

February 25, 2024
Second Sunday of Lent

Meditation: "Gospel? What gospel?"

Lent is a time when we are extra attentive to our relationship with God, and we delve a little deeper into our faith as we prepare for the new life we believe is coming; new life signified by the resurrection of Jesus. Allow me to share where my faith journey has taken me this past week and may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O God.

This past week I saw yet another news story about someone falling victim to the grandparent scam. A grandparent received a call from someone who claimed to be their grandchild, in fact, sounded exactly like their grandchild, and claimed to be in legal trouble and needed immediate financial aid. The grandparent sent money, and more money, and even more money before they realized that the person they were sending money to wasn't their grandchild at all. The suspicion, in this particular case, is that the scammer was using AI (artificial intelligence) to reproduce the grandchild's voice. The only thing that tipped off the grandparent was when the grandchild did not use the correct term of endearment with the grandparent.

There is a lot of misinformation and disinformation out there, particularly on social media. You all know the difference between misinformation and disinformation, right? Misinformation is false or inaccurate information like a rumour. (I heard Marylou dyes her hair, when in fact it is naturally grey) Disinformation is false or inaccurate information that is deliberately spread with the sole purpose of misleading someone else. Examples of disinformation include, hoaxes, propaganda, scams, and phishing (with a 'ph', which is a type of scam designed to get sensitive personal information, like banking information).

And then there is true information that is told only in part, for the purpose of misleading. This is usually seen when a company is trying to increase sales of their product. An example might be that Lysol kills 99% of germs left behind by regular laundry detergent. What they don't tell you is what percentage of germs laundry detergent kills.

And with the rise of AI, all of this gets a lot harder to detect, like the robocall in the US that claimed to be coming from President Biden during one of the primary campaigns there but was actually created using AI.

It's getting increasingly more difficult to know who or what to believe. One of the results is the rise of fact-checkers like Snopes. We can wind up either being willfully ignorant or doubting and questioning everything.

And Christians are not immune to the manipulation and abuse of information. In the first third of the fourth century Constantine was the emperor of the holy Roman Empire. He was not a Christian, but his mother was. He saw, in her faith, the opportunity to unite all people of the empire under Christianity. The only thing was, there were many different groups of Christians who believed slightly different things. He called for a council of bishops to meet in the city of Nicaea to hammer out a document that every Christian could agree to that this was what it meant to be Christian. The first council failed. It took over 460 years before the second council of Nicaea succeeded, the result of which was the Nicene creed. Constantine used Christianity as a tool (some might say as a weapon) to unite the empire and to control the people of the empire. He wasn't the last either. Have you ever heard of the Protestant work ethic? Essentially, "suffer under the hands of the industrialists and you will receive your reward in heaven."

Martin Luther, the 16th C priest and theologian, thought he was on to an example of disinformation within the church. In the 16th century the Catholic Church, the only church at the time, was on a building spree across Europe. One of the major projects was the construction of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. It was a project that took over 100 years to complete (1506 to 1615). The primary way that the church raised money for all of this construction was to sell indulgences. An indulgence is like a "Get Out of Jail Free" card in Monopoly, only it is a "Get Out of Purgatory Early" card. When Catholics died, the church said, they do not go directly to heaven or hell. They go to purgatory, the great waiting room in the sky, where they wait out the final dispensation of any sins they may have committed between their last confession and their death. An indulgence would reduce the amount of time they would have to spend in purgatory. But Luther, reading the book of Ephesians (2:8-9), found this, "8 For

by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—⁹ not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” He protested against the church practice of the sale of indulgences and, wishing to start an academic discussion of the practice and efficacy of indulgences, he nailed his 95 Theses to the door of a church in Wittenburg. Ultimately, Luther was excommunicated as a heretic and wound up one of the father’s of the protestant (protest-ant) church.

So where am I going with all of this? This week we read in Mark’s gospel (8:35), “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” And I wondered exactly what was meant by the term ‘the gospel’. I mean, most of my life I have heard that the gospel, which literally means good news, is that Jesus died for my sins. But last week we read, again in Mark’s gospel (1:14-15), “Now 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.”” So, what gospel are we talking about, because I can’t really imagine Jesus walking up to someone and saying that the good news is that he died for their sins.

You might ask, why does this matter? It matters because Jesus is calling us to commit our lives to living out and spreading the gospel, the good news. What the good news that he is asking us to commit to is of the utmost importance. That Jesus died for my sins almost sounds to me like a “Get Out of Jail Free” card. One could almost say, ‘it doesn’t matter how I live, because Jesus died for my sins. He already paid the price.’ And, it also sounds to me like God somehow required a death to reconcile the relationship between us and God. Personally, that is not a god that I find worthy of my worship.

On the other hand, the news of a God of grace, who forgives sins and who yearns to be in relationship with us, who, as the Psalmist wrote, does not want our sacrifices but our hearts, is a God that inspires awe and gratitude. That is a God that I do find worthy of worship. That is a God that I do find worthy of committing my life to. That is a God I am willing to share with all whom I meet, in word and in deed. That is a God I am willing to follow to the very end, no matter what. I believe that that is the God that Jesus followed, to the very end,

no matter what. In a very real sense, he did give his life for our sins. He died trying to tell us and show us the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God, that we would turn from and be freed from our sins.

Both are good news, the kingdom of God, and that Jesus died for our sins, but which are we to commit our lives to? That is the real question. I know my answer.