

McCabe United Methodist Church
“Naked Gospel: Inside out” (Part 4)
Psalm 42 & Colossians 1:24-29
Pastor Ray Baker
1-29-12

One fine day, a person just like you is out for a pleasant walk, pondering why you feel a kind of emptiness at the same time you are putting in overwhelming effort into making your life work. Thus distracted with your struggles, you suddenly find yourself falling into a huge, deep hole! It is quickly apparent you can't get out, so you begin to yell for help.

Luckily, a religious leader walks by and hears your pleas. He writes down a prayer for you and drops it in the hole.

Then the doctor hears you calling and responds: she writes a prescription and drops it in the hole.

You are starting to get a little frantic, since nobody seems to understand your situation or is able to really help you. But then your friend's friend Daria walks by. (That's me.)

“Help!” you call. “I'm stuck in this hole and I can't get out!”

Daria hears you, and she knows exactly what to do. She jumps down into the hole with you.

“What did you do that for?!” you sputter. “Now you're stuck too!”

“Yes, but I've been here before and I know the way out.” she says, winking. “Follow me.”

This is our fourth installment in “The Naked Gospel” series. We have been slowly stripping away the need for a faith based in legalism. There is nothing we can do to earn God's favor. God's Grace is a gift freely given and recognized through Christ's death and resurrection.

Last week we discussed how we can bear the Grace of God by giving unmerited forgiveness and Grace through acts of reconciliation. I gave the true life example of how a man's first wife forgave his second wife for running off with her husband. In fact, the first wife not only forgave her but she also helped her heal from the pain of learning her husband was a philanderer at best.

Today we will talk about the image of Christ being with us. I like using the Matryohka or Nesting Dolls I shared in the Children's Sermon as a way to understand our relationship to Christ. When we think of all the people who have introduced us to Christ, all the people who one-by-one have helped us mature in our faith because of the efforts of so many people.

“Christ in us” and “We are in Christ.” Christ is with us from the inside out.

As the Apostle Paul wrote in today’s epistle lesson:

²⁷ To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

²⁸ He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. ²⁹ To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me. Colossians 1:27-28 (NIV)

As we think about our faith journey we know there are times when we struggle to understand our relationship with God. Paul was writing about misunderstanding when he wrote to the people in Corinth.

The book of I Corinthians is a collection of Paul’s teachings to a church that was in conflict. If we read the letter with this in mind we can see the issues which were being raised by the people in Corinth.

In Chapter 12 Paul is talking about spiritual gifts and he is assuring the people one gift is not greater than another. It is obvious that someone was claiming their gift was greatest among them all. I agree with those who say someone had stated the gift of speaking in tongues was the greatest gift. The apostle assures the people all the gifts are of equal value. In Chapter 13 he tells them that faith, hope, and love are more important and the greatest of these is love.

As I’ve discussed before, when the New Testament is talking about love it is not referring to an emotion. The word love is a verb. It’s about taking action on someone else’s behalf. It’s about doing something with our lives to make someone else’s live a little bit better. It’s about committing ourselves to work on other people’s behalf. That is what it means to be a mature Christian.

I’m so thankful for all the people who have helped me grow in my faith. I have memories of being in Sunday School as a young boy and being taught the bible stories. The teachers would read the stories and use the old ‘flannel graph’ to place pictures of the characters on the board to bring the stories to life.

When I was in High School the teachers brought the Bible to life by teaching us the Parables. They helped us hear the story that was being taught on the surface and they unpacked the deeper meaning of the stories. This helped us see our faith in a new way. For example, we learned the Parable of the Lost Sheep, the Parable of the Lost Coin, and the Parable of the Lost Son. Each of them have a rich meaning that helps us understand the nature of God.

When I was in college I was fortunate enough to be part of a United Campus Ministry program. Our campus pastor was the first person who taught me by having us read a book of the Bible from the first chapter to the last. Until that time I read the Bible in sound bites, reading a short story or only a section of a book.

In his small groups we read the entire gospel of Mark. It was amazing to see the connections throughout this gospel, how all the pieces came together and came to life.

Then we learned that everything in the gospel of Mark is also found in the gospel of Matthew and the gospel of Luke. This is why it's believed the author's of Matthew and Luke used Mark as a blueprint for their own gospels. This is why the gospels are so similar and it's why we call them the synoptic gospels.

Another important step in my faith journey was when I made friends with someone named Terry. He was part of an evangelical Church. We became friends at a time when I was struggling with my faith and I was considering the call to ministry. He was adamant that if I was going into the ministry I needed to take my faith seriously by evaluating the way I lived my life including my choice of music.

Terry said I shouldn't be listening to rock groups like: Kiss, Pink Floyd, or Led Zeppelin; all the bands that I loved so dearly. He convinced me to get rid of all my albums. Believe it or not I took an entire box of albums outside and...I threw them...in...the dumpster. I even threw my Olivia Newton John album away. Why?

If I could have that day back.

Fortunately there were many other people who continued to influence my faith journey in a manner which reinforced the Methodist way. They were people who taught me an understanding of faith that didn't push legalism as one of the essential cornerstones of being a Christian. They were people who taught me the Bible is filled with wonder, mystery, and intrigue. There is always something new to learn each time we read the scriptures, because each reading can bring us closer to Christ.

They grounded me in my faith and helped me understand Christ is in me and Christ is with me. This is the foundation of my faith.

There is a man named Jim Wallis who is an evangelical Christian and the leader of a group called Sojourners. He wrote the following comments about his time in college:

When I was a university student, I was unsuccessfully evangelized by almost every Christian group on campus. My basic response to their preaching was, "How can I believe when I look at the way the church lives?" They answered, "Don't look at the church; look at Jesus."

I now believe that statement is one of the saddest in the history of the church. It puts Jesus on a pedestal apart from the people who name his name. Belief in him becomes an abstraction removed from any demonstration of its meaning in the world. Such thinking is a denial of what is most basic to the gospel: incarnation. People should be able to look at the way we live and begin to understand what the gospel is about. Our lives must tell them who Jesus is and what he cares about." --Jim Wallis, The Call to Conversion (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992), 108.

We are the people who name his name. We are the people who call ourselves Christian. Can people see Christ in us or through us? Can people tell we are on a journey of faith by our commitment to head Christ's call to Worship, Grow, and Serve?

When we allow ourselves to believe that "Christ lives in us" and "We live with Christ" there is a spiritual awakening, a transformation. Our spiritual transformation is personal and also public.

The good news is that our hands are God's hands; our mouths are God's mouth; our hearts are God's hearts; because Christ lives in us and through us.