

Joy and Grief, Heart and Gospel

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Hebrews 13:17-25

Most of us know C.S. Lewis as the author of children's fantasies, for instance "The Chronicles of Narnia" which were turned into movies that delighted my children a decade ago. Lewis was a professor of medieval studies at Cambridge, who late in life became a Christian, and whose books and radio talks fortified a whole generation of British Christians during and just after World War II. At the height of his popularity, a publisher asked Lewis if he would write a book about pain in the lives of Christians. And his first response was to want to write the book anonymously because, he said, "...if I were to write what I really think about pain, I should be forced to make statements [so brave] that [my words would sound] ridiculous if anyone knew who [wrote] them."

In other words, Lewis' friends all knew that he didn't like pain any more than the rest of us like pain. But if you're going to handle genuine gospel, if you're going to teach and share God's truth, it will often fall to you to have to declare things and to try to be things that are obviously, painfully beyond you. And that, I'm afraid, is my lot this morning. Our Call to Worship in your bulletins is from one of Paul's New Testament letters where he remembers for the Christians there how he and his companions behaved while they were with the disciples in the Greek city of Thessalonica. And if you read carefully the memories that Paul appeals to here you'll catch ideals like integrity, purity, honesty, compassion, commitment and sacrifice.

So if you pay attention, if you read our Call to Worship with your heart engaged, the words ring so clear and so true that it was actually hard for me to have to type them into the bulletin this week. Because I've been in the ministry for 21 years and I'm not there. What I've been and done and lived and taught all falls a long way short of how the apostles of Jesus lived, even though they were ordinary people when Christ called them and then sent them out around the world to build a kingdom, armed principally with those invisible qualities that come from knowing Christ, that way of life we're called to learn in the gospels and from one another in here in church.

It was an underdog kingdom built by people who taught and lived from the heart and who made no bones about their own and one another's sins and faults and limitations. Near the end of his life, Paul wrote to his protégé Timothy from a Roman jail cell and he remembered how badly wrong he had been way back when Christ "*appointed me into his service*" to travel the world and tell people that, Paul wrote "*...Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the foremost.*"

Jesus had a little brother, James, who wrote a letter to the early disciples and he said it like this, he said, "*Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he*

has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous person accomplishes much.”

And I’ve always thought it was both comic and a little bit tragic that modern Christians have wanted to latch on to that last verse of what James said, “*The effective prayer of a righteous person accomplishes much.*” Yah, that’s the ticket. Be righteous and pray hard and you’ll change things and move things and master your circumstances. But we detach the promise from the whole network of circumstances and relationships that James had in mind. The reality is that Christians suffer.

Physically, psychologically, spiritually, we feel pain. Christians are physically frail and need healing. Christians sin and need forgiveness. And James teaches that the power and healing and reconciliation God provides to deal with these realities come to us when we engage with each other in relationships that are mutually honest, we open our hearts to one another but we keep our eyes open too, mutually accountable, we face hard truths about ourselves together, and mutually accepting, we forgive each other for the bentness and brokenness that would tear us apart if any of us ever forgot how broken we were when Christ forgave us.

And it matters because, at the end of his letter, the author to the Hebrews responds to old Israel’s rabbi’s with their false, self-exalting, mastery-oriented spirituality by pointing the Christian disciples back to their own congregations, to that very same network of relationships that James taught in his letter and that Paul spoke about in our Call to Worship. So our passage begins, “*Be persuaded by those who lead you and defer to them...*”. Now the blue Bibles in front of you translate it this way, “*Obey your leaders and submit to them...*” But the Greek verb here is about persuasion.

Literally it says, “*Be persuaded...*”. The verb appears twice in this passage and both times it refers to human authority, human convictions that are relative and not absolute. So the notion here is not that anyone should blindly go in any direction just because a human leader points that way. The notion rather is that our hearts should be open to what our human leaders teach us, we should “*defer*” to them, our passage says, because we respect their calling. We believe that the ordinary, human individuals who lead and teach in our congregations are called and led by God.

Which, of course, takes faith because they are ordinary human individuals, not the spiritual supermen that old Israel’s rabbi’s often sold themselves to be. And like all ordinary people, leaders and teachers are frail and fallen and if you’re in their congregation you eventually find out just where and how they fall short. But whatever their failings, our passage teaches that leading and teaching in a Christian congregation is a high and severe calling. Our passage goes on, “*They stand guard over your souls as those who must give account.*”

The point being that Christian congregations are never the shallow, petty clubhouses they sometimes appear to be. Together, we are the bride Jesus loves. Which means that Christ

himself attends to our progress with the sort of zeal and intensity that only love can inspire. It follows that to lead and teach other Christians is to bear a burden. Leaders answer to God in their own personal walks for what they teach, for their personal conduct, for the sort of relationships they build with the disciples who trust them. It is work that can only happen when the heart is engaged.

And when it goes wrong, the heart breaks because everyone involved is precious to Christ and because good leaders are always aware that their sins and faults are also in the mix. So our passage teaches us to engage with our leaders in a way that lends toward “joy” and “not... groaning”. And the argument Hebrews makes is based on the disciples own self-interest. He appeals what’s best for the whole congregation. Their leader’s grief, he writes, “*would be of no advantage to you.*”

In other words, it pays a congregation to encourage leaders and teachers when they struggle in their work. After all, a good leader doesn’t serve for long without getting a crash course in his or her own sins and faults and limitations. God sees to that! So our job is to deal with each other’s sins and faults and problems, honestly, constructively, prayerfully, as James taught, in heart to heart relationships where you work through the rough spots and make the most of the people God sent you.

Because the biblical presumption in Christian congregations is that no one is here by accident. We were all called here by God and, until God himself leads any one of us to a different place, we belong to each other. So how does any one of us know when the gig’s up, time to move on, time to try something different? Well, we don’t know till God tells us, but it does happen that God leads people to faithfully part ways and I think God has ways of making it plain to leaders and congregants alike.

But until that moment, we’re still bound, whatever we think about ours or someone else’s calling, we’re still bound to do what James taught. Look each other in the eye and tell the truth, where I think you’re wrong, where I know I’m wrong. Listen to the other guy. Pray. Forgive. Keep at it till a faithful, constructive path is there for everyone involved. No one gives up on Christ and church in general. That’s not faithful. No one throws any brothers or sisters away in a fit of anger or fear. We work things out. If we must part, we do so with as much forgiveness and blessing as we can muster.

And this level of care and commitment is necessary in local congregations because learning God’s will, right from wrong, good from evil, wise from foolish is more an art than a science and an inexact art at that. We walk with God together over time and he works in our consciences, individually and together, to teach a way of life that we could never learn alone or without him. So our author winds his book to a close by asking for prayers from his readers.

Listen to him, he says, “*Pray for us, for we are persuaded that we have a good conscience.*” There’s that verb again, and again it speaks, not of the rock solid certainty that your blue Bibles

seem to want it to have. He is “*persuaded*” that his conscience is good. Which means by implication that our guy has gained the approval of his own conscience with some amount of struggle and effort. There was at least an argument where our author had to be persuaded to put his conscience to rest.

Calvin thinks he wants to express a measure of confidence and humility in the same breath. Which is not a bad place to land when dealing with issues of conscience. One must be humble enough to hear from God and listen to others when he or she is wrong. But one must also trust to grace. We must have confidence in God’s willingness to guide and forgive us. Because all of us will miss a step and God wants our goodness to depend on our love and trust for him and not on some measure of performance we impose on ourselves. So grace is what allows us to say, “Good enough!” and to rest.

Our author closes his letter with a blessing for his readers and for us. He writes, “*Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep...*”. The title he bestows on Jesus is consistent with what he’s been teaching us about life in a Christian congregation. There is a whole long list of titles in the Bible that rightfully belong to Jesus, “*Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace, Father of Time...*”, but here our author chooses the more modest and familiar “*Great Shepherd of the Sheep*”. The point being that, however powerful and masterful Jesus has become, our walk with him will always be personal and familiar.

In John 10, Jesus taught about himself as “*the good shepherd*” who “*lays down his life for the sheep*”. And what Jesus taught about shepherds in John’s gospel is loaded with personal imagery. “*The sheep hear [the shepherd’s] voice and he calls them by name and leads them out...A stranger they will not follow...*” Jesus taught. The point being that discipleship is personal. It is primarily done with people we know. In the New Testament, the office of teacher and pastor, literally “shepherd”, are intertwined. And the point is that gospel information needs to be lived out in the flesh and blood relationships that take place in the congregation where God has called us to serve.

It adds a degree of difficulty to discipleship that many modern Christians are unwilling to bear. We prefer to be taught by strangers whose confidence and mastery is exaggerated by the fact that we don’t know them and they don’t know us. Often they’re good Bible teachers, but what goes on between us and them is not any sort of biblical discipleship. Because biblical discipleship involves applying grace to peoples’ sins and flaws and working things out in an environment where we are bound to one another by the commands and promises Jesus taught us.

This is why Jesus didn’t open a Bible institute and offer strangers a program that would fix and straighten their lives. Instead, he wandered the countryside with a cadre of men and women who learned to be absolutely devoted to him and to each other in relationships defined by gospel and covenant. Like Paul said in our Call to Worship, “*...we were more than willing to share with you not only the gospel but our own lives because you had become so dear to us.*”

Christian discipleship is nowhere near as tidy and antiseptic as reporting to a stranger for your programming.

Real relationships are difficult and complicated and constantly require generous applications of grace combined with wisdom. Which is why relationships are the only way and our families and our congregations are the places that we will ever learn to be anything like Christ.