

“Hearing Isn't Believing”

Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
Independence, MO
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OLD TESTAMENT LESSON – Isaiah 53:1, 8-12
NEW TESTAMENT LESSON – Romans 8:18-25, 31-32

Theologian Søren Kierkegaard tells a parable about a flock of geese. Each Sunday these geese would gather in the shade of the barn to hear the gander preach of the glorious destiny of geese. He would describe the grand purpose for which they were created, namely flying.

Week after week they were enthralled by his messages about soaring above the clouds. But sitting around listening week after week, the geese got more and more plump. Until at Christmas time, they were eaten, and none of them ever experienced the exhilaration of flying.

Kierkegaard called his tale “The Domestic Goose.” We might call our tale “The Domestic Christian.” Many of us have heard, but don’t act upon the grand purpose for which we were created: to love the Lord with all that we are and to love our neighbor as ourselves, even as we go forth and share the Gospel with all the world.

We don’t act on our God-given purpose because, while we may hear the good news of the Gospel, we can’t find it within ourselves to really believe it, to own it personally. Our reading from Isaiah begins with these questions: “Who has believed what we have heard? Who could have imagined his future?” And then it goes on to describe how one innocent soul was stricken for the transgressions of all people. That it was “the will of the Lord to crush him with pain.”

I don’t know about you, but I find that hard to believe, I find that hard to accept. In fact, anyone who doesn’t find it hard to accept probably doesn’t really get what’s going on here between God and humanity. God is sovereign, like we heard through the Prophet Isaiah last Sunday (“I am the Lord, that is my name”); God is relational, active in our lives (“I have called you in righteousness”), and God is prophetic (“New things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them”), And we . . ., we don’t listen. Or if we do hear, we don’t believe; can’t accept that it was the will of God that Jesus should actually be tortured and executed for us – because of our rebellious nature. We’re told who we really are apart from the mercy of God and we turn a deaf ear to it; we respond like the three characters Hear No Evil, See No Evil, Speak No Evil.

The problem with Hear No Evil is Speak No Truth. Unless we acknowledge in our lives that evil exists and that God has conquered it through Jesus Christ, we end up denying God in our lives. We struggle with the idea of Jesus being killed for our sins; think it's not fair; it's not right; it makes no sense that Jesus had to die. We think that we really aren't that rebellious and misguided when it comes to God in our lives. But in the light of Christ's sacrifice, that's just what we are. And yet so great is God's love for us, that he sent his only son to die for our sins – the only perfect being, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, slain for our transgressions. That is the will of the Lord. To disregard this aspect of our faith is to disregard God's sovereignty, God's active presence in our lives, and God's prophetic Word. Why would we deny this? All God is doing is say that I am God and you're not; you are my people and I chose you for a purpose; and, I know "what's what" better than you do. Who would balk at something like that? We would.

Tap, tap, tap. Josh stood by the window defiantly holding a drumstick in his hand. Why does Mommy always have to spoil my fun? Why can't I drum on the window if I want to? Tap, tap. Okay, I'll stop ... but why should I stop? I'm not hurting anything. I'm not hitting Madison. And it makes such a wonderful sound. Tap, tap, CRACK. Kari Myers could just imagine what her 3-year-old was thinking when he broke the window in their living room. Clearly, he didn't mean to break it. Having never broken a window before, it came as a complete shock that glass would behave in such a fragile, brittle way. He didn't break it because he was angry with Mommy. He was just drumming, pursuing his God-given passion.

The problem was Kari's son wasn't listening. He was in his own little world when she first corrected him. He didn't hear a word she said. But that was only half the problem. Once she finally got his full attention, he still didn't listen, I mean really listen. He heard her say, "Stop!" but he had different ideas on the subject. He couldn't foresee the consequences of his actions, so he disregarded his parent's instructions and did as he pleased.

How familiar is this story. It plays out over and over again in countless variations. A marriage fails, a church divides, a window breaks, and we wonder "how could it happen?" Sometimes, it happens because when God's talking to us, we're not listening, not believing, not owning the message.

We don't really believe God is in charge. Okay, we believe God created the Heavens and the Earth, but we run our own lives, don't we? We get to choose. When it comes to our bodies, our words, our actions, we're in charge, right? Right. Even though God is sovereign, it is God's will that we get to choose. And most times, our choices work out. And even when they don't, we still get by. We don't curl up and die just because a window breaks, a marriage fails, we quit our job at just the wrong time, get caught up in drugs, experiment with casual sex. Life goes on, even though cracks form and lives may be shattered by such behaviors. What we forget as "life goes on" is that life only goes on,

not because of us, but because of what God has done for us. *God created us for good*, not evil, and no matter how often we go astray, God calls us back, through Jesus Christ.

The prophet Isaiah assures us that “when (God) makes his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper. Out of his anguish he shall see light.” And the light that Jesus seeks is God's light shining through us and in our lives as we seek to live up to God's love for us. Jesus' death for our sins is not our choice, but God's. God chooses to save humanity through Jesus Christ, to redeem self-will-gone-astray through the only one who did God's will to perfection. Only from righteousness can righteousness come.

Or, as Isaiah foretells, “The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.” We hear that Christ died for our sins and we say, “not fair; it wasn't us; I don't believe it.” It's not fair, but it is God's will. It wasn't us, but given the chance . . . , and but for the grace of God, it surely is us who puts Jesus on the cross, allows Christ to suffer and cry out watching what we do to ourselves and to each other. And for Christ's sake, we better believe it, because our lives depend on it. But still we struggle. God created us for good, *but we figure we could do better*.

Author Steve Brown has a list he calls “10 Stupid Things Christians Do To Mess Up Their Lives.” In his book “A Scandalous Freedom,” he says: No. 1) We think of God as either a child abuser (he allowed his own son to be tortured), away on vacation (if we're not listening, is he really there?), or as Santa Claus (sometimes we do get what we want in life); we think of God in these terms instead of looking to Jesus to find out what God is really like. "Stupid Thing" No. 2) we are obsessed with getting better instead of with God's forgiveness. No. 3) we forget the gospel and sacrifice the joy that sets us free.

We wear masks instead of being authentic. We put our leaders on pedestals and thereby demean ourselves. We demonize our enemies instead of acknowledging their humanity. We live in fear. We avoid the reality of pain. We define ourselves by our failures instead of by God's love. And we surrender the freedom for which Jesus has set us free.

Blogger Erik Guzman responds that for many Christians, “this is probably not the mental list we would have made for ourselves for ways we mess up our lives. He says we might have come up with a list more like this one: Watching porn – if you're a girl, insert watching “The Bachelor.” Skipping church too many times. Not tithing. Not reading your Bible regularly. Not selling everything and giving it to the poor. Being a Democrat (if you're Glenn Beck). Being a Republican (if you're Jim Wallace). Cussing, drinking, smoking, dancing, going to movies. Not praying enough.” And finally, says Guzman, watching porn – if you're a girl, insert shopping. Guzman says the reason we think up such items on *this list* is probably because of the *second item* on the first list – “we are obsessed with getting better instead of with God's forgiveness.” After all, if we could just get better, it would prove we have a handle on things. If we could just get better,

then we could achieve *our* goals in life. If we could just get better, than what we say should happen would happen.

The problem with us just getting better is it pushes God aside. Though God created us for good, if we can get better, *who needs God?* So how do we get over our obsession with getting better and instead become focused on God's forgiveness? By reflecting on the saving work of Jesus Christ, believing it, and carrying it with us throughout the day. By going through life in this knowledge, we come to know ourselves wholly dependent upon God and completely forgiven for our rebellion against that dependence. But to know the saving work of Jesus Christ, it's not enough to just read about in the Bible or hear about it in a sermon or Sunday school class. Hearing *Isn't* Believing; Seeing *Isn't* Believing. Speaking *Is* Believing. By giving voice to our faith, by declaring the truth of who we are as a fallen people in need of a redeemer every bit like Jesus Christ we become a new creation. We come to accept that we have no power over God's unmerited love for us, and that our only response is to accept God's love and forgiveness for ourselves, to own it; and to share it with others.

Next week, we'll look at how Speaking Is Believing; we'll look at ways we give voice to our faith, that it might live in us, in those we love, and throughout the world.

PASTORAL PRAYER:

God, ever present, you have promised us "I Am With You Always." Through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, O God, stay with us:

When we feel lonely

When we are hurt

When we feel inadequate

When we can't pray

When we are stuck

When we are misunderstood

When we really goofed

When our prayers seem like dead words to us

When friends fail us

When money is scarce or nonexistent

When we feel sick

When we have been forsaken and life seems unfair

When we have misjudged someone

When we don't want to hear the truth

When we don't like ourselves

When we are blind to opportunities pressing in on us

When we need courage and grace

When we have lost a loved one

When we have been emotionally abused

When it seems like there is no relief in sight

When we have become "unglued"

When we are depressed

When we have lost control

When we must wait

When we need to trust

When we have nothing more to give

When we feel trapped

When we have "lost it"

When we need healing in body, mind or spirit
When we need to be forgiven
When we face our own death.

Adapted from a poem by Ray A. Strawser.

Gracious God, you have given us an inheritance of eternal life, even when we are overburdened by our anxieties. Thank you for granting the strength to overcome our fears and the courage to bear suffering without being defeated by it. Free us to live in the joy and peace of Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.