

The Positive Alternative

Ps 20 and Galatians 5:16-26 – Sermon Text = Gal 5:22-23
513, 461, 477, 468

***By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is
love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,
generosity, faithfulness, gentleness,
and self-control.***

(Galatians 5:22-23)

One of the most influential theologians of the twentieth century once wrote that, in preaching, the congregation needed to keep the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other.

[hold up both, one in each hand, and wave them]

That theologian was Karl Barth.
He rose to such prominence in the world that his face was featured on the cover of *Time* in 1962.
He was a model theologian, one who explored deeply the meaning of our relationship with God.
His carefully studied the Scriptures and the Christian tradition as it interpreted them.
He did this to discern who God was, what God was doing, and how God was inviting us to respond and participate.
Then he shared his insights and wisdom, with far more humility than many of his devotees, with the world through his preaching, teaching, and writing.
The focus of all that activity was what the living Word of God in Jesus Christ was inviting and enabling us to do in the world for the Gospel and the Kingdom of God it announced.
That's what 'doctors of the church' do.
They help us thinking through the meaning of the Bible in light of the stories in the newspapers.

Barth lived through horrifying and depressing times – most of the twentieth century in fact.
He was born in Basel, Switzerland, in 1886.
His father was a professor of theology and pastor in Bern.
Barth lived through the industrialization of Europe, two world wars, a depression, the rise of Communism, the unfettered prosperity of the 1950s, and the social and political unrest of the 1960s.

Lots of stories about those events made the newspapers.
And the Bible was a big book – 66 books actually,
spanning Jewish and Christian history for over 4000 years.

So, Barth had lots to work with
and work with it he did.
He wrote over 30 books.
They are dense and deep,
but well worth the effort to digest and understand.

We'll look at Barth's theological views a bit more
when we start exploring what Paul was saying
about being the church in Jesus Christ
in his letter to the Romans.

The reason for that is that Barth wrote a commentary on Romans in 1919,
coming out of his experience of the First World War
as a pastor in Safenwil, Switzerland.

The town had a population of about 1500 when he was there
And had become heavily industrialized.

Barth's *Commentary on Romans* set off a revolution in Protestant theology.
But more of that when we start to look at Romans in a couple of weeks.

Let's go back to Barth's insistence
that the Bible and the newspaper be read together.

If there had been newspapers in Paul's day,
similar to those in our day,
they would have been filled with what Paul
writes about in vss 19-21 of this 5th chapter of the letter.

Here's the list again:

... *fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry,
sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger,
quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy,
drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.*

Take a look at a *Vancouver Sun* or a *Vancouver Province* this afternoon
and see what you can find related to this list of things
that are not part of life in the Kingdom of God.

When you strip away all the fascination with these qualities of life,
they boil down to denying God and treating yourself and others
with disrespect and dismissal.

They are ways of violating Jesus' summary of all the law and the prophets –
love God with your whole being and your neighbour as yourself.
Do these things and life will be tough.
It will be out of whack.
It will be distorted, distressed, and diseased.
Doing these things do not fit with the way we are made to flourish by God.

But the Good News – the Gospel – is that there is a positive alternative.
In Jesus Christ, God has set us free from the desire
to find meaning and significance in our lives
from these attitudes and behaviours
that deny God and disrespect others and ourselves.
There is true human joy, goodness, and beauty
in a different set of attitudes and behaviours.
We find those qualities of flourishing
modelled in Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ in whom God redeemed the world.
They do slip into the newspapers from time to time.
But the news headlines, in whatever format we get them,
are dominated by the distress and disease of our lives.

So, what does the Bible have to say to this way of seeing reality?

Let's admit, there's lots of this stuff in the Bible as well.
Rick Reynolds has been reading the Bible
from front to back over the last few months
and has been struck by how much of this sort of 'news' is there.

But this is not God's way of seeing things and responding,
if we are to agree with Barth that Jesus Christ is God's living Word,
to which all the written words of the Scriptures point and witness.
That's why we say every Sunday after the Scripture readings,
"This is the Word of the Lord, a witness to the grace of Jesus Christ."

Listen again to God's way of being in the world:

*... love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,
generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*

This is a life of worshipping God and, as a result, treating all humans with respect.
We don't find much of that in the newspapers these days.
That's why the church remains so important.
If we don't announce it and act on it, who will?

So let's continue to improve Brentwood as a vibrant centre of God's positive alternative.
Let's continue to improve this space of grace as God's hospital in a heartless world.
Let's continue to improve the ways we see the world through God's eyes.