

“Whose News Is Good News?”

May 10, 2009

Acts 8:26-40

1 John 4:7-12, 18-21

A week and a half before my dad died, he made a phone call to the man who'd been helping my folks in New Mexico for the last few years. My dad called this man – I'll call him “Peter” – because he wanted to make sure Peter and I had a chance to connect with one another in case I need Peter's help in New Mexico in the years ahead.

My dad talked to Peter for a while and then handed me the phone. Peter and I exchanged pleasantries, and he said he was sorry to hear that my dad was so ill. I thanked him and said something like, “Yes, this is a challenging time, but my dad's in good spirits.” Peter responded, and with words I won't be forgetting any time soon, he said, “Well, we Christians know that death is good news.”

Those words left me speechless. I was silent for a bit, and then finally I managed a “hmmmm.” After another pause, Peter and I started talking again and moved on to the business at hand. We finished our conversation. I hit the “end” button on the phone and started to think. Wow. This man doesn't even know me, and he's telling me that it's good news that my dad is dying. Wow. Looking back on the conversation, yes, I think I can understand his theological point, and I agree with him that death isn't something we need to be afraid of. But ... but I didn't find his words helpful or comforting, and I'm not at all sure that I share his point of view about the Good News of Christianity.

What news or whose news is good news?

Just last week, here in Sonoma, a young couple received the news that they had won the California state lottery. In an instant, they'd gone from being hardworking sheriff's deputies to being the newest millionaires on the block. But will the lottery's news really turn out to be “good news” for this couple? Multi-million dollar sweepstakes and lottery winners have often found out that the news of their winnings doesn't turn out to be such good news, after all. Even when they find wise, compassionate ways to deal with all the requests that they receive from family, friends, neighbors, and strangers, many winners discover that having so much money changes them, alienates them from other people, and does not bring the happiness they had assumed it would.

What news or whose news is good news?

In a couple of weeks, the Sonoma Valley Ministerial Association will be discussing several members' concerns about last month's Good Friday service at the Mission. For the preacher at that service, Jesus' death did not serve as a sacrifice necessary for God to forgive the sins of the world, but, for other members of the Association, Jesus' death on a cross was exactly that, the atoning sacrifice that makes God's forgiveness of our sins possible.

So what news or whose news is good news? Is it the Gospel as the preacher proclaimed it on Good Friday, or is it the Gospel that other preachers believe *should* have been proclaimed that day?

In this morning's story from the book of Acts, a man known to us only as the “Ethiopian eunuch” asks the apostle Philip to explain a passage from the prophet Isaiah, and Philip proclaims to him “the good news about Jesus.” So what or whose news is this

“good news” Philip proclaims? This reading doesn’t tell us just what this “good news” was or is, but the entire Book of Acts, the entire New Testament, and centuries of Christian theology and Christian tradition are all attempts to explore the good news, explain the good news, and proclaim the good news.

One of the bedrock formulations of the good news comes to us in our second reading this morning: God is love. We love – we are *able* to love – because God first loved us. God is love, and we have been entrusted with the calling of loving one another.

If the news that God is love is good news, how is it “the good news *about Jesus*”? What does Jesus have to do with it? If God is love and we can know God if we love, where does Jesus fit in?

I hope most of you know me well enough by now to know I’m not going to stand here and tell you I have *the* answer. Shoot, my Christian colleagues in the Ministerial Association and I don’t agree on just how Jesus fits in the picture, so it’s no surprise that that you and I often don’t agree, either. One of things I celebrate about this congregation is that we don’t feel the need to agree on exactly who Jesus was and is and on just how he fits into God’s work of loving and healing the world.

So this morning I can’t and won’t try to offer *the* good news about Jesus. I can’t and won’t offer news that you have to accept as good news or as true news. Instead, I simply offer news that my heart hears as both good and true. And the news I offer is all tied up in that one word, *ilasmos*, which I left untranslated in the reading from 1 John.

Now, if you should ever wonder if I or we as a congregation are somehow outside the Christian tradition because we hold widely and wildly different beliefs about who Jesus was and what difference he makes in human life and human history, wonder no more. Simply look with me at the different ways that the word *ilasmos* has been translated. At different times by different translators, Jesus the *ilasmos* has been translated as Jesus the expiation for our sins, Jesus as a sacrifice to clear away our sins, Jesus as the propitiation for our sins, and Jesus the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Not being able to agree is not a new phenomenon in Christendom, and we are not alone in our diversity of belief.

Before I go any farther with *ilasmos*, I want to issue an invitation to those of you for whom the word “sin” has too much damaging baggage to offer anything good or true. I invite you to understand “sin” as *separation* from God, *alienation* from the Source of Love and Life. “Sin” isn’t what someone else tells you you *shouldn’t* have done if you did it or that you *should* have done if you didn’t. “Sin” is what prevents you from receiving the fullness of God in your life and so keeps you from experiencing that perfect love that casts out fear. Sin is what hinders our ability to welcome the Holy One into our own lives and to welcome and love the Holy One in everyone and everything in creation.

So if Jesus is God’s anointed one who is an *ilasmos* for our separation and alienation from God, what in the world is an *ilasmos*? Over the last week, I put my divinity school education and my three years of studying New Testament Greek to work and tried to get a sense of the meaning of the word nearly 2000 years ago. Not the meaning that’s been layered over with centuries of theological ponderings and disputes, but the meaning it might have had for those early Christians, the women and men who encountered in Jesus Christ news that was good and true.

What I found was this. *Ilasmos* was most commonly used to refer to the rituals and offerings that people would present to various gods – household gods, city gods,

Greek gods, Roman gods – for the purpose of smoothing the divine-human relationship. The *ilasmos* seemed to pave the way for the gods to bestow favor and mercy, not necessarily in the sense that, without it, the gods would be angry and punitive, but in the sense of facilitating blessing and forgiveness.

When I bring that meaning of *ilasmos* into an understanding of the good news of Jesus, this is what I hear. I hear that, as the apostle Paul says, God was in Christ Jesus, reconciling the world to Godself. I hear that God sent Jesus as an *ilasmos* for our sins, someone who can clear away our separation and alienation from God, so that we can *receive* the Holy One's grace, mercy, forgiveness, and love. I hear that, in Jesus, God was and is telling us that there is no separation, no alienation, no shame, no degradation so great that it puts us beyond the reach of the love and grace of God.

I hear the good news that the Christian story is *not* about God needing Jesus' death to be willing and able to forgive and love us. I hear the good news that the Christian story *is* about Jesus teaching us over and over and over again, that an unimaginable abundance of holy love, mercy, forgiveness, and grace is always available, is always ours to receive if we are willing to open ourselves to it.

Let me return to our second reading this morning and offer a different translation:

Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. We come to know God's love through Jesus. If you seek to know what the fullness of God looks like in human form, do not look to Caesar, who calls himself the Son of God and who rules with force and threats and military might. Look instead to Jesus, who comes with love to take away our alienation from God and from one another. If we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us.

This, my beloveds, is the news I encounter in Jesus. This is the news I encounter as good news. In Jesus, I hear the news that there is nothing -- no harm we have experienced or inflicted that is so great, no path we have followed that is so destructive -- there is nothing that can take us so far from God that it is no longer possible to turn toward the Holy One and be welcomed home with arms of love and grace. The good news I hear is that, through Jesus, God is always seeking to teach us how to turn around and let ourselves be welcomed home.

I want to close this morning with one more piece of news I consider both good and true, and this news comes from an experience that I shared with two of the FCC confirmation class and two of their mentors yesterday morning. We were welcomed into the Sonoma Ashram and given the gift of conversation with the leader, or Baba, of the community. Baba is a man with an amazing story; he is a man of warmth and welcome; and he is a man with a stunning smile and a full body laugh. He is also a man with news to share.

Among the many things Baba shared with us yesterday, the specific good news I want to share with you is this. He said that the very purpose of human life is to be in union with God and that, as we experience that union, a fullness of life spills out more and more from us into selfless service in the world. In Baba's words, I also heard the words of Jesus, saying that the greatest of the commandments is to love God with all your

heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength and that the second greatest is to love your neighbor as yourself.

Listen to Baba and Jesus. The purpose of life is union with God. Love God with everything you have and everything you are. Let your union with God spill out into selfless service in the world. Love your neighbor as yourself.

My brothers and sisters, I do believe this is good news. It is the good news of Jesus. It is the good news of Baba Haraji and of his teachers before him. It is, as far as I'm concerned, the good news of God. What matters is not where or from whom we hear it. What matters is that we hear it and then try to live it.

May the Holy One of life, love, and blessing help us hear and share the news that is both good and true.

Amen.

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