. So we'll have to hook up with the people behind us and across the aisle from us, too.

When Jesus is calling people together, he finds James and John in their father's boat and what does it say they're doing? Mending nets. When Paul is calling the Corinthians together, he tells them to *be united* in the same mind and the same purpose. The Greek word he uses there for *be united* is the word *katarti'zo*. It's the *same word* that Matthew uses for *mending nets*. Paul calls the Corinthians to be *mended nets*. It's this idea that we're taking something that was *broken* and we're putting it back *together*; mending it to restore an original wholeness or unity.

That's the kingdom of God. That's the *will* of God. That what is *broken* can be *fixed*. What is *divided* can be *made whole* again. That like those nets, our lives, our relationships can be *mended*.

You are undoubtedly linked right now with someone else in here with whom you do not always *agree*. Maybe even someone you do not *like*. That's why I wanted you to do this. Instead of just *giving* you an example or an illustration, I wanted *you* to be the illustration. Because *you have to be the illustration*. And if we can't do it *here, together*, where it should be *easy* to love one another, how in the world are we ever going to do it out *there*, where it's a whole lot harder? But it's like the poem says on the cover of the bulletin, "The latest good news is that you *can* do it."