

Given the time of year, we have been talking these last weeks about making resolutions. Two weeks ago we started our conversation by talking about the resolution to get connected to God. Last week we talked about the importance of being connected to our heritage – not to a tradition or doctrine – but to the rich and growing roots of our life together here at Messiah.

Today, I want to spend some time talking about another resolution that I feel, if we can stick to it, will make our collective 2008 more fulfilling than we could have ever possibly imagined. The resolution that I'm going to talk about today is the resolution to get connected to the Gospel.

The word gospel literally means the "Good News." Specifically for us, the gospel, as we use the term in the church, is God's good news for each one of us about God's unconditional love for us in Jesus Christ.

Martin Luther taught that when we look at the Bible, no matter what book or chapter that we might be reading, in each passage there is law and gospel. The Law of the Bible are those things that reveal sin. The law is like a mirror that is held up in front of us that reveals us as we really are. The law reveals how corrupt we really are, how we inflict evil on ourselves and on others and the law reveals the pain that we all feel because of the presence of sin in the world. There is no

escaping the fact that, as St. Paul says, “there is no distinction, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”

There is a place for the law in our lives today. We don't talk much about it. We don't like to hear preachers talk about it. We would rather just believe that it isn't there. But it is and it serves a valuable function in our lives as followers of Jesus. It's easy to get very comfortable with where we are in life, both as individuals and as a community. It's easy to get complacent and believe that we are doing just fine and that there are not problems. The law stands before us and challenges us to take a good long and unbiased look in the mirror and to see what and who we really are. What are we doing with what we have been given? How well are we following God along the pathway that God has sent before us? Are we really being the kind of people that God has called us to be and the kind of people that we would like to be? The law is often a hard pill to swallow and something that we would rather avoid. But good old Martin Luther says that it is something that we must daily attend to and pay attention to so that we do not slip into some sort of life that leads us a long a pathway away from God.

So that is the law – what then is the Gospel. If scripture can reveal all of the evils and wrongs and sins of our life, what does the gospel accomplish? Luther believed that the gospel accomplished two very important functions. First, the

gospel gives us faith – the gospel of the Bible is one of the places that we acquire faith. The Gospel is where we get faith in God’s love for each one of us in Jesus. If the law tells me that I am a sinner and that I do not deserve to be loved by God and that I have fallen short of God’s expectations of me – then how in the world can I believe that God loves me or that there is any hope for me or that I have an ice cubes chance of getting into heaven? Simple – the Gospel. The Gospel tells me that God loves me and that God sent Jesus Christ to this earth FOR ME. Jesus died for me and was raised from the dead for me. This frees me from doubt and worry about my own standing with God and it frees me to start worrying about all those people who don’t yet know the Gospel the way I do.

Secondly, the Gospel tells me about Grace. Grace is the underserved, unearned, unmerited love that God has for me. Grace breaks the hold that sin has upon me. Knowing about grace means that I know that there is nothing so odious that I could do that it would cause God to stop loving me. There is no place so dark and distant that I can go that God would not follow me. Grace is what allows me to take that long look in the mirror, see who and what I really am and know that God still loves me and that God gives me fresh new start every single day of my life. Grace frees me from being enslaved to sin. When you know that you are forgiven,

when you know that God's love for you is not based upon your ability to perform all the right things in all the right ways, life is no longer a burden.

Connecting with the gospel for me means really getting in touch with that freedom. Connecting with the gospel means taking God, the Bible, Jesus from a place of intellectual thought and allowing these things to become a part of our hearts and lives. It means that we strive to internalize the love of God in our lives so that God's love and grace become more than just topics we talk about, but they become realities that we experience.

There are many different ways that this can be accomplished and I hope over the course of 2008 we will be open to investigating many of these different ways, however, I want to highlight one simple way that we can, as a community bring the gospel into our lives today. Turn in your bulletin to page 8. There is what we call here at Messiah the "Good News" reading – the gospel text that I just read for you a moment ago. Look down to verse 18 and 19, there Matthew tells us that Jesus was walking by the sea of Galilee and he sees Simon and Andrew fishing – just to clear up any confusion, Matthew says that they were doing this because, they were fishermen – duh!! Jesus then says to them, follow me and I will make you fishers of people. I always liked the old translation of this verse and I know why it was changed but I like the word play of they were fishermen – Jesus makes them fishers

of men. Anyway, what makes this exchange so important for me is that Jesus uses terms and sayings that these two fishermen could readily understand. They were fishermen – the Gospel that Jesus speaks to them is a gospel that they can understand, relate to, and put to use in their life where they are. You fish for fish, follow me and you will fish for people.

To connect to the Gospel means that the Gospel must be translated into term and terminology that folks can understand in their daily life. That is the task for us today when we talk about reaching out to those who are living their lives with no knowledge, or warped knowledge, of what God, the church and the gospel is all about.

Somehow, we who have been entrusted by God with the Good News that God has for this world, must take what we know and what is so meaningful to us, and translate it into something that folks today can understand, relate to and assimilate into their life experience. The Good News is only good news when people can understand what we are talking about. The task for the church is to continually rediscover new ways of speaking the timeless and unchanging Gospel to a world that is continually changing and recreating itself. Some of the language and style of talking about the Bible that I grew up with are no longer relevant to this new generation of believers and it really does no good for us to hang on to them because

folks today simply do not know what we are talking about and so what we are talking about will not have the meaning and impact in their lives that we would like it to have.

Once again, we can learn a lesson from Martin Luther. In Luther's day, the Bible was written in Latin – Luther wondered how anyone could connect with God if they could not read God's word. So Luther translated the Bible into the language of the people and in so doing, created "Luther German." What this meant is that one's access to the Bible did not depend on one's standing in society. The Luther Bible was the instrument of a religious renewal in Germany, changing simple baptized people into biblically trained "common priests" united together by a Bible that they could read and understand and so, put to use in their daily life.

There is nothing more treasured in our life as a faith community than the Good News of God's love for us. To connect with that Good News, to make it more than just a topic we talk about into something that is part of daily life, we need to understand what it is telling us and we need to seek ways to open the Good News to folks who still don't know a thing about it.

This year, let's all resolve to connecting more with the Good News of Jesus. Let's all resolve to make the Good News something that we use day in and day out - so that it becomes a part of who we are. And let us also resolve to endeavor to

discover some ways in which we can open up the Good News to those who do not know about it or who have a warped sense of what the Good News is all about.