

16 October 2016

Good News for the Church
Matthew 18:15-20; Micah 4:1-4

In a couple of Paul's letters, he gives instructions on how husbands and wives are to relate to each other. In Ephesians 5 he says that husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church – then spends more time talking about the church than about marriage. So, as we consider the church today, let us read what Paul says about her in this context. Ephesians 5:25-30:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body.

Every now and then, an evangelical Christian will say of the mainline church that we just don't preach the gospel anymore. As a general statement, there may be some validity to that, but I hope you don't feel that way. Not only have I preached *about* the gospel since September 4, but I have taken care to explicitly restate the gospel of Jesus Christ in simple terms in every sermon in this series. Today we end that series, so . . . one more time. The gospel is the good news that God loves us, loves us beyond belief. We were created to be loved and to return that love to our Creator freely. Generally we don't. Generally we take advantage of the freedom we were given so as to love ourselves. But God still loves us and has taken the initiative to restore us to the loving relationship we were created to enjoy. God bridged the gap between us, above all, by coming to us as a man, Jesus of Nazareth, living among us, loving us and teaching us how to love, enduring all the trials that we face. Even then we turned against God, and killed Jesus, God in the flesh, but Jesus rose from the dead, in this way offering us not only restoration but eternal life. We don't have to *do* anything to receive this love and life. God has done it all already. This is a good thing, actually, because when we try to earn God's love by our own efforts, we always end up making things worse. All we have to do is trust that God really does love us and accept that amazing grace. This is the good news, and because our relationship with God is based entirely on God's initiative and has nothing to do with us, that means that the good news is offered to everyone equally. No one has a leg up on salvation, regardless of race, nationality, generation, income level, or marital status. And that's good news, too.

In most of the sermons of this series, I concluded with a question: how well does the church reflect that generous gospel, and by and large the answer has been, "Not so well." The gospel is for all races, but the Church is the most racially segregated institution in America. In direct contradiction to the gospel, the Church shows clear preferences for young, married, middle-class people. So no, the Church has not lined up perfectly with the gospel of Christ. So today I want to conclude today by talking about that. There is actually a theological term to use as a response to the failure of the Church to live up to Christ's example: Duh.

Of *course* we fall short. The reason we even *have* a gospel is because we as individual human beings fail to live up to God's plan. Why would we expect an aggregate of those same individual human beings to somehow get it right? Now don't get me wrong. I'm not using our fallible human nature as an excuse for everything the Church has done wrong. There have been times when the Church has been actively evil. When we went on Crusades to wipe out those who believed differently than we did, that was not weak humanity. That was evil. When we tortured people into converting to Christianity in the Inquisitions, when we drummed up biblical justifications for the genocide of Native Americans and the enslavement of black Africans, when we discovered serial sex-abusers in the priesthood and then transferred those predators to new parishes so as to cover up evidence, those things were simply evil, and there is no excusing them. But that's not the stuff that people usually complain about, and I have to say that I'm getting really tired of hearing people condemn the church as a "bunch of hypocrites" because Christ taught love and mercy and compassion for the defenseless, but we're still sometimes jerks. Duh! That's why we're here! That's why we come back every week and confess that we screwed up again and ask for forgiveness: because we need to. That's why we gather in groups on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings and study the Bible: because we hope this time maybe it will rub off a little. We're not here because we think we're any better than anyone else; we're here because we bloody well know we aren't!

But guess what – shocker here – I have good news for the Church. In the same way that Christ loves our scabby little individual selves despite our sin, he also loves the Church. Look back at Paul's language about the church in Ephesians 5. It is identical to the language that we tend to use about our individual salvation. We say, "Christ died for my sins": Ephesians 5 says, *Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her*. We sing "my sins were washed away": Paul says, *in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendour, without a spot or wrinkle*. We sing "God will take care of you," and Paul writes, *For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church*. The gospel that says that we don't have to be perfect ourselves to be loved by God applies equally to the Church. The gospel that says all we have to do is trust in God's grace is just as true for the Church.

Now, as individuals we keep forgetting that we don't have to do anything. We keep wanting to earn our own salvation by being more virtuous than someone else or more faithful to church or something. It's as if we're saying, "Yes, I'm saved by grace alone, but I'm so good that I'm a little bit *more* saved than some people." And as I said before, this attitude only makes matters worse. It doesn't change the fact that we're as sinful as everyone else; all it does as add the sin of self-righteousness. Well, the Church is subject to the same temptation. We, too, keep forgetting our need for grace and trying to do it all ourselves, which is silly. We haven't survived for 2000 years because we're such an admirable institution (see Crusade, Inquisition, genocide, slavery, and abuse cover-up, above). No, we've survived because Jesus loves the Church in spite of herself and will not let her go. But we keep trying to save the Church ourselves. In the past twelve months I've been to four separate conferences on the future of the Church. I've learned some good things from those conferences, and I got to meet Lucy Moore the founder of Messy Church, so on balance they've been a good thing. But there's an underlying presupposition in all of these conferences: that it's up to us to save the Church from its current decline by our own creative new programs and institutional brilliance. (Now *there's* an oxymoron for you.) And just

as happens with individuals, when the Church tries to save itself by its own efforts it just makes things worse. You think a priggish, self-righteous Christian is revolting? Wait until you meet a priggish, self-righteous church. Bleegh!

So what do we, as a church, do in response to God's grace? Just sit around? No. We do the same thing that we do as individuals saved by grace. We give thanks to God, we humbly accept that grace even though we know we don't deserve it, and then we try to reflect God's unimaginable mercy to us in our interactions with each other and others. Simply put, we acknowledge that we've been loved beyond our deserving, so we try to love others in that same spirit. We start out small, by trying to love each other, even though "each other" includes that church member who's voting for the wrong candidate or that other one who's a Dallas Cowboys fan. Then we broaden that love to include people outside our congregation, to our neighbors, and then expand it to strangers – even strangers who are different from us – and then (when we start to get a hang of that much) to love even those who hate us. That's plenty for us to work on. We don't have time to waste on silly stuff like trying to save the church. God can handle that without us, thank you. All we have to do is try to be worth saving.

And if we do that, if we accept God's grace and turn it into love for others, we will see God do something splendid. I close by reading the vision of the prophet Micah:

*In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised up above the hills.
Peoples shall stream to it,
and many nations shall come and say:
'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.'
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between many peoples,
and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more;
but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,
and no one shall make them afraid;
for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.*