

What's Next

Deuteronomy 18:15-20 and Mark 1:21-28

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Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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²¹ They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. ²² The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. ²³ Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, ²⁴ “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!”

²⁵ “Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!” ²⁶ The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

²⁷ The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, “What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him.” ²⁸ News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

I don't have a lot of experience with farewell sermons, so I wasn't exactly sure what I should say today.

You'll be relieved to know that I have nothing to get off my chest. There is nothing I have been holding back and saving up for today. And besides, a sermon is not a time to get even or to take a parting shot, even if I felt the need to do that, which I don't.

When an airline captain retires – maybe you've seen this – often the whole family accompanies the captain for his (or her) final flight. The air traffic controllers often ask the

captain which runaway he (or she) would prefer to use. I would choose the longest and widest one available. And then, after the plane has taxied almost to the gate, the fire trucks come out and water cannons hose the plane in a final salute.

You can go to YouTube and see examples this for yourself.

I saw this in person one time, when a member of my church in Florida retired from flying commercial airplanes and I thought it was a very moving experience.

The captain, who was an elder at my church and someone who had become a dear friend, came through the jetway into the waiting area where he was met with cheers from all of his friends. I was surprised to see that he had tears in his eyes. It was the only time I had ever seen that. You don't want the person flying the airplane to be on the verge of tears all the time.

But I am not asking you to turn on the water hoses today after worship. Some of you – those of you sitting right there in the balcony – probably think that's a great idea, but ... please ... no.

I think I have a better idea for what to do today.

Very early in my ministry, I attended a funeral service with my senior pastor, who was someone I very much admired and had a deep respect for, and during the service, while sitting next to him, I could sense that he was not very happy. He seemed to be annoyed with everything that was happening. (Do you know the sounds people make when they're really irritated with something?)

We heard one tribute after another to the person who had died ... and not very much about God, who presumably we had come to worship.

And so, as we were leaving the church that day, my senior pastor stopped and turned to me and said (and obviously I have not forgotten these words), **“Doug, if it should ever be your responsibility to preach the sermon at my funeral, preach the gospel.”**

So, thank you, Fred, for that advice – and for all of the other advice you have given me along the way. I am here today – more than 37 years later – in no small part because of you and your patience and your modeling of what a pastor should be.

The other person who should be thanked is the person who was very, very surprised the day I told her that I was thinking about going to seminary.

After dating for a few weeks and realizing that this was going to be a serious relationship – at least I was hoping that it would be serious, she was going to need a little convincing – I took Susan out to dinner at the best restaurant I could afford, which isn't saying much, and I wore the only suit I owned at the time, and I said, “**There's something I have to tell you.**”

Which, trust me about this, is never a good way to begin a conversation with someone you love.

She could have left me that night, and she may have thought about it, but instead she has stayed with me for more than 40 years now, as my most trusted confidant – and the best supporter and encourager and advocate any married person could ever have.

Frankly, I don't see how ministry is possible without a full partner, and I was blessed to have the best.

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So, Doug, what about the gospel you were going to preach? Thank you. I'm glad you asked.

Last Sunday, I was sitting in the front row at the annual meeting, and I listened as a discussion broke out about attendance and giving, two topics which I have heard a lot about over the years.

One of the comments that was made – and I forget now who made it – was that we should try to be a more friendly and welcoming church.

We should have a time at the beginning, for example, when we meet the people sitting near us. We should have a welcome pad on which people could give us their names and email addresses. We should make sure that the pastors follow up on visitors, especially when those visitors go to the trouble of giving us their names and email addresses (something we always do, by the way). We should even think about translation services, passing out wireless earphones, with worship translated into a variety of languages. And so on.

All of those suggestions were good, and all of them are ideas that we – or rather *you* – should consider. The church, I think, should try its best to be a friendly and welcoming place.

But, as you know, I have had some biblical and theological training, and so when a conversation like that takes place, especially at an annual meeting, especially with more than a hundred of our most active church members in attendance, I start to think biblically and theologically.

“What does it mean to be a friendly church?” I wondered.

Did the Apostle Paul ever instruct the churches he founded all over the eastern Mediterranean to be **“more friendly”**? Did he ever encourage them to adopt the most recent technologies or the best marketing strategies?

And the short answer, as I think you know, is no. He did not.

But what is more interesting is why not, why Paul had almost nothing to say about friendliness or marketing strategies or anything of the sort.

I should point out that Jesus had no interest in friendliness either. When he spoke in the Galilean synagogues, no one – as far as we know – remarked about his amazing smile or his firm handshake.

What they noticed about him, and what launched his ministry, was ... did you hear it in the gospel lesson I read for today? What they noticed was his *authority*. It was an authority that was different from anything they had ever heard. It was certainly different from that of the religious types, the scribes and Pharisees, in Jerusalem.

What attracted such large crowds of people – and according to the gospel there were thousands of them at a time – what attracted such large crowds of people was that Jesus spoke the truth.

He was disarming not because of his kind smile or his sense of humor or his magnetic presence, although he may have had all of those things. What attracted people to him was that he **“taught as one having authority.”**

You know, I believe that we underestimate our product. We spend a lot of time – not just this church, but every church I have ever served – we spend a lot of time on strategies and best practices and taking note of what the leaders in the field are doing.

And what we neglect – or underestimate – is the power of the product to sell itself, if only we could get out of the way.

I'm sorry to use the language of marketing. But often we have no other language to use. If I were a musician, I would sing. If I were an artist, I would paint. If I were a poet, I would write all of this out so that you would be as transformed by it as I have been.

But I am a lowly pastor. What should I do?

...Thank you for asking.

Here at the end of my career, at the end of my useful life as a pastor, I have never been more sure of one thing – namely, that the gospel doesn't need my help. It certainly doesn't need my marketing skills. It doesn't need my warmth or dry wit or anything else I might like to add to it.

The gospel has survived just fine – all these years – in spite of my best attempts to help it along.

So, what are we supposed to do? I think the answer is, Sing it, Paint it, Proclaim it, and – most important – *Live it*.

And never, ever get in its way.

This was the earliest lesson I learned in the church. I was five years old, and I was in my kindergarten Sunday school class, and I learned to sing, “**This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine, let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.**”

Everything else in my life – like my seminary training, for example – everything else has been commentary on this one simple truth: **Let it shine.**

When I arrived at seminary – and my friend Steve Lytch, who is going to be your interim pastor, will be glad to confirm this story – plus, if you ask him, he'll tell a few other stories – but when I arrived at seminary, I thought that I knew my Bible. In fact, I thought I knew it better than anyone else.

And so I thought of myself at the time as very, very advanced.

But ... and this, I have to say, was quite a painful lesson ... I soon learned that Bible knowledge doesn't count for all that much. And don't get me wrong. Knowing the Bible counts for something. I mean, if you're in a Bible study, good for you. You should keep studying the Bible. And if you're not in a Bible study, I hope you will consider joining one.

But what I learned, and what I have been learning ever since, often painfully, is that how I live the gospel is far more important than how much I know about it.

Living it – day by day, hour by hour – is what counts. And it’s what other people will notice about us.

I have spent my whole life, as the Apostle Paul puts it, growing up into the full stature of Jesus Christ. And I hope to have a few more years on this earth, because I have more a lot more growing to do.

So, better than knowing the gospel – or marketing the gospel – is living the gospel, demonstrating it, revealing it through the person you are and the decisions you make and the causes you support and the way you speak to and about other people.

I have a suggestion. If you want to be a friendlier, more welcoming church – and every church should be more of those things – then try doing that, try growing up into the full stature of Jesus Christ.

At least 20 years ago, I went on some sort of overnight retreat at a Catholic retreat center in Chicago, and as I was standing at the reception desk, waiting to get my room assignment, I noticed a small sign, which I think has changed my life.

On the sign were these words: **“When a stranger arrives, Christ is present.”**

I didn’t know this at the time, because I was brought up to be suspicious of Catholic teaching, but those words draw heavily from the hospitality teachings of the Benedictine monks.

In the middle ages – there being no five-star hotels with breakfast buffets and fitness centers – travelers would often stop at monasteries, and the monks had strict rules about how to receive guests.

According to the Rule of St. Benedict, they were to welcome guests as they would welcome Christ himself ... because, as scripture tells us (this is in the Epistle to the Hebrews), **“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”**

In the Old Testament alone, there are no fewer than 36 places where we are commanded to show hospitality to the stranger, to the guest, to the foreigner.

In the New Testament, the Greek word for hospitality is *philoxenia*, which literally means “love of strangers.”

Any way you look at it, this is an important idea, biblically speaking. We do we have such a hard time remembering that?

When Jesus spoke to his disciples about separating the sheep from the goats, and how you figure out who the sheep really are, he said, **“When you welcomed the stranger, you welcomed me.”**

In Jesus’ mind, the sheep, those he welcomed into the joy of his presence, were those who offered hospitality to strangers.

So, the Bible never answers the question, **“How do you get your numbers up?”** And I am ashamed of how many years, during the course of my ministry, I have nevertheless thought so much about that question.

What the Bible does say is that learning to love the way Jesus loved is the most important work we have been called to do. We love the way Jesus loved by welcoming the stranger, and by speaking the truth, and by living our lives with honesty and integrity and purpose.

If we were to do that, if we were to focus on that, if we were to make it our mission, then people would notice, and they would be clamoring to join us because it is a rare and precious thing in the world today.

One more thing.

Thank you for allowing me to be your pastor. It has been the experience of my life. I will never forget you or my years here with you.