

# A GENEROUS GOSPEL

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Isaiah 56:1, 6-8 - A house of prayer for all nations  
Matthew 15:21-28 - Crumbs from the Master's table  
Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32 - God did not reject His people

These three scripture readings today follow a theme that evolves throughout the scriptures, and becomes in many ways very central to our understanding of the gospel. The Isaiah reading is set in the post-Exilic time--after Israel had gone through in a way the most critical or traumatic time of its life, had been taken into exile, had their temple and their city destroyed. They had come back with a new regime that was more compassionate and that allowed them to rebuild their nation. But the new setting is very different. The people are a minority within essentially a foreign culture, and so they are trying to understand how to relate to that culture and to the theology of election. That sense in which they are God's chosen people begins to change. From meaning "we have some special privilege," as Joy Anne [Murphy] was discussing during the children's time this morning, election now meant "we have a special mission to be channels of God's grace and word, not only to our own people but beyond." Foreigners who would observe the Sabbath would now be welcome in the temple. That was a profound change, a profound change, this idea that *Torah* [God's way of salvation for Israel] could be a way of salvation for all the nations, not just for Israel.

Now that's the beginning of a new stream of thought that is carried on in Jesus' life and the gospel stories, and we see it in the reading from Matthew in a very striking story of Jesus doing his teaching and healing. A woman, a gentile woman and not a Jew, comes to him seeking healing for her daughter. Jesus reacts in what to us today seems a disrespectful way. He tries to reject her, to push her away, saying "the food is for the children of the house, not for the dogs." A nasty comment indeed! But she has this very quick-witted response: "But even the dogs get the crumbs that fall from the master's table." Jesus changes his mind; her argument changes his mind. And so we have in this story, right here in the gospel, the evolution of Jesus' understanding of his call in a way that is parallel to the way the faith of Israel and the understanding of election was evolving in the post-Exilic period. We've got this dynamic between Israel and all the others who are not Israel--the gentiles--and whether they have a place in God's plan or not. As we are listening to this, remember which side of that dichotomy we are on. We're the gentiles; we're not the Jews, not Israel. We're the gentiles. So we've got an historical interest in this process.

Now it evolves even further into the early church when Paul has had his debate with Peter, because the way of Christ is a transformation of Judaism. It starts out being something that is still offered only to Jews. But then Paul has this revolutionary vision of a gospel to the gentiles, people who might actually receive this way of salvation apart from Torah. We see this argument being worked out in some of Paul's letters, and eventually Paul becomes known as the one who is preaching the gospel to the gentiles. This is salvation in Christ and not in Torah, in Christ entirely apart from Torah. As a matter of fact, now that this new way of salvation is here, whether it's for those who are within Israel or who are outside, the dilemma emerges as to how some of the people who have lived in Torah can not get it. The entire eleventh chapter of

Romans shows Paul struggling with much feeling because these are his own people he is talking about. How can God seem to have rejected his own people in favour of these gentiles? It would be like a father who favours the youngest child instead of the oldest. This is upside down; it's reversed.

But this motif, this reversal of convention, runs all through the Old Testament and the gospels. And so, running right through the centuries of biblical tradition, we have this broad movement of the sense of election and favour and grace. It becomes broken open, opened beyond what people thought were the limits. So it's a generous gospel. It has a generosity in the sense of not being restricted as if it were scarce and enough for only a few of us. It is enough for everyone; this cup can just overflow because there is plenty. That's speaking metaphorically, but in reality it takes the form of the many ways we as human beings try to make fences and draw lines. We tend to say "ok, here's the limit. 'Us is in and them is out,' and there must be someone who has it and someone who hasn't in order for it to be valid. There have to be some winners and some losers." We try to turn our faith into that, and yet there is something in the way the Spirit moves in our faith that keeps on breaking it open.

Well, we live that today. We look at the church and the world around us and there seems to be something that is keeping people out. There's some reason why people, even those who are genuinely searching spiritually, come to the church honestly and sincerely, but experience some kind of barrier. And so are we living in a time when the gospel, the church, the gifts of God, have become restricted and need to be broken open again--open beyond what we thought were the limits? Just back from holidays, catching up on the stuff on my desk, I noticed the information arriving with the statements of our financial givings. There's a letter from Laura [Servage], chairperson of our Council, and I'm sure many of you have already read this. She says, in part:

*A more faithful and positive discussion coming out of this same [Council] meeting helped us to consider our financial uncertainties not as a crisis but as a part of a larger challenge to develop a collective sense of mission and passion in our congregation. I believe, as Council and many others have expressed, the question of long term financial stability is absolutely connected to a fuller sense of stewardship--one that brings the gifts of our time and talents, not just the money, to our church and broader community.*

So she's raising this question of the church's mission, and an understanding of mission about which we can really ignite a passion among ourselves. And she is raising the question of our gifts--all the gifts we have, not just our financial gifts. That means all we have to offer, not just to one another within the church but to our larger community as well. Money, time and talents are, I thought, what we have to offer our community. If we think about that, what is at the essence, what are we really offering our community, through the medium of our time and talents and money? The essence of what we're offering is simply our faith, isn't it? We have this faith; we're stewards of this gospel. There's the heart of stewardship. We're stewards of the gospel, and we have this life-giving faith to offer our world, our community, by outreach and by our response to everyone who walks in through the door. And so our mission, our fulfillment, as a church is not about survival. We do need more of this and all of that, but that's all a side effect. The essence of who we are as a Christian community is the important thing. It is to understand our mission and to see it in the light of today's scripture readings as part of that eternal challenge to God's people. We must recognize how we have put walls around this, and that we must break down those walls--those barriers that stop people from coming.

How do we do that? Well, there are many mechanical ways in terms of how the church operates, and the Council and everyone else works on those constantly. But at the heart of the issue is how we share our faith, our gospel. There are two dimensions or levels to that. First, there's the common faith which is ours together--the faith we hold in common as a congregation,

as a denomination, as a church. Second, there is our own personal experience of faith, of the sacred. The challenge before us is to learn how to share our faith with the world around us on both of those levels. I want to say a little bit about each one.

The first one is our common faith. We have heard in many different ways from John Spong, Marcus Borg, and others, who are writing about Christian faith today that we are in any of ten thousand different ways between paradigms. There's an old paradigm of Christian faith from which we in the United Church, anyway, have largely moved away. There are other churches who are still deeply committed to the old paradigm of Christian faith--the moralistic view of faith, the picture of heaven and hell as reward and punishment, the literalistic interpretation of the Bible, the understanding and a literal sense of Jesus as Son of God. Everyone in this room, I would venture to say, knows someone--a son or daughter or other loved one, or a friend--who has found some of that old paradigm to be a barrier and a reason he or she has turned away from the church. Even though there may be an acknowledged spiritual need, that person has felt the church to be inaccessible even though he or she recognizes it as having an essential spiritual power. The church is inaccessible because of that old paradigm orthodoxy. So we have found ourselves caught in the middle, unable to name what we're relinquishing or, even more difficult, to see or name a new paradigm. And that's the challenge before us.

One of the people who is helping us a great deal with that is Marcus Borg. Many of you are familiar with his books *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* and *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*. He has been developing his thinking, and has drawn that together into a beautiful book called *The Heart of Christianity* which puts those insights together into a description of how it is we can be Christians today. His subtitle is "How We Can Be Passionate Believers Today." He's not alone. He is saying what many others have said, but over the decades it has been said by scholars in a very inaccessible, tentative sort of way. What's really exciting to me is that people such as Spong and Borg are bottom-lining it, integrating it, putting together all of these insights about the movement. They are critiquing the old paradigm and putting forth the vision of a new paradigm of Christian faith. And they're writing it in plain, simple, language such that it is very readable and very accessible.

I am going to be leading a study of *The Heart of Christianity* here this fall, and as I approach that study I want to say two things to this congregation. One is that if you were intimidated in the past about attending Bible or faith study groups because you felt you didn't know enough, try it again. This is new; this has an accessibility to it that is new. It's not addressing people who have studied the Bible, the Christian theology, all their lives and want to do some more analysis of it. Rather, it's for ordinary people in the pews who are sitting here listening Sunday mornings knowing there is something and wishing they could more easily put it into words, not just for themselves but also for their sons and daughters and friends who feel alienated from this church. This study of *The Heart Of Christianity* is for those who wish they knew how to express the faith in a way that identifies this real vitality and life that Christian faith still has.

The second thing I want to say is that *The Heart of Christianity* is written in a way that enables us to take away a language for ourselves and to affirm that letting go of the old paradigm doesn't mean a sort of reduced and truncated faith. On the contrary, it leads us into a much deeper and richer faith, helping us to grasp the new paradigm of Christian faith. It helps all of us, not just the leaders, to learn how to name that faith such that we can share it with the world in a way that drops those barriers for so many people who need the church and have found unnecessary barriers in their way. So I want you to understand that as a gift, as a part of the mission of the church, and not just for the church today but as what challenged the bearers of the word of God throughout the centuries.

I mentioned earlier that there are two dimensions or levels of how we share our faith and our gospel, the first one being the faith we hold in common as a congregation, as a denomination, as a church. The second dimension or level is our own personal experience of faith, of the sacred. The challenge before us is to learn how to share our faith with the world around us on both of those levels. And so, in addition to the help that someone like Borg gives us to name our common faith and the new paradigm of our common faith, we also need to be able to express our personal experience of this wonderful faith.

I want to tell you about another author, one who will be here this fall--another workshop to which I hope many of you will come. The writer is Ray McGinnis who is a long-time personal friend of mine and has for many years been teaching seminars on spiritual journal writing. He has evolved into writing spiritual poetry, and has done extensive study of the Psalms inasmuch as the Psalms are the part of the Bible where people's experience--through the whole range from the highest heights of joy to the depths of distress--of the sacred, of the faith, is expressed. Ray uses techniques, and they are amazingly simple techniques, from the Psalms to teach people how to write psalms, how to express their faith in beautiful words and poetry in their own language. He has taught hundreds of people how to do this at workshops for about six or seven years. His book, which has just been published, is entitled *Writing the Sacred*. He's on a workshop tour in conjunction with the publication of his book, and he's going to be here for a Friday evening and a Saturday all-day workshop at the end of September.

Details about both of these events--the study I will be leading on *The Heart of Christianity* and Ray McGinnis's workshop--are mentioned in the announcement sheet this morning. So here are two opportunities for us as a congregation to engage the whole new and wonderfully exciting opportunities for learning how to share our faith with our world, how to drop the barriers that are stopping people who need the church, and how really to grasp the essence of our mission as a church in a way that will truly awaken that passion.

As an illustration we have a hymn on the insert in today's bulletin. It is one of those from *More Voices* with which we're experimenting this summer. The hymn is written by Ruth Duck who is a United Church of Christ ordained minister and has been a professor of worship at the seminary level. I want to share a paragraph where she talks about the experience that gave rise to this hymn.

*One afternoon relaxing by the Bay in Marblehead, Massachusetts, I watched a bird sing through my binoculars. It seemed as if the bird was singing with its whole being, and suddenly phrases from the psalms about the whole creation praising God came alive for me. If only we as human beings could open our beings to life and to God as that small bird did! I went home and wrote this song. It was written in 1988 and first published in a songbook for use in camping programs, *Come Join the Circle* (1989).<sup>1</sup>*

So let's sing "It's a Song of Praise to the Maker."

Transcribed and edited for publication by Sue and By Reesor

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Duck, *Dance in the Universe* (1992, GIA Publications) # 16.