

Last week we launched our fourth vision pillar on cultural engagement, which is helping us to be “Transformed People, Transforming the Peninsula.” The series is entitled *So I Send You* and is looking at how we engage our culture. As a way of review, here is our definition of Cultural Engagement: Our thoughtful and gracious participation in society, as both individuals and as a church community, so that people encounter God through our words and actions.

And at the core of this pillar is the deep conviction as the church that we are called not to retreat away from culture but to live and exist within the culture as an example and beacon of God’s mission in his world. So I am excited to be continuing that discussion with you.

What binds a community together?

Maybe put differently, what is at the core of every community, which holds it together? Think about the various communities you may find yourself a part of—a local school, a neighborhood club, your work/industry, or maybe CPC, our church community.

What is it that holds those various communities together? From as early as I can remember, my Dad taught me about two specific communities we were a part of because we were Sneeds through two important lessons that he passed on to us kids. As Sneeds, we would love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. And the second lesson was very similar; we were to hate the Dodgers with all [our] heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Now, obviously, he says this in jest. But these two lessons demonstrate two communities that I am a part of, the Christian community and the community of Giants fans. But what is it that holds me to these two communities? Each has an incredibly diverse constituency that ranges geographic locations as well as socio-economic status. They cross all sorts of social divides, and yet those differences don’t break down.

I think the thing that holds communities together is story. And what I mean by story is a common shared history. Let me demonstrate this to you. I imagine I am not the only one who would identify as a part of the Giants community. So for you Giants fans out there, when I mention names like Willie Mays, Will Clark, Barry Bonds, Matt Williams, or maybe Juan Marichal, those names mean something to you. For you more recent fans, names like Tim Lincecum, Pablo Sandoval, Buster Posey, or Madison Bumgarner mean something to you. Those names indicate stories of a shared history.

Think about Bobby Thompson’s “Shot Heard Round the World” or Barry Bonds’ 73-Homer Season, or the pain of the 2002 World Series and Russ Ortiz being pulled in the 7th inning of game six. And, of course, the torturous but incredible runs of 2010, 2012, and 2014. These names

and events are all a part of a shared history that Giants fans everywhere share. And because of this shared history, we can find commonality wherever we are. Stories connect people. They provide identity and distinction. They also provide the tools for inviting others into that community. In the same way, my Dad would tell me as a young kid about Orlando Cepeda and Willie McCovey. These stories share the good news of the San Francisco Giants with friends around me!

The same is true of the Church. Although, as good a story as the 2014 dominance of Madison Bumgarner is, the church holds a better story. And this story is what we call the gospel. The gospel is the story—the shared history—that defines us as a community and the story we share with the world around us.

So with that in mind, how do we share our story as the Church, the gospel, in a pluralist culture? How do we live our faith in public with others who may not share our beliefs? In the increasingly difficult cultural temperature that we live in, we must find a way to share our story that is gracious, thoughtful, and that holds to our convictions authentically.

So, in what probably seems like the first logical step, if we are to thoughtfully and graciously share our story with our culture, we need to know the actual core beliefs of our story—the gospel. And I think a strong argument can be made that if you are going to determine the core beliefs of our faith, there is no better place in scripture to go than right here in 1 Corinthians 15:1-11.

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve.

After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what

**we preach, and this is what you believed. 1 Corinthians
15:1-11**

Having spent 14 chapters teaching the community of Corinth a litany of different things, from ethics of the way of Jesus to instructions of the church gathering to specific scenarios and issues the church in Corinth were facing, Paul pauses to take a deep breath and re-center the church on that which is central to their identity and community.

Remembering the Gospel “Of First Importance”

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. vv. 1-2

Notice how Paul starts, “*I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you...*” Why does Paul need to remind these believers, the church, of the gospel? Why does he need to remind us of the very story that we find our identity in? Quite simply because we forget! And we forget because while we believe it is the true story, we live in a plural society that contains countless stories and narratives about the way the world operates. And because it is simply the air we breathe, it can be easy to get lost in those other stories, allowing them to seep and define who we are.

This was a problem that constantly faced Israel and the early believers and is especially tempting for us. It is a problem of allegiance. This can happen through different cultural stories about health, wealth, individualism, love, sexuality, republican politics, or democratic politics.

One of my deep concerns as a Pastor is that we have witnessed the shifting of allegiance within the church to political stories over the past few election cycles—particularly the merging of evangelicalism and conservative politics. The marrying of the way of Jesus to any political party (republican or democrat) is an idolatrous split of our allegiance. When this happens, it is an indicator that we need to be reminded of our story, the gospel. We need to be reminded that we are about a higher allegiance.

Let me demonstrate this another way. Paul says right here in the opening of this text that we need to be reminded of the gospel. The word, gospel, is the Greek word *euaggelion* and this Greek word is where we derive the name evangelical. I would imagine if I were to go out and ask random people what an evangelical is, I would guess I would hear more about politics than I would about Jesus and the gospel. And whether or not we believe this is a fair assessment, it demonstrates that we have work to do to recover and restore our allegiance to the gospel. Because what the word gospel literally means is good news or glad tidings.

Historically it was used to announce a history-changing event, usually to announce the coronation of a new king, or a significant military victory, some major news event that was changing the world. So right here, at the beginning of Paul's discussion of the absolute core of Christianity, is a gospel event, something that has already happened. Listen to this quote from the New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright.

Christianity, you see, isn't a set of ideas. It isn't a path of spirituality. It isn't a rule of life. It isn't a political

agenda. It includes, and indeed gives energy to, all those things; but at its very heart it is something different. It is good news about an event which has happened in the world, an event because of which the world can never be the same again. And those who believe it, and live by it, will (thank God!) never be the same again either.

Therefore, to be an evangelical is not to be a part of a voting bloc; it is to be the people of the Good News! Marked and defined by the story that Jesus is Lord! It is to be part of a community that is embodying and giving witness to the world-changing events of the Christ event that took place in Jesus. It is to be defined by an actual historical event that transformed the world, and it is to spend your life living into the implications that it has for our daily life. Most namely, seeking the grace of Jesus and learning live in this new reality.

Because the center of our faith is a historical event, it has already happened whether we believe it or not. By faith and the grace of Jesus alone, we can be saved and live into this story, but the gospel is that it has taken place. If the gospel is simply a set of teachings, then we are dependent on our own frail abilities to achieve our own salvation by living up to some standard that we cannot attain.

Reread verse 2. “*By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.*” The gospel is not advice; it is not a myth; it is actual news about what God has done in the world. And this can be either accepted in faith or rejected. Paul's encouragement is to “hold firmly” to the Gospel. To live into that new reality because it is by this that we are saved! It is to allow this world-changing news to change your world. At the most basic, fundamental level, what I want you to understand today is:

The Gospel Changes Things

Has the gospel changed you? This happened in the lives of the Corinthians, and it is happening in our lives today and will continue to happen in the lives of our neighbors, friends, and family.

So with all of that in mind, let's look at three particular things that change in Paul's summary of the gospel here. The gospel changes the problem of sin - 1 Corinthians 15:3. The gospel changes history - 1 Corinthians 15:4-8. The gospel changes you - 1 Corinthians 15:9-11.

The Gospel Changes the Problem of Sin

“*For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,*” (v. 3). Paul does something here that is really helpful for us as we consider how we are to share our story of the gospel with our culture. He narrows his focus to that which is “of first importance.” Christians believe in all sorts of different things about nearly everything. When we talk about engaging our culture with the gospel, it is important that we focus where Paul does, majoring in the majors and minoring in the minors.

You may be passionate about certain Christian beliefs about various secondary issues. And that is good, but when we talk about sharing the gospel, we have to narrow our focus and not get caught up in those secondary issues. The reformers of the faith had a great saying they

would use to talk about church unity, but I think it very much applies to cultural engagement as well.

In essentials, unity.

In nonessentials, liberty.

In all things, love.

Paul says this gospel is of “first importance,” and everything that follows through verse 11 is about the gospel of first importance. The first thing we learn about this gospel of first importance here is that it changes the problem of sin. Let’s carefully breakdown the following sentence. “...that Christ...” The word Christ is the Greek word *Christos*, which is the Greek rendering of the Hebrew title “Messiah.” Contrary to widespread assumption, “Christ” is not Jesus’ last name but is instead a title. The Church in Corinth was primarily made up of Greek speakers and non-Jews, so it made sense for him to use the title Christ or Christos instead of Messiah. But it was pointing toward Jesus as the Old Testament Messiah that had been long spoken of and attested to.

Paul goes on. “...that Christ died...” It is an astonishing reality to consider that Christ, the Messiah, dies. This has profound implications for how we understand and relate to God, profound implications for our ethics, and how we go about the mission of God. The means of the cross is the means of suffering. At the center of this gospel is that our King, our Savior, died. He didn’t conquer through violence and conquest. He didn’t save through the sword and empire. But rather, Jesus—the Christ—gave himself over to the powers-that-be and through the seemingly powerless crucifixion established his kingdom. A thoroughly different kingdom constituted by alternative means has nothing to do with coercion, revenge, or power over.

It is one of empathy at its deepest levels because the King experienced the harshest realities that we face. One of love, a love willing to give and sacrifice his life for the lives of others. But also one that engages the world, not through power “over” but through power “under.”

If, in fact, Jesus died, which he did, and if, in fact, Jesus was The Christ, which he was and is, then how we go about the work of the kingdom is to follow a similar pattern. It is not taking up the sword and conquering through coercive means.

Now, Jesus’ death was for a specific reason. “...that Christ died for our sins.” This is the core belief of the Christian faith. It is dealing with the problem of sin. Because what the Christian story holds is that sin is our most fundamental problem that must be dealt with. Now, this is not our only problem, but it is our most fundamental problem. We are suffering and in need of liberation, yes. We are sick and in need of healing, yes. We need help and support and teaching, yes. But first and foremost, we are sinners in need of salvation. This is our foremost problem.

We need to do a little work on this concept of sin because the age that we live in has a complicated relationship with the idea of sin. On the one hand, we see our culture going through so much upheaval because it recognizes the deep brokenness of different systems and structures that are unjust. We see the deep impacts that sin has had on the lives of others. In some ways, we are very comfortable with systemic sin.

But on the other hand, we are repulsed by the idea of personal sin and responsibility. Because we are so deeply formed by individualism and sin requires there to be an external source of authority that is beyond the individual, and as good post-enlightenment modern people, we resist any form of authority that is outside of the self.

But here is why both the concept of systemic (or corporate) sin and personal sin are both so important. Think theologically for a second. If God does, in fact, exist and is the sustainer of all things, which is core to our Christian worldview, we owe it to this God to live entirely to him. Because if he didn’t sustain us, we would not exist! But the clear teaching of the Bible and the clear experience that we all have is that we don’t do this. We don’t totally live for God. We miss the mark; we sin, we cloud out God, we allow ourselves to get in the way. We live selfishly, we ruin ourselves, and we’ve ruined the world. This is sin.

The result of our sinfulness is that a state of alienation is created that must be remedied. But Jesus deals with the alienation in an altogether different way than the world. And that is all remedied by this tiny English word “for.” In English, we have a limited use of prepositions, but thankfully Greek is more robust. And here is the Greek preposition *huper*, which we translate as “for,” but a more literal translation of the Greek preposition is “on behalf of” or “for the sake of.”

Rather than the perpetrator paying for the sins that created the alienation, Jesus substitutes himself to heal the divide of alienation. Meaning that he has died for us, and instead of us. He took what we deserved, so we could have what we didn’t deserve.

So how does the death of Christ for our sins give birth to new life in us? That brings us to our second point about the Gospel.

The Gospel Changes History - 1 Cor. 15:3b-8

“...that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...” The core of the gospel is that Christ died for our sins, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day. He overcomes this problem of sin through the birthing of a new reality right in the midst of this one, as demonstrated through the resurrection.

The death and resurrection of Jesus is the coronation of King Jesus over his new creation. It is the beginning of a new way of the world, what Jesus called the “Kingdom of God.” Now, this little phrase “according to the scriptures” is really important because it does not simply mean that there were a few scattered prophecies that mention the Messiah. What Paul means by this is that the narratives of Jesus are one part of a much larger story that is taking place. It is the story of the entire scriptures! The fullest expression of the gospel must be taken “in accordance with the scriptures.”

Meaning, the gospel, the story of Jesus, is the culmination of the entire hope and aim of the Old Testament. This is the good news about how God did the thing that he had always promised to do. So the whole story of Jesus is about something shocking and startling to the world that was predominately not ready for the ascension of the Lordship of Jesus!

The Gospel Changes You - 1 Cor. 15:9-11

For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed.

Paul now closes this summary of the gospel with a testimony. It is a beautiful story of how the gospel has deeply changed his own life. It is how Paul has found his own life wrapped up in the life of a gracious King. Notice that the word grace is used three times in verse 10 alone! Because here is what we have to really understand. The gospel, with all of its cosmic depth and importance, is also deeply personal. And Paul is a beautiful example of just this.

How does God's grace transform us? I believe God's grace is transformative in two ways mentioned here by Paul. It is undeserved (15:9-10a)—this humbles any attempts we make at being self-sufficient "*I am who I am.*" Nothing Paul had done deserved the graciousness of Jesus. This is a humbling experience. It levels the field. We are all no different than others. Grace and sin are both wildly non-partisan; they affect us all! So this brings us down to recognize our need for grace.

It is unconditional (15:10); this raises us back up. We are always loved, always accepted. No matter how hard Paul worked, none of that took root but only by the grace of God was it transformative.

The Grace of God was not without effect.

At the close of the first chapter of Dallas Willard's book, *Divine Conspiracy*, he tells a story about growing up in rural southern Missouri before electricity had made its way into houses. During his senior year of high school, the Rural Electrification Administration extended their lines into his area, and electrical power became available to households and farms. A new reality was born; there was now a gospel of electricity and the good news of electricity. He writes:

When those lines came by our farm, a very different way of living presented itself. Our relationships to fundamental aspects of life - daylight and dark, hot and cold, clean and dirty, work and leisure, preparing food and preserving it - could then be vastly changed for the better. But we still had to believe in the electricity and its arrangements, understand them, and take the practical steps involved in relying on it.

In some way, this helps us to understand Jesus' basic message...In the same way, these farmers heard the announcement, "Repent for the kingdom of electricity has arrived" we hear the cry of Jesus, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near."

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

Certainly, this metaphor is just that, a metaphor. But I think it paints a helpful picture of how the gospel is operative in our world and our lives. And to do so, of course, involves repentance, intentionality, and transformation of our habits and ways of living. This is what the invitation of the gospel is—to live in light of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. This will still require the rearranging of our lives around its availability. We cannot just live the same old way we have always lived, because the kingdom has arrived.

I think this story illustrates two things for us and offers us two questions. First, toward the beginning of my sermon, I stated a question. Has the gospel changed you? I invite you to continually ask this question. And if you haven't, I invite you to begin the journey toward accepting this gospel message.

Second, this is the story that we are called to give witness to. How will you give witness to this story? Ultimately we give witness to this story by speaking of the gospel. We give witness to the way we have rearranged our lives around the work of Jesus Christ. To use Willard's metaphor, we witness to the arrival of the kingdom of electricity.

This can no doubt be a challenging task, but it is what we are called to do. Canadian pastor, Bruxy Cavey, has a simple framework for speaking of the Gospel. To make it simple, he writes the gospel in one word, three words, and 30 words.

1 Word -Jesus

3 Words -Jesus is Lord

30 Words -Jesus is God with us, come to show us God's love, save us from sin, set up God's kingdom, and shut down religion so that we can share in God's life.

This simple framework is meant to be a helpful guide to how we can approach this grand story of the gospel. It is meant to be both a way for us to remind ourselves of the story that defines our identity, and it is meant to be a helpful way that you can remember how to share this gospel with the world around us. It is a sort of a mental rubric you can use to sort through the biblical story of Christ's life and teaching. But I think this is better used, not as something you recite to others, but as something you internalize and use it help you internally process how to share about this grand story of the gospel.

The gospel changes things. The gospel changes everything. And it is the story that binds us together, and it is the story that is continuing to turn the world upside down. May we find our lives wrapped up in this story. Amen.

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