

# What Good News Looks Like

---

**John Wilkinson Third Presbyterian Church**  
**June 19, 2013 Luke 7:36-8:3**

Happy Father's Day, to fathers, grandfathers and father figures, with prayers of gratitude for those who have gone ahead of us and words of appreciation for those with us yet. We hope you have a blessed day.

Additionally, today marks the final Sunday for the Chancel Choir for this program year. I am grateful for the excellent and inspiring musical leadership the choir offers week by week, in their seasonal special offerings and in so many other ways. Thanks to our section leaders, Tom Mueller, Peter DuBois and all of you...perhaps we can express our gratitude to this fine group of musicians.

\*\*\*

Allow me to offer you a homework assignment for the summer. But first let me say a word about the summer. School is out. Vacations are on the horizon. The pace changes. And Third Church presses on. Next Sunday our summer schedule kicks in. At 9:00 a.m. we will launch "Feasting on the Word," a group, interactive study that will consider the Bible passages for worship that immediately follows. "Feasting on the Word" has evolved into a positive experience for participants this past program year, and I do hope you will take advantage of this good opportunity. And yes – worship at 10:00 a.m! Be there! There is certainly the need for a summer change of pace, respite and Sabbath. Allow that to include Sunday mornings, when you are in town.

Before there was Facebook, there was face book, or at least there was for me, a book of faces. In the summer before I went to college, I was to send a photo of myself with five words that described me. My senior photo was acceptable, barely, but I remember I really agonized over those five words, searching for the perfect combination to capture the very essence of who I was. I am sure now I could find them in a box somewhere in our basement; I am pretty sure I wouldn't want to. Right before we went off to college, the face books came in the mail. Some of the entries were poetic, or funny, or clever, or inspiring. I remember mine being none of those, but rather overly earnest, and, thankfully, not too embarrassing.

It's an interesting exercise to do even now – five words to describe yourself. That could be your summer homework. But I have something else in mind as well.

One of the finest books I've ever read was called *Brother to a Dragonfly*, an autobiography by the Baptist preacher Will Campbell. Campbell was a prominent minister in the civil rights era and later was active in many social justice matters, including opposition to the death penalty. Campbell famously said that "some people may deserve to die, but we don't deserve to kill them."

In *Brother to a Dragonfly*, Campbell recalls how his friend P. D. East had “badgered” him for a succinct definition of Christianity. East did not want a long or fancy explanation. “I’m not too bright,” he told Campbell. “Keep it simple. In ten words or less, what’s the Christian message?”

Campbell obliged his friend, and you’ll need to excuse the language just a bit: “We’re all bastards but God loves us anyway,” he said. To which East replied, “If you want to try again, you have two words left.”

The magazine *The Christian Century* invited some authors to try their hand at doing the same, summarizing the Christian message. They were given a maximum not of ten words, but seven.

As the magazine editor says: “The exercise can have practical benefits. Christian leaders often need to have what business consultants call an “elevator speech”—a quick way to sum up what’s distinctive and compelling about Christianity. When asked to sum up the Christian message, one must do better than, ‘Ah, well, it’s complicated, but . . .’”

We put one on the bulletin cover this morning, from Peter Marty. “Once dead. Now alive. Christ re-shaping people.”

Here are a few others:

Martin E. Marty: “God, through Jesus Christ, welcomes you anyhow.”

Donald W. Shriver: “Divinely persistent, God really loves us.”

Beverly Roberts Gaventa: “In Christ, God’s yes defeats our no.”

Most of the authors mentioned theology, but not the church. Mary Karr does: “We are the Church of Infinite Chances.”

Some wrote of our relationship to God, as we’ve read. Others wrote of our relationship to one another.

Ellen Charry reports that “the wall of hostility has come down.”

Lamin Sanneh quotes Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 5:19, “God was in Christ, reconciling the world.”

Walter Brueggemann’s gospel is dense: “Israel’s God’s bodied love continues world-making.”

Bill McKibben opted for the Golden Rule (Mark 12:31): “Love your neighbor as yourself.” That’s five words.

Craig Barnes made it in four words: “We live by grace.” (“The Gospel in Seven Words,” Aug 23, 2012 by David Heim)

It’s an interesting exercise. And it’s your homework. Unlike theologians and some preachers we might know, you can’t be long-winded. Write the words to yourself, maybe during a pitching change at a Red

Wings game or in between novels on the beach. Send them to a friend, or to me. Or post them on the Third Church Facebook page. Let's have an interesting conversation.

You could drop in nearly any place in Paul's letters and find good raw material for your exercise. This morning to the church at Galatia Paul writes that "It is Christ who lives in me." Those are seven pretty good words. Paul is speaking about grace here, which along with a few other single words – love, reconciliation, hope – could perhaps alone summarize the gospel.

The early church was anxious about their life, and their future. Paul reassures and reassures that no act or word can save them – only faith. Faith. If we are ever to become the agents of our future, we are in a world of trouble. It is God, God alone, God through Jesus Christ, who can and will make the difference.

Charles Cousar writes that this gospel "eclipses" everything else – all works, all understandings, all law, all values, all commitments, pride, accomplishment, everything. Because Christ lives in me, all other standards are "swept away." (*Texts for Preaching*, Year C, pages 386-390)

Which begs the question and puts the summer homework assignment in jeopardy. Not only *how* do words matter, but do they matter at all? Now you know I will not end up saying they don't matter at all, but consider Michael Gerson's recent editorial on the new Pope, Pope Francis I. Though we Protestants have our own narrative to attend to, I must admit that I have watched this pope's first few months with some interest, both for my Catholic friends and for any ecumenical promise.

Gerson writes: "We tend to remember leaders in characteristic poses. For Pope Francis, it is kneeling to wash the feet of a young Muslim woman in a prison on Holy Thursday...Francis' symbolic act," Gerson writes, "managed to...effectively communicate the essence of the Christian gospel."

He continues: "Francis has not yet issued sweeping declarations. But his symbolism has begun seeping into substance. He seeks a simpler church, more closely identified with the poor..."

'This guy,' says Stephen Schneck of Catholic University, 'seems to be trying to be like Jesus, the image of Jesus in the Gospels.' The one who brought good tidings to the poor, bound up the brokenhearted and proclaimed liberty to the captives."

Gerson concludes: "Whatever your view of Christianity, the example of Jesus remains one of history's most surprising constants. A man who never wrote a word, who spent three years teaching in an obscure corner of a vanished empire, still stirs the deepest longings of the human heart." (Washington Post, June 11, 2013)

What would it be like, I wonder, not to throw every theological moment out the window, every debate, every controversy, but to put them in their place. We could write volumes and volumes and hold conference after conference, or we could wash the feet of a young Muslim woman in prison. We could then use words to help us understand, but they would be most effective only when they lead us to further action.

I don't like to quote Nike too much – but they were certainly on to something when they said years ago, “just do it.”

And then we encounter this lovely gospel story. Jesus shares a meal with a Pharisee. One more feast in a year of feasting. A woman tends to him. The Pharisee thinks to himself that Jesus should be outraged because she is a woman with a poor reputation. And what Jesus is thinking to himself is what a gracious, hospitable woman this is. The Pharisee is primed for theological debate and forgets his table manners. The woman, with no interest in theological controversy, embodies the compassionate hospitality of God.

“Your faith has saved you,” he tells the woman. “Go in peace.” Eight words, and they will do.

No doubt each of the actors in the story – the Pharisee and the woman – was a sinner. One was clearly more aware than the other. One was interested in debating the finer points of theology, while one was interested in demonstrating love. One was willing to throw the other under the theological bus, while one was willing to have her heart and spirit open to an encounter with Jesus.

Beverly Gaventa writes: “The two sinners provide a striking contrast. The woman is so stigmatized by her sins as to be a public figure, and Simon comes across as a blind, smug religionist...they serve to expose our modern moralisms and dramatize for us an authentic response to divine grace.”

Back to our homework assignment. Whether you do it or not, to think about faith is to think about yourself, of course, and God, and the world. Who am I and who is God and how will I live in the world? And do note that the Pharisee did a lot of talking, while the hospitable woman did none.

A week ago, as a response to violence in the Lyell-Otis neighborhood, several of us gathered with the children and staff of Cameron Community Ministries to take a walk. We could have held a conference, or written an editorial. But we walked around the neighborhood, reminding the children without saying anything that here were adults who cared, and reminding the adults in the neighborhood that same lesson.

Words will be needed, of course. But walking silently, like washing someone's feet, like tending to Jesus at dinner while the debate raged on, spoke volumes. Or as the ancient saying reminds us: Preach the gospel – if necessary, use words. Amen.