

## Introduction: Ears to Hear

After John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Mark 1.14-15

Now I should remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you – unless you have come to believe in vain.

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them – though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

1Corinthians 15.1-11

The good news . . . is good.

Juan Segundo

## What is the Good News?

Many years ago a singer by the name of Larry Norman described a street preacher trying to make a convert.

The preacher was on the street. He stopped a passerby and said, "can I ask you a question?" The unsuspecting man agreed and the preacher began, "have you been born again?"

The man thought about it and said, "not lately."

The preacher tried again. "Well, have you been washed in the blood?"

To this the man was quick to respond, "I hope not."

Frustrated the preacher put his cards on the table, "I'm . . . I'm trying to tell you the good news."

"The good news. What is the good news?" asked the man.

"You're an unrepentant, unbelieving sinner, and you are going to hell."

The man looked to the preacher with grave concern and asked, "What's the bad news?"

Many, many years ago I was cajoled into trying my hand at street preaching. This was 1996 in Monterrey, Mexico. My mission co-leader, Tim Burden, loved the experience and idea of street preaching. For him it was part of the mystery of missions and the power of the Spirit.

Just about dusk, on a near empty basketball court of a remote barrio of the city, Tim thrust the microphone into my hand and said, "you're up, man."

I wasn't ready to be up.

Take a moment to ponder the experience of standing on a sidewalk and preaching on the fly. No text, no pulpit, no Geneva gown. "You're up, man."

Still young enough to believe all things are worthy of a try, I started. I preached and a young Mexican pastor translated. A crowd of about forty young people gathered around to hear me stumble and bumble my way through the impromptu sermon.

After the sermon was done and prayers of invitation were offered to all, I limped to the bus. It felt disastrous. Before I took my seat, my translator came to me. "How marvelous, how wonderful!" he said with glee. "What a blessing. One of the people in the crowd, Pastor Ramon, had decided today to give up on ministry. Because of your sermon, he has decided to continue as a minister."

To this day I am not sure if there was something inspiring in what I said, or if Pastor Ramon listened to my terrible sermon and thought, "I can't leave the church; they really need me if people like this are preaching."

In the passage above from Mark, there is an image of Jesus walking around proclaiming the gospel. It might be that in ancient times to walk about and preach or teach was more common. I believe it was. Yet, I can say from experience, walking and talking is one thing; preaching the good news of the Kingdom of God on a street corner is another.

Consider the sermon on Sunday morning. There is an organ prelude to gather people to a contemplative place; there are a series of hymns and prayers and readings and an anthem all designed to prepare the person in the pew. Most pastors spend a few hours, if not many, crafting a well thought out, researched, and sensible sermon.

Add to this that there are walls and lights; there are seats and a furnace. All of these "indoor" amenities are lost when you step onto the sidewalks and ask, "can I tell you the good news?"

Yet, the greatest challenge of proclamation is not location; the greatest challenge is in the statement of Juan Segundo. "The good news . . . is good." The great challenge

is to find the good in the good news. This is the great leap of faith. You can't really proclaim the good news if you don't know what is good about it. Take a moment to linger with the question: what is the good in the good news?

## **The Good News of Jesus**

Matthew, Mark, and Luke do not say, "the good news of Jesus Christ is. . . ." Mark simply says, "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news." Jesus never says, "the gospel is this. . . ." We are left to define this good news. Many times Jesus taught in parables that sought to capture and describe the Kingdom of God. But never is a direct definition of the gospel.

Some might suggest that the gospel of Jesus is what he told the disciples of John the Baptist.

When John was in prison word had reached him that Jesus was not living an ideal life. He was often in the company of prostitutes and tax collectors. He and his disciples were accused of drunkenness and gluttony. Many times Jesus was charged with breaking the Sabbath. Facing death, John the Baptist looked for assurance from Jesus. His disciples came and asked, "are you the Messiah, or should we expect another? John wants to know." Jesus says, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."

From this we can discern that the good news has something to do with relief from suffering. The good news is a moment of compassion and healing. The good news is good news for the poor.

Another way of looking at the good news might be to see it as the sum or the truth behind the teachings of Jesus. If we were to read and seek to master the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount, then perhaps the good news is what we would find in the living out of these teachings. The same could be said of the parables. There are a bit more than 40 parables of Jesus. Perhaps the parables are the way we hear the good news. The good news is a voice we hear when we understand and live out the truth in Jesus' parables.

Let's take a step back. When have you said, "I have some good news"? I have said this when my wife is pregnant or I'm going to be grandfather. I say to friends and family, "I have good news." When people we love go in for a test like a biopsy. It's good news when the test comes back negative. A new job, a marriage proposal, the completion of a long project, an upcoming visit. All of these are good news. Life is going to change for the better.

We need to remember this when we consider Jesus teaching and preaching “the good news.” This was (and is) a moment where our lives are going to get better. Our life doesn’t have to be terrible (the poor hear the good news), nor do we need to be facing an awful affliction (blindness) for our life to improve with good news. Good news can be something as simple as “I blocked off the rest of my afternoon to spend time with you.”

Jesus offered good news to the hurting and the poor. Yes, but he also offered truth and power to ordinary, average folk as well. The disciples whom he called to follow him were terribly mundane. What was their good news if they were not poor? What made their life better if they were already able to see?

Here I would like to offer a very preliminary answer to the above question. I say preliminary because each essay following this one will seek to answer this question in depth. Suffice it to say, the good news offered by Jesus to the ordinary people of Galilee was that they could live in freedom from fear with abiding joy here and now.

This may not sound very theological or transcendent. Indeed, I hope it is not. Jesus told the people of Galilee, behold the kingdom of God has come near; it is at hand. In other words, it is here and now. Hence, I would add to Juan Segundo’s definition by adding, “the good news has to be good here and now.” Much more depth needs to be added to the definition of the good news. This will come. Now let’s consider a different gospel than the one Jesus offered to the people of Galilee- the Gospel of Paul.

## **The Good News of Paul**

The most important key to reading the New Testament is to understand the time in which each piece was written.

The earliest piece of the New Testament is Paul’s first letter to the church at Thessaloniki. Most scholars place the time of its writing about 50 C.E. The last letter of Paul, most likely Philippians, was written in 61-63 A.D.

Ten years after Peter and Paul died in Rome (65 C.E.) and five years after Jerusalem was sacked by the Romans and Jews were barred from the city (70 C.E.), the Gospel of Mark was written (75 C.E.). After Mark, Matthew and Luke/ Acts were composed most likely no later than 85 C.E. Lastly, you have the Gospel of John, Revelation, Hebrews and letters in the name of Paul but most likely written by someone else. Let’s put this in a chronology:

1	CE	Jesus is born
30		Jesus begins preaching in Galilee
33		Jesus is crucified
35		Paul is converted on the road to Damascus
50		Paul writes first letter

65	Paul and Peter die in Rome
70	Jerusalem is sacked
75-80	Mark writes his gospel
80-90	Matthew and Luke/ Acts are written
90-96	Revelation, Hebrews, John and pastoral letters are written

The most important key to the chronology is that Mark, Matthew, and Luke were written after Peter and Paul died. The gospels were written to the church of the second generation.

Many theories try to account for this order. Some suggest that the gospels were an oral tradition and only written down after the apostles began to die. Another theory is that the gospels were the fruit of a particular community; they grew out of a certain place after a generation of preaching, teaching, and practice.

My working theories takes both of these but adds another layer. The first three gospels were written after the apostles died; they were written in particular communities; and, they were written to balance the Paul's gospel and his Cosmic Christ with the earthly Jesus of Galilee. The evidence for this theory is when you consider the gospel of Paul with the gospel of Jesus as conveyed in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in this way.

II Corinthians 5.16

When Paul wrote to the church at Corinth in late 50s, his gospel was fully his own. He regarded Jesus as divine, the work of Jesus as the eternal design of God's will; the death of Jesus was the perfect atonement of creation to be reconciled and vouchsafed for eternal life. In his first letter he offers a very clear description of the good news he had to offer.

. . . the good news that I proclaimed to you . . . that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.

The gospel of Paul, then, was about the death and resurrection of Jesus. There is no mention of his life, no mention of his teachings, no mention of his work. The good news, what will make our life better, is if we believe and accept that Christ died for our sins. This is the gospel of Paul.

In a later essay we will explore the way this view of Jesus made him the "cosmic Christ" and how the first generation of the church divided and splintered over this theology. While factions and camps arose over many parts of the early church, my theory is that only one led to the composition of the gospel of Mark, and then, Matthew and Luke. There were many issues and controversies, yet only one led Mark to describe

a very earthy Jesus whose gospel was about life here and now with little to no mention of the life to come, the future, or eternal life.

Perhaps the best way to capture this difference and the challenge it presented is to remember that the Apostle Paul never quoted Jesus directly; he never mentioned his miracles; and he never spoke of the parables. There are teachings of Jesus that can find a rough parallel in the letters of Paul, but only once did Paul say, "I was told that Jesus said this" (the instruction of the last supper).

Another helpful example of this gospel of Paul about the death and resurrection of Jesus is to look at the Apostles' Creed. Although composed many centuries after the time of Paul, the Apostles' Creed embodies a key component of Paul's gospel. The Apostles' Creed can be seen as a legacy in the way it proclaimed the life of Jesus.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit  
and born of the virgin Mary.  
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended to hell.  
The third day he rose again from the dead.  
He ascended to heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.  
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

The legacy is found in the gap between the first and second sentence. Jesus was born (full stop); Jesus died (full stop). The life of Jesus is missing. He was born; he died; he rose. This is the good news according to Paul. This is not the good news Jesus preached in Galilee.

## **Teachings About Jesus and Teaching of Jesus**

The most important gift I received in ministry was to learn the difference between the teachings about Jesus and the teachings of Jesus.

Teachings about Jesus (his sacrificial death; his birth from a virgin; his resurrected status as Lord and judge of all creation; his perfection and sinless life) have caused much strife throughout the centuries. Consider the teaching of the last supper. Is Jesus in the bread, above the bread, the bread itself? In the sixteenth century Protestants and Catholics went to war over the bread and the cup.

Teaching about Jesus line the walls of theological libraries. In each book you have a writer making a case that his or her view is better than others, more correct, a better version. Scholars devote their entire adult life to whether or not the death of

Jesus was for all of humanity or for all those who believe in him. We have centuries of debate about Jesus.

Nobody argues about the teachings of Jesus. Now to be fair there are some New Testament Scholars who argue whether or not Jesus said what is recorded. Some scholars even debate if Jesus actually existed. But these debates are “about the Bible” not so much about the teachings of Jesus.

Consider the opening lines to the Sermon on the Mount.

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

‘Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

‘You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

‘You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

The Blessings of Jesus are about living this life here and now, and living it well. The path he lays out is daunting. To see the poverty of your spirit, to die to the self, to seek the path of meekness: these are very challenging steps to take. Truly, this is not an easy call. Yet, they are rather straightforward to understand. If you empty yourself, you will be ready to receive the kingdom of God. If you die to the impulses of hate and greed, you will find peace in life. If you learn the path of humility, the goodness of this life is yours.

We could easily continue down the entire list of beatitudes, and we should. For each one of them is a skill to master, an art to develop. Each of the blessings is a way to live this life in freedom and hope. As we worked through the list, we might not all agree on the best way to live these. We might have different definitions of mercy. But the energy it takes to live them does leave much room for debate or strife.

Consider another teaching from the Sermon on the Mount:

‘Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgement you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, “Let me take the speck out of your eye”, while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.

There is an underlying truth in this teaching that helps distinguish how we interact with others and how we treat them. Before you critique someone else, go to the great effort of removing your own faults and failures. If we were to make such an effort, the chances are very good we would have no energy left to judge. More importantly, the humility gained in such an effort would leave us with no taste to be critical.

The teachings of Jesus lead us to a place of humility where we find freedom here and know. This is the good news. The teachings about Jesus so often times divide us, fill us with false confidence, and make us ready to judge. “If a person doesn’t believe this, then they are really not a Christian.” I have heard people say this about what someone believes about Jesus. I have never heard someone speak this way about a teaching of Jesus.

## **A Path of Artful Devotion**

There is intriguing difference between the teachings about Jesus and the teachings of Jesus. The teachings about Jesus are very hard to understand, but not difficult to live. The teachings of Jesus are not difficult to understand, but they near impossible to live. For me, this is why the attempt to learn and live the teachings of Jesus, to find the good in the good news of Jesus, is a path of artful devotion.



Consider a great sculpture like Michelangelo's "Pieta."



There is little debate that this statue is one of the greatest artistic works heretofore. The power of the emotions conveyed, the symmetry, the motion, and mostly the life emerging from marble. How is it that Michelangelo could have such skill, such mastery as to chisel such an image from a huge stone?

Indubitably, he practiced. This was not his first work. Throughout Italy you can find the works of sculpture created by Michelangelo. In each one you can see the power of his skill, the gift of his genius. But mostly, if you follow his development, you can see how his time and life emerged from an artful devotion. He worked and worked and worked. His life was a relentless pursuit of art and beauty.

Perhaps the most important need of the church today is embody this artful devotion of Michelangelo. We have a great deal of information, without art. We have a sincere grasp of the truth of our faith, yet little skill born of devotion. It is one thing to understand what you believe; it is quite another to be able to live it.

In the coming months it is my hope that we will explore the writings of the New Testament together. The purpose for this exploration is threefold. First, if we can look to the evolution of the church's writings, we may find a way to understand what each one in particular offers. What *Hebrews* offers is different from what *Acts* offers.

Second if we learn the difference between the teachings of Jesus and the teachings about Jesus we may find a focus that avoids conflict. Paul's letter to the Romans is about debate; it fosters debate; it was part of a debate. The Sermon on the Mount was not a debate.

Lastly, and most importantly, if we devote ourselves artfully to the teachings of Jesus we may find the power of the good news in our life. We may have “ears to hear” the good news Jesus gave to the people of Galilee, how it was to live here and now. If we can hear this good news and live it, then we may find our lives are reborn, restored just as the lame who walked and the blind who could now see.