

1 Corinthians 15:1-12 (NRSV)

Now I would 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 one 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 toward 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. Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

We recognize only four canonical Gospels – those of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. There is no Gospel according to Paul. Even though Paul wrote nearly half of the books in the New Testament, even though Paul was the earliest of the canonical New Testament writers and certainly one of the most influential, there is no Gospel according to Paul. Except, perhaps, for today's text from First Corinthians.

What we hear in today's reading from First Corinthians is the essence of the good news – the Gospel – that Paul proclaimed to the church at Corinth and through which they are being saved. These were the traditions that Paul considered to be of first importance in what he, himself, had received. And since Paul's letters were probably written before the Gospels were, this is the earliest brief written summary of what this young church held to be true.

And as I come to the end of my ministry here, I find myself thinking about what is important in what I have had to pass on to you and what I hope you will continue to pass on to others. And so I was drawn to preach on this text.

Paul summary of the Good News is surprising, I think, for what it contains and what it does not. It can be summarized fairly briefly:

- Christ died for our sins;
- Christ was buried;
- Christ was raised; and
- Christ has appeared to believers, including Paul himself.

That's it. That's the good news. No summary of teachings, no Apostle's Creed. No Bible Bowl. I bet Paul's confirmation classes were shorter than ours are.

It's reasonable to ask, what is such Good News about this? And why is it of first importance?

Well, let's begin at the beginning – Christ died for our sins. Now, many people will say that this means that Christ atoned for our sins, that Christ allowed himself to be judged in our place, and many of the people who think this are wise and thoughtful theologians and I wouldn't say that this interpretation is impossible. What I would say is that it isn't necessarily implied by what Paul says here.

At a minimum, Paul is saying is that Jesus died *because of* our sinfulness – it could be that in our sinfulness, we executed him or had someone do it, and that certainly is true. It could be that because we didn't like what he had to say or how he chose to live, we had him put to death, and that, too, is certainly true. And that directs our attention to what he had to say, a message of hope and redemption, and how he chose to live, among the people on the margins, the poor, the sick, the beaten-down. And until you have heard this, this message of hope for the hopeless, this message of love for the last and the lost, until you have heard *this* good news, more complicated interpretations aren't really necessary or helpful.

The second piece of the Good News that Paul considered of first importance is that Jesus was buried. Why is this of first importance? I think a couple of reasons. First, may be a little silly, but when you are buried, you are really dead. I mean, really dead, not in hiding, not away for the weekend, not “in seclusion.” Dead. Jesus is broken out of his former life and he is freed for life with God. Just as we break with our former life in baptism and are freed to a new life with God. The little death has to come before we can be a new creation.

Which brings us to the third piece of Paul's summary of the Good News – Jesus was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures. Why is this of first importance? Because the tomb is empty as the angel at the tomb tells us on Easter morning. He is not here, he is risen. With this, we learn that God is firmly and completely in control. Sin and death have done all they can but they cannot defeat Jesus and they cannot defeat God. By raising Jesus, God declares that death is not the ultimate power over creation or the ultimate fate of his children – that there can be and there will be more in store for us.

And finally, the fourth matter of first importance is that Jesus has appeared to Peter and to the apostles. He has appeared to more than 500 – perhaps this is a reference to Pentecost. He appeared to

James and to all the apostles. He was not dead, he was raised and returned to his people to give them hope, to spark their courage, to remind them of what had yet to be done.

And last, as to one who was born at the wrong time, too late to meet this Jesus in his earthly life, he appeared to Paul. This is obvious, but it seems very important – the most influential follower of Christ, the man who, with God’s help had the largest impact on the formation of the church, never met Jesus in the flesh. He never heard his teachings, never heard the Sermon on the Mount, didn’t even have the Gospels to read since they weren’t written yet, but nonetheless he planted churches and made disciples all along the rim of the Mediterranean and perhaps as far as Spain. And Paul doesn’t seem to assume that Christ is through appearing to his people – indeed, as the Body of Christ, the church is the vehicle for the continuing appearances of Christ among us.

So, these are the things of first importance in Paul’s understanding of the Good News – that Christ died, was buried, was raised and then has appeared to his people, in accordance with the scriptures. Now, it seems to us strange, I think, that this account of what is of first importance has no content, has no special insight of what Jesus wanted to tell us.

There is disagreement among theologians along the same lines – that some people will say that what’s really important is not the *message* of the Gospel, but rather the *fact* that God had decided to take on human form, to become flesh and live among us. That with this, our world is literally turned upside down, that God has now come to dwell among us and will not leave. This fact, say some theologians is more important than the content of what he taught.

Now, I don’t think that what Jesus taught is not important – my goodness, what have I been teaching for five years? But I think I do understand what Paul and these theologians are saying – that with Jesus, our fundamental situation has changed – God is not out there,

anymore, God is among us, the body of Christ is present to the believers, comes to be with us in the assembly, to teach, to instruct, to inspire.

And *how* he came – not as a rampaging, powerful warrior, but rather as a humble, gentle teacher. He came not to force us to change but to show us we can change, not to crack us open but to coax us out, with love rather than fear, hope rather than judgment. This tells us much about who God is and how God hopes to change us, what our relationship with God can be.

Sometimes by putting the content of the Good News to the side and looking at how the Good News came to us, we can better understand why the Good News is so good. Because God comes to us not as a triumphant warrior but rather as a vulnerable teacher who seeks to open our eyes and our hearts to those among us who are on the margins, in the shadows.

And so, for this gentle teacher who died, was buried, was raised and has appeared to his people – Paul's matters of first importance that he passed on to his people who through generation after generation passed it on to us – for this gentle teacher we say, thanks be to God.

Amen.