

## Radical Week 2- Getting the bad/good news right

- I. When I was a youth pastor in Goucher, a “suburb” of Gaffney South Carolina, I had what I only can describe as a disturbing religious cultural experience. Linda, who was both the janitor and a member of the church, told me a week after I arrived, “Now Rawn! (that is how she really said it) There’s a play coming up and youuuu just have to take them young people to see it!” She went on and on about this play as if it were a Broadway hit. She went on to say, “Now Rawn, you best be ready! Expect most of them young people to get saved!” Being fresh into the ministry I didn’t even think to ask any questions. A week or so later we loaded up the bus and took them based on Linda’s glowing recommendation. I should have known by the name “Heaven’s Gates, Hell’s Flames” that this might not have been the best idea. So we got seated in what truly looked like a theater minus the concession stand. The curtain pulled back and the scene opened to a construction crew working on what was supposed to be a skyscraper. It was lunch break and the guys were all just talking about what construction workers talk about...that is if construction workers were being watched by a bunch of church people. A character named Daniel said something like, “Hank, do you want to accept Jesus as your savior” Where Hank replied, “No, Daniel, I don’t believe in any of that Jesus stuff. I am fine on my own.” The conversation went back to sports and then while Hank was reaching out to grab a Little Debby from Daniel, he “fell” off the steel girder and plummeted supposedly to his death. Off stage came this horrendous scream and then evil laughter. From stage right emerges what I can only describe as a poor man’s version of Gollum from the LOTR but with horns taped on. Honestly, I about exploded with laughter. But as I looked around almost everyone else was taking this for the legit devil. Especially my youth. And they were scared to death! So the Gollum Devil and his minions proceeded to drag poor Hank off the stage to “hell” with Hank hollering and screaming bloody murder the whole time. Well that is how the whole play went with slightly different variations on the same theme. Accept Jesus or face the Gollum Devil. And I am not exaggerating (too much ☺) when I say that almost every one of my youth at the end of the play ran down the aisle to accept Jesus. Many for the 6<sup>th</sup> time. I guess they didn’t trust my driving. For me the whole thing really wasn’t funny but depressing. I thought to myself, “Is this what people think the gospel is about? Saying a little prayer thereby getting “fire insurance”? And is this the best way to share it?” I left feeling sad for both the sponsoring church and my own.
- II. I share that story because Platte in the second chapter of his book talks about “the truth and beauty of the gospel” which frankly many of us in the United States might have missed. Many of us in the church go to one of two extremes. In the case of the *Heaven’s Gates, Hells’ Flames* crowd, many see the gospel merely as an offer to eternal paradise in exchange for a stroll down the aisle...even if it is induced by fear. Or the other extreme is found among many prosperity preachers, that the gospel is nothing more than a self-help program (image). Platte says it well in his book. **“Fundamentally, the gospel is the revelation of who God is, who we are, and how we can be reconciled to Him.”** But then he offers this warning. **“Yet in the American dream where self reigns as king (or queen), we have a dangerous tendency to misunderstand, minimize, and even manipulate the gospel in order to accommodate our assumptions and desires.”** (p.28) When he says the American dream

here he is not talking about the idea that no matter what your background may be, rich or poor, or what country you hail from, that in the U.S. you can pursue your ideal vocation or job. Rather Platt is talking about the more recent incarnation of the American dream...the materialistic vision, like the bumper sticker "The one with the most toys at the end wins." The temptation is to see the gospel, God's redemption plan, as just one more way to justify and pull it off. The thinking is this...God of course wants me to be happy...and for me to be happy I need all this stuff. A recent study found that 61 percent of American Christians believe that God wants us to be prosperous. Oh really? Where do we find that in the bible? So where do we get such a notion? The Joel Osteens, Joyce Myers, Kenneth Copelands, Creflo Dollars, and so forth. They promote this health and wealth prosperity gospel. And they don't just preach it, they live it out...I will give them that. Each of the pastors I just named lives in a multimillion dollar mansion (or several), jets around in a private jet, drives cars that cost more than most of our annual salaries, and dresses in designer clothing. Yet they follow Jesus who was homeless, poor and took the sandal expressway everywhere he went. See how this might be a problem? I am not saying any of these pastors or their churches don't have anything good to offer, but their understanding of the gospel is deeply flawed. Like we talked about last week. They are superimposing the American dream on the gospel and the gospel is the losing partner in this unholy mix. God's redemption plan involves restoring our relationship with God so that we can then help restore others. It's not, and never will be, a get rich quick program.

- III. So let's explore the gospel a little more closely. I remind us this morning that G3 is part of the United Methodist Church. And in this flavoring of Christianity we look heavily to John Wesley, the great church reformer, pastor, preacher, and theologian, in how we understand God and the gospel. He also lived out his preaching by visiting prisons, caring for the sick and dying, feeding the hungry and clothing the poor. Not that we believe John had it all figured out but we do believe he provided a wholistic biblical framework on the Christian life. Kind of like how Megan my wife and I looked towards John Rosemond, a syndicated columnist and psychologist, for parenting advice when our kids were young. Not that we thought Rosemond was the "end all, be all" on parenting but he did provide us some invaluable insight and guidance...like using dead bolts to lock your toddlers in their rooms at night. That's gold right there! Kidding.
- IV. So how do Christian Methodists understand the gospel, or God's redemption plan? I realize for some of us here, you love nothing more than to sink your teeth into some theological conversation. And when I say "some of us" I just mean three. ☺ And for the rest of us, well, you started to drift off as soon as I said the word "theology." But I beg you to stay with me as this is not some obscure minor point, like discussing how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, but is at the very core of this whole Christian experience. So in Wesleyan understanding of God and the gospel we see at least three "movements" or steps that God takes to bring about our salvation. Each is described as a form of "grace" or something that God does on our behalf. First is the idea of what Wesley called **God's prevenient grace or "grace that goes out before."** So what is this? Isaiah the prophet in the Old Testament makes a profound and disturbing statement in **Isaiah 64:6 NIV**. Sort of like that hand towel

you keep around the kitchen sink. We can quote a dozen other verses that essentially say the same thing. Humanity is deeply flawed. This might fly in the face of some of us who believe we are basically good. My response is go hang out in a preschool class for a day. You don't have to teach children to steal each other's toys, push to the front of the line, or hit one another with a stick. It comes very naturally. Some of the great reformers such as John Calvin argued that humanity is so hopeless that unless God forced our hand or predestined us to be among His elect, no one would have a chance. But Wesley argued that God gives us the grace (prevenient grace) to freely accept or to reject Him. He argued that God restores our humanity enough to make this decision. Only this understanding makes the beloved **John 3:16 NIV** make sense. "Whoever" translated from the Greek means...well, whoever! Not just God's favs, but anyone and everyone. And prevenient grace gives us the ability to do it.

- V. Then we have what Wesley called "**justifying grace**" or **grace that makes you right with God**. Whereas everyone benefits from God's prevenient grace which restores our ability to choose good over evil, justifying grace must be accepted. Like in the strange case of George Wilson. George and his partner in crime were robbing the 1830's version of Goin' Postal when an employee caught them in the act. They shot him dead. Both were caught and sentenced to death by hanging. George's partner was executed but George had friends in high places. He was given a presidential pardon. His life would be spared. But here is where it gets strange. George refused the pardon. Was it guilt? Was it pride? Or was it the prison food? No one knew. But his case went before the Supreme Court. It was decided that a pardon, even when the convicted is on death row, could not be forced upon the accused; rather, it needed to be willingly accepted. This is an almost perfect picture of God's justifying grace. Paul writes in his letter to the **Romans chapter 3:21-25a NIV**. In short, he is agreeing with Isaiah. We all are broken, turned from God, and in a sense like George, with a death sentence hanging over our head. That is what happens when you rebel against the king of the universe. That is the bad news. But the good news is that God offers us a pardon. Jesus died in our stead. But we must accept it in faith to "activate" this grace. The faith we are talking about here is not simply saying a prayer or walking down an aisle or putting our hand up. But it is a faith that is backed by action as James, Jesus' brother, describes.
- VI. It's kind of like this. I have a good friend, Greg. Greg, among his many talents, races cars. No, we are not talking about like in the reality show *Street Outlaws* or anything illegal here. He goes to an established track down in Farmington and races his '68 Camaro. I have told Greg several times over the years that I would like to go and ride in his car during the race. But, as Greg would tell you, so far I haven't. I will tell you that I trust Greg. I believe he is probably an excellent driver. Yet, I still haven't gotten into his Camaro yet. I haven't backed my words with my action. So maybe I really don't trust Greg after all? But biblical faith, trusting that Jesus truly died for us and has pardoned us for our rebellion against our King, means we get into the car. In fact, as Carrie Underwood sang, we are asking Jesus to "take the wheel." Take the lead role in our lives. This is biblical faith that activates God's justifying grace.

VII. Then we get to the third movement of God's saving work on our behalf as understood by Wesley. **Sanctifying grace.** This kind of grace involves **God changing or transforming us into the people He called us to be** (saints). And, if we are honest with ourselves, deep down who we really want to be as well. Paul says it this way in his letter to the church of Philippi. **Phil 1:6 NIV.** In other words, when we first truly put our faith in Christ, when we get into that car so to speak, that is just the beginning of our faith journey in earnest. Now God rolls His sleeves up to get to work. It's kind of like this. When a baby is born it's not like the parents look at him or her and say, "OK, welcome to the world Johnny or Mary, now you are on your own! Go for it!" No. Dare I say that the easy part, especially for the father, is done and the tough part is ahead...especially when that cute little infant becomes a teenager dripping with hormones. And even when a child leaves the house one day, the parents' work still isn't over. Ask my parents. The same with God and the good news of the gospel. God doesn't leave us on our own but begins to shape and mold us. If we work with Him and not against Him, He helps us become more compassionate. More forgiving. More merciful. Less gossipy and less likely to cheat, steal and lie. Yes, when we put our faith in Christ we are no longer guilty for our rebellion against God but there sure is a lot of work to do. Especially if the person in question is me! As Wesley says, when someone puts their faith in Christ, "Sin no longer reigns but does remain." Meaning no longer does our brokenness define and control us but we still have areas in our life that need to be cleaned up. Kind of like when you find out at the last moment you are going to have company at your house. You hit all the highlights, vacuum the living room, scrub the guest bathroom toilet and spray Lysol around the house...but if one was to look closely there still are dust bunnies hiding in the corners, McDonald fries from last year sequestered between the cushions of the couch and Lord knows what in your bedroom that you now have safely locked. God through His sanctifying grace is about cleaning up our whole "house" from the attic to the basement. And this takes a lifetime.

And this is the gospel in all its beauty and truth. It's not fire insurance. It's not about our wealth and health in this world. It's not a self-help program. It is a free gift of God but it will cost us our lives...but in the turning it over what we will find is that we get our lives back again infinitely better. Like in the case of Lois, as shared by Phillip Yancey in his book *Vanishing Grace*. Lois put her faith in Christ as a young woman. She went on to school to become a registered nurse. While her friends all took well-paying jobs in prestigious hospitals after they graduated she went a different direction. She felt called to go to Somalia and work alongside Christian doctors and aid workers among the poorest of the poor. Her friends thought she was out of her mind. Although they applauded her sacrifice they still thought she was crazy. Why give up all the modern amenities like soft beds, clean water and the iPhone X and so forth when she could just use her education here in the states and pursue the American dream. Listen to what she said: "I guess coming here does look like the insane thing to do yet I have never felt more satisfied and fulfilled in my life." She goes on to say, "In fact, I almost feel sorry for the people who never had a chance to serve God like this...they are the ones losing out." She sums it up, "I believe I am beginning to learn what Jesus meant when He said, 'If you lose your life for me, you will find it.'" Lois found it. How about you and me?