

Occasionally, someone will ask me, “How do pastors come up with things to preach about?” I love that question, because I sometimes wonder the same thing. But seriously, one of the ways we are trained as Lutheran pastors is to look for two things in every Biblical text—those two things being Law and Gospel. Now, I’m about to get very technical, OK? Hang on. When I say Law, I mean things that make you go “oops” and “ugh.” When God’s standards make you go “oops” and “ugh,” the Law has done its work. When I say Gospel, I mean things that make you go, “All Right! Yes! Thank you, Lord!” The Gospel is news—news of something God has done for you. It’s news of a victory.

So it is that we find very discernable, very obvious Law and Gospel in today’s reading from Acts chapter 2. These first readings from Acts are kind of strange in a way—it’s like the Church Year can’t wait for Pentecost, it wants to take us there right away— mostly because it means to show us the gigantic difference that Jesus’ resurrection caused in His disciples. Having been taught by the risen Christ and emboldened by the Holy Spirit, Peter preaches an incredibly detailed sermon that results in thousands of people receiving Christian baptism. And at the heart of that sermon is this Law and Gospel dynamic.

Again, in Acts chapter 2, we find Peter preaching a brilliant sermon to people, mostly of Jewish origin, who either lived in Jerusalem to begin with or travelled there specifically for the festival service of Pentecost, which was a kind of thanksgiving service. But this service has taken a turn. Peter stood up and was building a case for Jesus being the Promised One; the One to whom all of Old Testament Scripture had pointed; and then comes the Law. In verse 36 he says, “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” Now that is extraordinarily bold. What is equally extraordinary is the response. Verse 37: “Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

There it is: The Law. The “oops” and the “ugh.” As a group, Peter’s listeners were not offended; they were grieved. They were cut to the heart.

Now, some of the people Peter preached to that day *may* have had some direct involvement with Jesus’ crucifixion—that’s entirely possible—but the majority probably didn’t have much to do with it at all. They may not even have been in Jerusalem when it happened. And still, they were cut to the heart by this message and grieved over what Peter was telling them. They wanted to know, “What shall we do?” What is there to do to get out from under this burden? Ugh! It’s painful to even think about.

The Holy Spirit, accompanying Peter’s every word, drove the point home, creating a serious OOPS and UGH. The crowd cried out for the tension to be resolved. How about you? What do you do with Peter’s words today? *God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus*

*whom you crucified.* You. Not the Jewish travelers to Jerusalem this time. This Jesus whom you crucified. Of course, you weren't there when it happened. You didn't shout "Crucify Him" or drive the nails into Jesus' body. The event happened thousands of years ago. And yet, if you have not been moved to grieve over Jesus' death, and not just Jesus' death, but your role in Jesus' death, if that has not cut you to the heart, then you don't yet understand the central message of the Bible.

If you're not sure what I mean, here's a little test. When you think about the death of Jesus on the cross, is your reaction, "Oh, that's terrible what they did to him;" or is it, "Oh, that's terrible what I did to him"? Do you feel the OOPS and the UGH of the Law? Because the message of Peter and the message of all the Bible is, you are responsible. You are part of this; this Jesus whom you crucified. Sure, I didn't lift the hammer to drive the nails on Golgotha, not physically, but my debt of sin caused it; our cumulative sin debt made Jesus' death a necessity. God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us. He went to the cross to settle things for you and me. Knowing that our shame, our pride, our self-centeredness, our worship of other things besides God sent his Son to the cross, there is a new urgency to ask, "Brothers, what shall we do?" What should we do?

Peter tells us. "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." There's the Gospel! ALL RIGHT! YES! Peter says, "Repent," meaning 'turn around.' Have a change of mind. Return to the Lord. Stop trying to be the god of your own life. Own the fact that you're not in charge. Let go of the idea that you've got to be good to get God to bless you. Instead receive this truly good news: Jesus went to the cross voluntarily, to wipe out our debt, to make the exchange: his life for ours. Jesus died your death. Jesus was raised to new life. ALL RIGHT! In baptism, your old self, the sinner, was drowned and was buried. A new self, connected to Christ's risen life, takes over, giving you supernatural strength; a poise and a balance in the face of great challenges. YES!! Forgiveness of your sins is yours. The gift of the Holy Spirit is yours. The Holy Spirit clears the way for the message to hit home. With the Law, he cuts to your heart, causing you to ask, "What should I do?" With the Gospel, he presents the solution: "Repent and receive Jesus." ALL RIGHT! YEAH! THANK YOU, LORD!

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, through the pattern of Law and Gospel embedded in your Word, lead us to draw on the blessings of baptism, believing that Jesus has granted us forgiveness of sins and new life in connection to Him. Continually lead us to find our worth and value in Jesus. Transform us into Christlike servants who greet your gifts with thanks, for it is in Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.