

Sermons from Emmanuel Church, Dublin, New Hampshire

Sunday, July 9, 2023

Proper 9, Year A (RCL): The Very Rev. Gideon L. K. Pollach

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So, obviously, with this great collection of readings, I am going to spend the next half an hour speaking about ancient Semitic dating practices. Particularly, the use of wells as a metaphor for God's abundant provision. Some other time.

Instead, today I want to speak with you about something deeply true at the heart of the good news of Jesus Christ.

Look, it has long been said that it is easier to believe a lie about the judgment and anger of God than the truth of the generous grace and love of God. That's because it's hard to accept sometimes that God's love for you, and for me, is unmerited, unearned and available to us, despite our failings and our shortcomings.

I know that this is a hot take, and it's a lot to receive at the top of a sermon. But I want you to bear this truth in mind. Because many of us are burdened, not by accepting this truth. But by following and accepting false truths about who God is, and what God expects of you.

Now I call this collection of false truths, this disordered thinking about God and God's desires for us "false gospels." False gospels are culturally bound lies about God that feel true. But aren't.

They have the benefit of being widely accepted as true, and they feel believable, but they are painfully unachievable, impossible to follow, and our striving to achieve and follow these false gospels, our discipleship to them undermines our joy in life, and our feelings of self-worth.

It's also important to note as I name some of these, that this list is not exhaustive.

We are often taught, consciously or unconsciously, that life is a process of constant improvement. We are expected by others outside of our church community, and sometimes ourselves, we are expecting ourselves to get faster, better, stronger, thinner, more beautiful, more capable, more intelligent, more able. And if we don't, then we aren't winning life, as if life can be won.

Now, I won't ask how many of you have internalized this false gospel of constant improvement for fear that either we won't be honest, or everyone in the room will be implicated. This idea is so widespread in our achievement based culture, that it's nearly ubiquitous.

Here's another: the false gospel of generational achievement.

This is one I know. Because on Long Island, I hear people stressed about this all of the time. Maybe this isn't true for you. But there are many people who believe that they are only making it when they're doing better than their parents or their grandparents. Now this might be achievable for some people, people whose families come from modest means and backgrounds but for others, especially those who have been born into any kind of privilege or perhaps live in the Cold Spring Harbor School District.

So here's another add to your list: The Gospel of constant availability.

Now, this is a false gospel that I just want to admit, I am currently actively rebelling against in this all the time "on "world with all the various means of communication, email, text, Twitter, Slack, now threads, and unusually the telephone, many of us believe that the path to perfection may lie in being constantly available and responsive. Open to interruption,. Everything to everybody. Mother, father, friend, confident, coach, expert, novice. Ready to respond at any time and for any reason. Because of this, unless we make it a practice of tuning out, no time is private, or sacred. No time is ours. We belong to the breaking news, or the iPhone alert, or whoever is the next to ping us at any time in any place.

And of course, the corollary expectation is that you and I always deserve a response from whomever we contact, whenever we contact them, no matter where they are, or what they are doing.

Now compare this shortlist to the true gospel of grace, in which Jesus declares, you are enough.

You may not be perfect, but you are loved.

In fact, God calls you Beloved, Not for what you have accomplished or for what you do. Or, how much you are worth, or for what you have earned, or for your amazing availability, or for your incredible second serve, but just for being made in the image and likeness of God.

Right now, I'll admit, so far, I haven't anchored this sermon in the Scripture. So here's your touchstone: not just one reading, but two readings. So I want to notches in my exegetical expertise column, okay? Because I'm obviously keeping score.

St. Paul, in his intentionally confusing and obfuscatory meditation on the human condition from the letter to Romans makes a beautiful point : human life, the reality of being human is confusing.

Sometimes what is right isn't clear. And, sometimes, what is clear isn't right.

And sometimes there is no right answer only two good options that are in conflict with each other and we are left to ask: do I do what is right? Do I do what I want? Do I do what is just? Do I try to be equitable? Do I try to be loving, even when sometimes it's not just or as he puts it: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want. But I do the very thing I hate. Now, if I do what I do not want I agree that the law is good, but it is no longer the in fact I that do it, but sin that dwells within me for I know that nothing good dwells within me that is in my flesh, I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want but the evil I do not want is what I do. And now if I do what I do not want it is no longer I that do it. but sin that dwells within me.

In short: Do, Be. Don't do. Don't be. Be. Do. Do be. How can I be and do?

What can I do? And how do I know what is right? How can I have the courage to accomplish it? What happens when I'm wrong? Despite my desire to be right, who can save me from this human condition, this morass of moral and ethical ambiguity? And you know, he's got a point.

The second is the Gospel of Matthew in which Jesus confesses that he, Jesus is the object of another false gospel, which is the gospel of constant critique.

This faith needs no explanation. Jesus makes the point that John the Baptist preached a gospel of self denial, repentance, judgment, universal sinfulness. But few accepted it.

Jesus preaches the gospel of God's grace and love. And people reject that too.

Why? Because the false gospels feel right.

The false gospels of constant improvement, generational achievement, constant availability, constant critique, these all feel true because they are grounded in an anthropology of human inadequacy that just feels true.

They tell us that we are not enough unless we improve, we are not enough unless we are available. We are not enough unless we are perfect. We are not enough unless we spot the flaws in others. We are not enough unless we are greater than our parents, or our grandparents or our siblings or our friends and

neighbors. No, we are not enough. Unless we work hard enough, achieve enough and improve ourselves at a rate greater than our ancestors.

But this isn't the truth. It is believable and it resonates because it's consistent with the way the world treats us. But it's not true of God.

The true gospel of God's grace declares that you are enough already. You are beloved as you are.

Work will not perfect you. In fact, you deserve rest.

"Come to me," says Jesus. "Come to me all of you." "Come to me, all of you who are weary." "Come to me, all of you who are weary and are carrying carrying heavy burdens." "Come to me, all of you. All of you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls."

Our Christian faith stands in opposition to the Gospels of human inadequacy and shame and says: you are enough. You are beloved as you are. You may not be perfect, but no one is. You can be forgiven. You are loved. And in God's generous time and through God's generous love, what is broken in you can be healed. What is in need of forgiveness will be forgiven. What is weak can become a source of strength with and through God's generous and abundant love.

It is the true gospel of God's salvation rather than the false gospel of human inadequacy, human perfection, human achievement, human striving, or, as St. Paul so memorably said: "Who will rescue us?" Well, "thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord" who has saved us from the burdens of perfection, the expectation of improvement, the burden of critique and our need to be available.

Instead, Christ invites us not only to rest but to rest in God's abundant, unmerited, unearned and generous love for you and for me. *Amen.*

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