

Being the Church in Jesus Christ: The Wisdom of Pastor Paul

Brentwood Sermons for 2015

Christ, Compassion, and Conflict

Mar 22, 2015

**Ps 51:1-12 and 1 Corinthians 4:1-13 – Sermon Text = 1 Cor 4:5
(680, 496, 692, 642)**

What have we learned so far about the Spirit's desire,
working through pastor Paul,
in 'norming' the life and witness of the early church?

We've focused primarily on the witness part of that desire,
the message that Paul was convinced
formed the soul of a new way of being in the world,
a way that embodied and enjoyed
the salvation God had given the world in Jesus, the Christ.

Let me try and summarize that understanding
of the norm God had breathed into Paul
as the Holy Spirit nourished his relationship with Jesus Christ
so he could flourish into a courageous and compelling witness
to the grace and truth of the Christian Gospel.

Paul's message
formed in the soul a new way of being in the world,
a way that embodied and enjoyed
the salvation God had given the world in Jesus, the Christ.
'Soul,' as I am using it in this statement,
is the integrating centre of a human being,
where the physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions
of our life force or energy align together
into a coherent way of understanding and being.
It's where love of God, love of others, and love of self
all get formed into the norm of Christian maturity.
It's a steadfast and safe port in the storms of life.
It's where God encounters us daily with the power of his love.
It's the true source of the kind of performance
God enables us to contribute to the world
as we respond positively to his invitation to bless his creation.
In that soul, the Holy Spirit norms our performance.

As Paul deals with the storming going on within the early church,
heavily influenced as it is by the storms going on in the world around the early church,
he keeps coming back to his core conviction,
God-breathed into him by the Holy Spirit in his encounter with Jesus,
that God has fulfilled his promises to Abraham –
to bless all the nations of the earth –
in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.

Nothing less than the salvation of the whole world is at stake here.
Well, actually, what's at stake is your relationship to the salvation of the whole world.

The salvation itself has already been accomplished.
That's what God did in Jesus Christ.

The issue now is whether you will accept God's invitation
to become part of the work of completing that salvation.

Will you respond positively to the invitation
to live in a community of faith, hope, and love
in which all the old divisions among humanity are healed
and in which all people are free to be friends of God in Christ Jesus?

The whole world now belongs to God
and he is reclaiming it with the help of this new community, the church.

Here's the best summary of Paul's Gospel
that I can offer so far, based on my studies for this series:

*Jesus is Lord and he does his lordship through love.
Nothing can separate us from the power of that love.
Because of that love, a new creation has begun,
one everyone is invited to join and enjoy.
Because of God's faith in us, hope for us, and love of us,
we can now, in Jesus Christ, bless the world
with our varied, but aligned, expressions of faith, hope, and love.*

That's the norm that comes through Paul's writings over and over again.

That is the soul of his witness to the grace of Jesus Christ.

Now, that is not the world we seem to live in.
Nor was it the world Paul and the early church seemed to live in.

Both worlds seem filled with destruction, death, and despair.
Where, in Paul's day, is the lordship of love
in Paul's world of Roman occupation, Jewish exclusiveness,
slavery and economic exploitation,
wars and rumours of wars throughout the empire,
terrorists seeking to undermine and overthrow in the name of God?

Where, in our day, is the lordship of love
in our world of American domination and exceptionalism,
a crass and widening gap between rich and poor,
bitter and unending wars destroying any hope of peace and prosperity
in regions and countries around the globe,
terrorists seeking to undermine and overthrow in the name of God?

All of these conflicts and misuses of power
prove to many that a gospel of compassion is a crock.
It doesn't work and never has.
They either manipulate Christianity to serve their own ends
or reject it altogether.
The world is a jungle and you have to be the biggest, baddest beast there.

In these kinds of contexts, with these kinds of political and social attitudes,
it is tempting to read Paul's writings about the end of time,
about the judgment that will come at the end of the old age,
as vindication for us and destruction for others.
But that would not be an accurate read of Paul.
There are voices in the Bible that express that desire.
But they do not go unchallenged.
They do not reflect faithfully what God revealed to us in Jesus Christ
about his loving way of being Lord of all creation.
Paul is clear, over and over again,
that God alone will judge, in God's uniquely loving way,
and that our calling is to walk with Jesus Christ in faith, hope, and love
so the world will be blessed.

My sincere hope and prayer is that this focus on Paul this year
will clarify and strengthen our common understanding
of the norms that guide how we perform in the storms of our context.
Those storms are fierce and frightening.
The great temptation is to take sides and fight the good fight,
whatever vision of good seems most promising to us at that moment.
As was Jesus during those 40 days in the wilderness,
we are tempted by possessions and personal power.
But Jesus, and Paul, bid us shine with a different light,
with the light of a divine love that really can overcome the darkness of hatred and death.

Will you live, will you flourish, in this light that reveals
that the purpose of your heart is to follow the lordship of love?

*Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can
ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever.
Amen (Eph 3:20-21)*