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The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost – October 3, 2021
Mark 10:2-16

Almighty God, we ask that you grant us in this world knowledge of your truth, and in the next, life everlasting. Amen.

A number of years ago, the editors of Christian Century magazine asked various authors to summarize and proclaim the gospel in seven words. As you can imagine, there were a wide range of responses, highlighting different aspects of the gospel message. Some were tinged with ironic humor, like: “God, through Jesus Christ, welcomes you anyhow.” Some stressed how our human nature tends toward rebellion: “In Christ, God’s yes defeats our no.” Some were more mystical: “Christ’s humanity occasions our divinity.” While others showed a complicated theology: “God enters history; renewed covenants promise salvation,” and this one from Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann: “Israel’s God’s bodied love continues world-making,” to which he then added the sidenote, “I only used six words; I rested on the seventh.”

One of these mini proclamations of the gospel especially caught my attention. Lutheran pastor and author, Nadia Bolz-Weber wrote: “We are who God says we are.” She elaborated on this statement writing, “in the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Christ, we see that God is so for-us and with-us that we can no longer be defined according to death, a religion-based worthiness system, or even the categories of late-stage capitalism. We are who God says we are: the forgiven, broken, and blessed children of God; the ones to whom God draws near.”¹

I would like to expand on that description of our identity. We are the beloved creatures of God. We are made a little lower than the angels and have been given stewardship over the rest of creation. We are the Church, the baptized, who are members of the Body of Christ. We are illuminated by and reflect Christ’s light. And as members of Christ’s body, we are the people of the New Covenant.

As people in covenant with God, we need to better understand just what that means. At the heart of Jewish belief is that God, who is the creator of the world, had called Abraham and his family to belong to Him in a special way. The promises God made to Abraham and his family, and the requirements made of them as a result, came to be seen in terms either of the agreement that a king would make with subjects, or of the marriage bond between two people. In this covenant, God promised to make of Abraham and his family a mighty people who would share a special relationship with God. This covenant was renewed at Mount Sinai with the giving of the law to Moses and the Israelites, who had been freed from slavery and led out of Egypt by God. This covenant was a special way of binding, or yoking, God’s chosen people to Himself, into an intentional, reciprocal, and loving relationship of mutual fidelity.

As Christians, we believe that the unique acts of the incarnation, passion, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, mark the beginning of a new covenant between God and his chosen people. In Luke’s account of the Last Supper, Jesus takes the cup and shares it saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” It is into this new covenant that we enter at baptism and through which we are yoked and bound to God in loving relationship.

In our gospel passage today, Jesus is approached and challenged on the legal particularities of divorce. Jesus, as he frequently does, turns the argument on end. Instead of debating the legal foundations of divorce, Jesus reframes the debate to argue the theological and covenantal foundations of marriage. While Moses may have given provisions in the law for a husband to

¹ Christian Century Magazine, September 5, 2012, Vol. 129, No. 18

divorce his wife, Jesus says that was so because of the hardness of Israel's hearts – that it may be a necessary provision, but it is not what God willed at creation. What is important here is that Jesus refuses to nitpick the various legal interpretations of divorce set forth by Moses and the Torah. Instead, Jesus takes the discussion back to God's intention in the act of creation. God, by creating us human, did so for the purposes of union and generation. As two become one, they become a new creation.

Our God is a God of union. And as such, God is eternally calling us into union and covenant with Him. And yet, as mortal and fallible creatures living in a broken and wounded world, we are not always able to sustain our covenants. Divorce is always a tragedy, even when it comes as great liberation and opens the way for new life. But it is a tragedy not because the separating couple is sinful, rather because the breaking of a covenanted relationship is not what God intends for us. This covenantal relationship is a human attempt at enacting in this world the relational love that is within our triune God.

Jesus preached that the kingdom of God was in-breaking now, and that Jesus himself and his deeds of power and forgiveness of sin were the primary signs of this. In the person of Jesus, the kingdom of God has come near, and Jesus teaches us what this kingdom is like:

- it is where there is justice for all;
- it is where the most vulnerable people are protected;
- it is where the least of this world will count among the greatest;
- it is where not only two become one, but also that we all become one in Christ, and one with the God who is One.

The kingdom of God is where we, as members of Christ's own body, will be able to live and love as God lives and loves. It is where we will be able to fully live into our God-given identities, and be "who God says we are."

This is a special day in the life of the church because (later) today we are celebrating Holy Baptism. Like in our gospel passage, today we bring our beloved to Jesus to be blessed and to enter into the new covenant by membership in the Body of Christ and his Church. Baptism is the sacramental act through which we obtain our new and God-given identity.

It is said that Martin Luther, when struggling with challenges and doubts, would shout out, "I am baptized!" Luther believed that baptism bestows an identity and affirms our unity with Christ, and that it was important to remember who we are. Baptism is the beginning of a new way of life - to be washed in the waters of baptism is a radical act.

In our baptismal liturgy when the priest is blessing the water, we are reminded of the great waters of creation and destruction in Genesis, the waters of the Red Sea and the Jordan that were crossed when God led his chosen people out of Egypt and into the promised land, and the waters in which the prophet John baptized the repentant to prepare the way for Christ. It is in these baptismal waters that we share in Christ's death and burial, as well as in his glorious resurrection. By the Holy Spirit we are sealed and marked as Christ's own forever. And as participants in the liturgy of Holy Baptism, we all renew our Baptismal Covenant, and we are reminded of who we are and to whom we belong. We are the baptized, the people of the new covenant, and members of Christ's body. We are the people who can begin to live into God's kingdom now and taste a share of the resurrection today. And that is good news, indeed.

So, how might you summarize the gospel in seven words? I invite you to think about that this week. I've pondered this some myself, and here are some of the possibilities that I've come up with: "New life and new relationship with God;" "The waters parted, and Christ was resurrected." And my favorite right now, "Communion with God through Christ" – and that is only five words. Maybe I can rest on the sixth and seventh!

Amen.