

Would you do me the favor of allowing me to tell you a secret? It's been whispered in my ear for the past fifteen or so years. Our gospel is too narrow. By "gospel" I mean how God brings the good news of salvation upon the earth. I believe that our gospel is not wide enough to cover WHAT God wants to do or HOW God wants to work. At minimum our gospel is lopsided and wobbles. But I believe that for most of us, it is simply too narrow.

Carlo Carretto says in his book *Why, O Lord*¹, "we seek a mighty God, a God who would solve problems, a God who would eliminate the wicked, a God who would conquer enemies in a way that everyone could see."

And instead of finding our problems solved and wickedness banished along with our enemies...we often find the God who came as an infant into less than ideal circumstances and fled to Egypt for fear of his life. Instead of finding the God who conquers we find the one in the upper room who says,

"14b I have been very eager to eat this Passover meal with you before my suffering begins. 16 For I tell you now that I won't eat this meal again until its meaning is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God." (Luke 22.14b-16 underline mine)

We know now that his suffering would include betrayal, false accusations, unjust conviction, beatings, and eventually being hung on a tree until he drowned in his own bodily fluids. And get this...all the while being able stop and even avoid the suffering but refusing to do so.

We simply don't know what to do with this kind of God. Our knee jerk response is avoiding of pain. We move heaven and earth for comfort. We simply don't know what to do with the God who chooses the painful path.

¹ *Why, O Lord* by Carlo Carretto

We love to talk about his omnipotence. We get uneasy talking about how hurricanes and terrorists align with God being all-powerful. We love to laud his perfect will. We skirt around the reality that often he is willing to allow suffering in order to accomplish it. Our gospel is too narrow.

What do we do with this God who regularly says, "I am not taking you around the valley of the shadow of death but through it." What do we do with this God who's highest priority seems to be our maturity over our comfort?

Would you like to hear how I have seen what we've done when confronted with this God?

Some follow the path of Judas and reject him. It never sounds as bad as that. We don't really reject him, so we think, instead we reject those who would make such a claim as "through his wounds we are healed" and "in our weakness he is made strong." We find other places which will tell us that we are more than conquerors and that God desires us happy, beautiful, and healthy while rejecting the notion that this Jesus was called a "man of sorrows."

We reject the notion that without poverty we cannot inherit the Kingdom of God and instead trust in our church attendance and giving. We forget that only the meek will inherit the earth and instead assert our will at every turn when it means we get ahead or at the very least others don't leap frog us. We fail to embrace that we must be pure in heart to see God and instead simply hope that being better than our neighbor will do the trick. Our gospel is too narrow.

Have you taken this option without realizing it? Look around. How many people do you know around here? Which of them would you be willing to share your personal struggles with? Look around again. What wounds do you see? Who has been willing to be vulnerable this week in the midst of this congregation? Why not? Fear of being rejected or ridiculed or thought less of is my guess. Our gospel is too narrow. This

place is a hospital before it is anything else. A place where the wounded run to. If that is not our perspective then our gospel is too narrow.

But there is another way forward. I've seen it. It always begins with a humble heart. You can tell a humble heart because gratitude is the first response. Always. Grateful for God. In particular grateful for God sending his only Son to live, suffer, die and be raised to new life. They identify that this pattern, while the chosen way for God's own son Jesus, may very well be the pattern God chooses for all of us. For it WILL bring about maturity by identifying the places in our heart not fully devoted. God knows that it is exactly these places stopping us from becoming all God intended. Jesus said that if your right hand offends then cut it off. If our eye offends then pluck it out. While I do not think Jesus sought amputation as the path to discipleship. He did intend to convey the dire consequences of an unchecked heart. Those whose gospel is well rounded allow trials and tests to chip away at the places creating offense to the way of God. By strengthening our faith through the tests and tribulations just like a muscle in the body strengthen when it is worked so to our faith is strengthened. I've seen it.

Oh, it is never easy. Not easy to go through or to watch. Can you imagine being Jesus' mother Mary and seeing him hung on the cross? Neither is it easy to walk beside someone who is going through what seems to be an interminable season of trial and testing. But we must not look away. For if we do, we cease to be a helpful presence of support. Those who walk through the fire always seem to have one or two that refuse to look away. And in so doing they provide the necessary support to continue. I've seen it.

If we will listen, our narrow gospel confronts us every time we come to the Eucharistic table of grace. As this table is prepared by the one who suffered. It is established exactly because of his suffering. It is set because he rejected the self-preserving path and chose us instead.

Strip away the romantic notion of this table as our LORD was stripped bare and led away. Do not look away from his ultimate sacrifice because it is uncomfortable. Allow the fullness of this Good News to be that which marinates our life. Allow God to enlarge your understanding of the good news he want to do in and through you.

We are called into relationship by the one who loves us...truly loves us. Whose life of sacrifice paved the way for our life of abundance. And my friends, abundant life does not happen in this realm without joining Jesus in his suffering. The apostle Paul went to so far as to say, "we were chosen to suffer along with Christ."

If that defines you this morning please hear me say this one thing: you are not being rejected or despised because of what you are going through. In fact, quite the opposite.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. For their's is the kingdom of Heaven. You are experiencing the same pattern that Jesus experienced of life and suffering. And just like the one who came before us to point the way, if we do not give up we too will experience the new life he experienced on the third day. Resurrection is not a word on a page but a work being done in your life. But unless a seed falls into the Earth and dies it cannot multiply and grow. Hear the good news...the full well rounded gospel that God is on your side wherever you may find yourself.