

The Difference

St. Mark Lutheran
Three services

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For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles... They hearing it said, "He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God because of me. Galatians 1:11-24

Grace and peace to you this day from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I wonder if anyone here feels like this woman. A woman by the name of Louisa Tarkington once said this: "I wish there were some wonderful place called "The Land of Beginning Again", where all our mistakes and heartaches, and all of our poor selfish grief, could be dropped like a shabby old coat at the door, never to be put on again."

If we are honest, there are things from our past that we regret. There are words we have said that we would like to take back. There are relationships that we have damaged that we would like to repair. There are things we would do differently.

We all have regrets. Chances are we have learned some lessons the hard way. But the fact is we cannot go back. We can't do it over. We may have been given a second chance, but we can't erase the errors of the past. There are some people who can't get over this. They spend their life dwelling on their mistakes and missed opportunities. They can't really move forward and fully enjoy their life because they are haunted because of mistakes they made in the past. The devil wants people to be chained to their past and live out their lives in guilt and misery.

But here is good news. Because of Jesus Christ, the past can be just that-the past, and the future is wide open. One of the best statements I have heard is "Today is the first day of the rest of your life." (author unknown). The BEST of your life can be the REST of your life.

You see, all along, God has known our situation. He knows that we have all been changed by the fall of our first parents into sin, and even if we have good intentions, we are helpless to save ourselves. But listen to what the Holy Scriptures say in Micah 7:18: "Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in

steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea." How does God do that?

He does it through Jesus Christ who makes "the difference". We should never give up on anybody, because Jesus Christ can change even the worst of people. We see that in Paul's own testimony in Galatians 1 this morning. He says, "For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it." Not much can be worse than persecuting the church of God. But God struck him blind on the way to Damascus one day, and Jesus called out to him saying, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" From that time on Saul, renamed Paul, followed the Lord instead of opposing him. He repented of his former life and was baptized and went on to serve the Lord. As we read on in the Bible we discover that Paul did not spend his life dwelling on the mistakes of his past. He also did not attempt to cover them up. But he began to live a new life in Christ. He did not allow his past to hinder his future.

We can learn from that. If there have been big mistakes in our past-drug abuse, addiction to alcohol, sexual sins, or other serious sins-we can repent of those things and have a better chance of reaching others who are caught up in those kind of temptations. Instead of beating ourselves up with lamenting our past mistakes, we are called to minister to the spiritual problems of others with God's life-changing Word. If we have repented, we have been forgiven, and we have been called to be ambassadors of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

How do we do that? The Holy Scriptures tell us and show us how it is done. It greatly helps if we know some passages that we can share with people when we have the opportunity. It is not our words but the precious Gospel that has the power to change lives. 1 Peter 1:23 tells us, "...you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God..." It was God's Word that brought illumination to Paul and changed his life on the road to Damascus that day, and it is God's word that changes lives today. You can write down some key messages from the Bible and learn them or read them. You can invite people to church to hear God's saving word from preachers or teachers. You can get good Christian pamphlets or books and put them into people's hands. As it says in one of our good Lutheran hymns, "Let none hear you idly saying, 'There is nothing I can do...'" I know some of you do that. I thank God for you. Keep doing it. If we all sow the seed, we will see a wonderful harvest. This is not meant to bring glory to our name. This is to bring glory to God's name.

God called Paul on the road to Damascus and God calls us also. He gave Saul a new name on that day that he spoke to him, and he calls us by our name at our baptism. We are adopted by Jesus Christ into himself, and we are given the privilege to be called a child of God. Sometimes we don't fully grasp or appreciate what he has done for us. Think about this! The Son of God, even knowing that we have so many faults and failures, loved us so much that he was willing to die for us and offer us the gift of eternal life!

Not only have we been called by God, we have also been commissioned by God. In Acts 9 the Lord said that Paul was "a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings and children of Israel." Paul's priorities were completely different after his conversion. Before he was living for himself; after his conversion he was living for Christ.

May that be said of us also when we have been called to our eternal home. May God use us to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which brings about "the difference", into the life of someone else. Two weeks ago, I spent the weekend with dear friends in Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin. As we left St. Paul Lutheran Church that Sunday, I saw a rock with a cross carved on it just outside the church door. Its message sums it all up for us this morning: "Find one more." Let's do that. Let's "find one more". To God be the glory. Amen.

This is the man who is speaking to us in Galatians this morning, but he is no longer Saul. He is a changed man called Paul. His life has been changed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. There are at least three reasons why it made such a difference.

First, the Gospel made a difference because of its transcendence. What is transcendence? It means it is beyond the limits of ordinary experience.

Paul wrote in verses 11-12, “For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel preached by me is not man’s gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.”

This message of good news, that salvation from sin can be found in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, is not a man made message. It is too simple and too magnificent for man’s wisdom. It is a transcendent message, a message from beyond. It is a message from God, and Paul received it directly.

Recently I had the opportunity to share the Gospel with someone in the hospital. After explaining what Christ has done for us, and how salvation works, I asked the person this question: “How do we know that these things are true?” She thought for a while and said, “I don’t know.”

Well, first we can know that it is true because this is God’s Word and it bears witness to our hearts. But there is another solid reason. Paul did not get this from anyone else. He had a first hand dynamic experience with the Lord. It was something far beyond any

ordinary experience, and it changed his life. The twelve disciples had first hand experiences with the Lord. The women who went to the grave had direct contact with the Lord. They saw the resurrected Christ. They sealed their witness by the way they spent the rest of their lives, testifying about Jesus. Because of the way Jesus revealed himself to Paul, he dared to begin his letter to the Galatians in verse one with these words: “Paul, an apostle-sent not from men or by man, but by Jesus Christ...”

Second, the gospel makes a difference in our lives because it is the truth. The NIV translation of verse 20 is a little easier to understand here. Paul says, “I assure you before God that what I am writing to you is no lie.” It is important to Paul that we know that the story he is relating about his life is true. He isn’t making it up. He realizes how important this story is, that it is the truth, that it has made a huge difference in his life, and he knows what a difference it can make in other lives-a difference about where people will spend eternity.

We live in a world that is becoming increasingly distant from the notion of truth. Postmodernism has told us the lie that there is no absolute truth, that truth is a social concept, filtered through cultural lenses, and that what is true for you may not be true for me. The world would have us believe this especially of the case in religious belief. We are told it is arrogant and insensitive to say that we have the religious truth. We should be tolerant of other viewpoints.

We can be tolerant of other viewpoints and even defend the right of others to hold a different viewpoint, but that is quite different than saying any other way of salvation except Jesus is valid. The word “truth” itself makes an exclusive claim, and everything that is not the truth is false. The Word of God comes crashing into postmodernism’s false viewpoint in John 14:6 when Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life...” God has revealed the truth and it makes all the difference in the world.

Third, the gospel makes a difference because it brings about transformation. It is interesting during the last political campaign that one political party talked about the great need for change, and the next thing you know the other political party was talking about the need for change. But probably neither one of them was aware of the thing that most needs to change: man’s heart. The church has been given the one thing that can change man’s heart: the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel brings a difference in people’s lives because it has the power of transformation. What did the churches of Christ have to say about the new man who was Paul? It is written in verses 23-24, “They only were hearing it said, “He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy. And they glorified God because of me.”

The Gospel can make a big difference in one’s life because it is God’s message and not man’s. It makes a difference because it is the truth and not false. The message of the cross has the power to transform lives. The apostle Paul was imprisoning and killing

Christians until God literally knocked him off his feet and convinced him of the truth of who Jesus Christ was. He transformed him into a mighty warrior for the Lord.

Lee Strobel, a longtime atheist who was saved, said this about the Gospel's power of transformation: "How can I tell you the difference God has made in my life? My daughter Allison was 5 years old when I became a follower of Jesus, and all she had know in those five years was a dad who was profane and angry. I remember I came home one night and kicked a hole in the living room wall just out of anger with life. I am ashamed to think of the times Allison hid in her room to get away from me."

"Five months after I gave my life to Jesus Christ, that little girl went to my wife and said, 'Mommy, I want God to do for me what's he done for Daddy.' At age 5! What was she saying? She never had studied the archaeological evidence. All she knew was her dad used to be this way: hard to live with. But more and more her dad is becoming another way. And if that is what God does to people, then sign her up. At age 5 she gave her life to Jesus. God changed my family. He changed my world. He changed my eternity."

The message of the cross is one of transformation. What God did for Paul, what he did for Lee Strobel, he can do for you. He can do it for those you know. What a difference!