

THE UNSTOPPABLE GOSPEL

Scriptures: Philippians 1:12-20; Mark 9:38-41

In the eastern part of Berlin, Germany, there is an old Lutheran Church with a tall steeple and cross that once dominated the city skyline. During the cold war the East German government built next to the church a huge office tower topped by a large silver ball. The tower was supposed to dwarf the church, symbolizing the triumph of communism over Christianity. But when the tower was finished, a funny thing happened. When the sun came out, the shiny metal sheets of the silver ball reflected sunlight in the shape of a cross that was visible for miles. As the sun moved across the sky, the cross reflected out to different parts of the city. People in East Berlin started calling it “the cross tower.” The very thing that was supposed to make people forget Jesus ended up reminding them of him.

A similar thing happened in ancient Rome. The apostle Paul was imprisoned to stop him from spreading a new religion about a Galilean carpenter named Jesus. The Roman authorities did not appreciate Paul telling people that Jesus is Lord. They wanted people to think that Caesar is Lord. So they put Paul in jail. But Paul tells the Philippians,

I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ.

At the end of Philippians Paul passes on this little greeting from the Christians with him in Rome. He says, “The friends who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of the emperor’s household.” Don’t you love it? Paul is imprisoned to suppress the gospel, but his imprisonment ends up making believers of the emperor’s own family and staff. Apparently, God loves irony.

But it does not stop there. Paul’s imprisonment was also meant to intimidate other Christians, to scare them into keeping quiet. But it had the opposite effect. Verse 14: “And most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.”

I think many people feel that to be a good witness for Christ you must be on top of your game. Your life must be together and going well. As a result, when people go through a divorce, they sometimes quit coming to church. They feel embarrassed or ashamed, and part of that may be feeling that their Christian life is a failure, that their life disproves the power of the gospel. Others feel that way when they have lost their job or when their business has failed or when their children have gotten into trouble.

On more than one occasion people have come into my office and told me, “I have a hard time coming to church. Everyone else in church seems to have their life together, and my life is a mess.” I want to tell them, “If you only knew.” If you only knew how much brokenness there is sitting in this room this morning. Really! Many of you have shared your stories with me: stories about struggles with addiction, struggles with depression, troubles with your children,

your marriage, even your parents. We tend not to talk about these things, as if talking about them will discredit us as followers of Christ. But actually, the opposite is true. When Paul was thrown in jail, far from discrediting the gospel, it helped it to spread.

It could be that you are the best witness for Christ, not when you are at the top of your game, but when you are at the bottom. If you can keep following Christ, if you can keep coming to church, if you can keep worshiping God and praying with others and singing hymns, even if you have to stand here and let others sing because there is a lump in your throat or tears running down your cheeks—if you can come to church and worship God under such circumstances, that may be the best witness to Jesus of all. To follow Jesus when you're in trouble, like Paul was, to follow Jesus when your heart is broken, when your finances are crumbling, when your family is messed up, when you're struggling with addiction, depression, or direction—your presence in a family of faith at such times does not discredit the gospel, it demonstrates it. And it gives courage to others in similar situations to believe and share their faith.

But there is more. In verses 15-18 Paul talks about discord within the church. Verse 15: “Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill.” Talk about discrediting the Christian faith. What could be worse than in-fighting in the church? Even the fact that we have different denominations—Presbyterians, Lutherans, Methodists, Catholics—turns some people off to the whole idea of Christianity. But not the apostle Paul. In verse 18 Paul says, “What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice.”

Do you see what a remarkable statement that is? We can be glad there are other churches, even churches of other denominations, that are inviting people to follow Jesus. We need not feel threatened by starting a new church five miles away in Latah Valley. If they reach people, if they help people find a home in a family of a faith that don't find one here, all the better.

You may have seen the sign that St. John's Lutheran Church is also moving its church out into Latah Valley, directly across the highway from where the Latah Valley church hopes to build. On top of that, an independent church called Relevant Life is starting up in Latah Valley. Is that a setback? Will that harm the church's mission? Not according to the apostle Paul. Nor according to Jesus. In our first scripture lesson one of the disciples is concerned about a new church starting down the road. He says to Jesus, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” It is not just a new church but one of those wild “charismatic” churches gathered around a colorful preacher with a questionable theology and no accountability, the very kind of church which we Presbyterians tend to view with suspicion. But Jesus says, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.”

The kingdom of God is not about making people Presbyterian. It's about bringing people to Jesus.

This does not mean every church that talks about Jesus is witnessing to the true Jesus in the New Testament. The apostle Paul is quite emphatic about that. Later in Philippians, chapter

3, Paul says, “Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh.” He is talking there about people who teach that believing in Jesus is not enough. To be saved, they say, you must be circumcised and follow all the commandments of the Old Testament law. Paul is enraged by such teaching. He saves his nastiest comments for those who think Jesus needs to be supplemented by other means of salvation based on works.

No one could accuse the apostle Paul of being wishy-washy. But at the same time, Paul recognizes that differences between Christians may actually help the gospel. People may be brought to Jesus through different styles and personalities. There are people drawn to a community of faith in the Lutheran Church that are not drawn to the Presbyterian Church. I discovered that in Potlatch, where I was the pastor of both churches. There are also people drawn to Jesus through churches with large auditoriums, charismatic preachers, and flashy bands. Heck, we have a flashy band. All we need is a charismatic preacher. We don’t have to condemn these other churches. Remember what Paul says. “What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way ... and in that I rejoice.”

Our job is not to compete with other churches; our job is to share Christ with the people and gifts that we have. If we are a church that thinks deeply about our faith, that studies carefully what we believe, that makes decisions slowly and carefully as a group, even if we are a little boring, that’s okay. There are people that we can bring to Christ better than anyone else.

The same is even true for you as individuals. Each of you as individuals has the ability to share Jesus in a way that no one else can. Each of you has contacts with people, relationships, even your own style of following Christ that is just what other people need to see in order to find Jesus for themselves. Each of you is positioned to be the representative of the worldwide body of Christ to certain people. Because of your relationships, because of your personality and gifts, because of your life experiences, even the bad ones, you are in a position to help others know the grace of Christ in a way that no one else can.

And here is the good news. If you commit yourself to share Jesus with others, you will succeed even if you think you are failing. God loves irony. The imprisonment, the barriers, the problems and conflicts that you think will prevent you or disqualify you from sharing your faith is the very thing God will use to make it work. For the gospel is unstoppable. All it needs is people willing to give it a shot.

- Ken Onstot
April 22, 2007