The Six Great Ends of the Church
I. The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind
First Reading - Isaiah 40:7-9
Second Reading - Luke 4:40-44

Ned Ryerson. Does the name ring a bell? *Groundhog Day,* 1993. Punxsutawney, PA. Bill Murray's classic comedy where he plays weather forecaster Phil Conners enduring an endless loop of Groundhog Days, waking up every morning to the exact same day, encountering the same people at the same places and times through the day. *"Phil? Phil Conners? I thought that was you … Now don't tell me you don't remember me, 'cause I sure as heck fire remember you! Ned … Ned Ryerson … Needle Nose Ned … Case Western High! … I sell insurance. Do you have life insurance? If you do you can always use a little more, am I right? Hey, have you ever heard of single-premium life?*

What is classic in the character of Ned Ryerson is the way he so fully embodies his vocational identity. He's selling insurance, and by golly, he's really into it. Probably read every Dale Carnegie pamphlet out there, manufacturing the constant smile, his grin as fixed and superficial as the horde of botoxed, plasticized fading celebrity faces. Ned's selling insurance and if you come across Ned, he's talking insurance. His whole being exudes

… term life, whole life, universal, and copays. His pajamas probably have a patterned pastiche of insurance logos, and his house, really his whole life, is wallpapered with actuarial tables. He's into it, and will never understand why you aren't also.

Do you know Ned? Surely, you do. He, she, or they may not be selling insurance, but there is never a mystery about what they are selling, what they are representing — band parents, booster clubbers, Amway, Mary Kay, PGA, beach music, yoga, pop divas, vitamin supplements… I walked into Target the other day, and was taken aback by this curious long line of young dudes bonded by the zealous motivation to purchase something from a roped-off shelf being stocked with what they treasured. Don't think it was a study bible, or a facial cleanser, or even the newest, bestest running shoes (sign me up!). It was for a pack of cards! Pokemon, Magic, or something was being released, and they were into it and **all** about it.

Everybody has an identity composed of any number of influences, but in each life there are influences that manage to capture larger chunks of real estate, bandwidth, identity. More and more and more, you evoke that influence, become that influence, a walking, breathing talking billboard of

that influence — trendy diet, pop star fixation, alma mater. You have to escape the obsessed before you can escape their obsession.

Everybody evokes that which has influenced them, and often those influences become a large part of our identity, such that people cannot mistake what is important to us. So, what is the story people read when they meet you? What is the story people read when they experience the church? What is the story people read when they encounter us … SMPC, four letters that we must admit are just letters to the world's eyes, but have become much more than letters to us? What is our story to tell? What is our calling to perform?

The first of the historic great ends of the church — The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind. The thesis sentence of our being as a church has to include the clarity of our mission to proclaim the gospel. Calvin said that the church is found where the Word of God is proclaimed and the sacraments are administered. Proclamation of the Gospel is always our intention, and is always where we start in determining what we do.

No problem, right? Easy-peasy, uncomplicated, straightforward. It's paint-by-numbers simplicity … not! Particularly when so many people, and so many groups, factions, sects, tribes, denominations, nondenominations (which are actually just other denominations pretending not to be), movements, associations, ministries each have their own unequivocal convictions about what "proclamation of the gospel" means and demands.

In a seminary homiletics class, you are required to prepare a sermon to preach before your professor and classmates. Fun, right? Some two to three dozen eyes and an equal number of ears focused on critiquing, parsing, and deconstructing every word you utter and how you utter it. I didn't know what I was doing … still don't, many would say … but in my sermon I spoke about proclaiming the gospel, because no matter the scripture text, those time worn words would have to have to fit, right?

Proclaim the gospel, everyone from the Pope to Billy Graham to Barbara Brown Taylor to Bishop Tutu to Jimmy Swaggart couldn't argue with that. But my professor, the legendary Dr. Elizabeth Achtemeier, who was such a powerful voice in the pulpit, wrote a red marker question in the margin of my sermon manuscript that has stuck with me as a fundamental,

yet too often unheeded consideration. Where I had written, *proclaim the gospel*, she simply asked, *"What is the gospel?"* My first reaction — *What is the gospel? You know … it's gospel. It's one of our most used words. Gospel.*

Yet, the more I thought about it, Dr. Achtemeier was offering an essential observation. Yes, the people in the pews have heard the word gospel a thousand times, but do they understand what meanings are carried within the word gospel? Do I? Do you? Yes, fundamental to our identity and purpose is the proclamation of the gospel, but what does that mean? What does that entail? What does that demand? And what is it we are called to proclaim?

Proclaim the gospel. The Greek here is — *euangelizō* — bring glad tidings, good news. So, what is the good news we are to proclaim? Quite simply, what God has done for us in Jesus Christ — his incarnation, life, teaching, cross, resurrection, commission. "*The angel said to them*, '*Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord* … Quoting Isaiah, Jesus said, *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim*

release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And from Paul, we read — "*For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation."*

And from our text for today — *"The crowds were looking for him; and when they reached him, they wanted to prevent him from leaving them. But he said to them, 'I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose.' So he continued proclaiming the message in the synagogues of Judea."*

All of that is wrapped up into that one word, *euangelizō* — proclaiming the good news of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ — the birth, the life, the teachings, the healing spirit, the faithfulness of love, the richness of grace, the reconciliation, the defeat of hate, love wins, hope will not be diminished even by death. All of this wrapped in this word, *euangelizō*, proclaim the good news in all that we do and wherever we are.

When the people besieged Jesus in Capernaum, having heard his words and seen his power to heal, they implored him to stay. They wanted to keep Jesus for themselves, addressing all current and future challenges, threats, illnesses. It's understandable. How many times have you visited a restaurant or a shop, or experienced a public service, a transportation system, and thought, *I wish we had that in our town, in our neighborhood.*

You've probably visited that particular beach or village or lake vista before the crowds arrive. It has remained unspoiled, and you probably celebrate being in the know about a region's best kept secret, hoping to keep it to yourself, not spoiling it. This is our spot. You might even do that with people — *This is our doctor. We want to keep her here, for us; this is our teacher, our leader, our friend. We'd hate to lose them to bigger things, other places. Stay with us, Jesus, we're not ready to share.*

Jesus had come down to Capernaum, and the response to his presence was enthusiastic — very different than his experience in Nazareth where they were ready to throw him off a cliff; very different than his encounter with the Gerasenes after the pig incident, they were begging him to leave.

But here in Capernaum, things were clicking. The people were feeling it, wanting to keep it going.

All of it was good, but even good things can wear a person down. Yet, as often happened, when Jesus needed time for solitude and prayer, the people would come looking for him, wouldn't let him be. We have a Cavalier, Molly, who we dearly love, but no matter where you are in the house, wherever you go in the house, and I mean wherever, she's gonna find you. *Here I am. Isn't it wonderful!*

For Jesus, there would be no sneaking off. *"At daybreak he departed and went into a deserted place. And the crowds were looking for him; and when they reached him, they wanted to prevent him from leaving them. But he said to them, 'I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose.'"*

What Jesus was doing in Capernaum was good stuff, transformational, healing stuff, but there was a larger purpose, a primary mission that would eclipse even the good things that were happening in that village by the Galilean Sea. *"I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose."* As Jesus stated so clearly

elsewhere, *“No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.”*

What God has done for us in Christ is not something to cling to and hold for ourselves. Faith is never a private matter. The grace of Jesus Christ, (a gift received, not a possession earned), is such that it cannot be contained. Overflowing with gratitude, we must share it.

How it is shared is the continuing challenge for every believer and every church in each new generation and environment. What does that calling demand from us today? Now, I will tell you that from the day I was ordained until today, I was never going to be the Ned Ryerson of evangelism, the English word used for *euangelizō,* the proclamation of the good news. When they were pushing kids out into the streets in grade school as pint-sized fundraisers, knocking on doors, aggressively selling those magazines, candles, and popcorn, I was hiding in my house. I couldn’t, can’t, and won’t be **that** evangelist. But proclaiming the gospel isn’t marketing and sales pitches and door prizes. It is seeking to embody in thought, word, deed, and character the grace and graciousness already given to us in Jesus Christ.

We're admittedly not in the Ned Ryerson corner of God's kingdom. There is plenty *gospelling* out there we cannot begin to understand, appreciate, or endorse, so let's leave that to the wisdom of the Lord to sort out. Yet, there is so much we can do to embody Christ's calling to share his good news of grace. I see it in you week after week, year after year, a beatific evocation of Christ's grace at work in and through you. I see it in your faces. I hear it in your voices. I witness it in your acts of compassion, mercy, and goodness. We're not polished elocutionists. As Nadia Bolz Weber points out — *"Never once did Jesus scan the room for the best example of a holy person to tell others about him. He always sent stumpers and sinners."* That's us!

The challenge for the church, as I see it in this fractured world today, is to learn our story, the gospel that we seek to embody, because there is a cacophonous clanging of voices throwing around the notion of gospel in every corner of society, but when I hear or read what they're saying on the one hand, and hold the Bible's witness to Jesus Christ in the other, forgive me, but I'm not seeing the connection. Now, I, we, can complain about it decry it, distance ourselves from it, but there is another way. We can ponder

and live into the very question my preaching professor posed to me. In regard to the gospel — What is it?

The profound theologian Karl Barth proposed that — *The Gospel is not a truth among other truths. Rather, it sets a question-mark against all truths.* Look and listen around you — Does it look like Jesus, sound like Jesus, love like Jesus, include and welcome like Jesus? If not, it may not be worth the brain real estate it would suck up. Look within you — Does it look like Jesus, sound like Jesus, love like Jesus, include and welcome like Jesus? If not, you may be chasing a false god.

Do you know your story, the story to which your life will witness, the story to which our life together will witness? The style of the old-timey hymn may prompt a giggle, but its truth resonates with our mission in this time.

Tell me the same old story,
When you have cause to fear
That this world's empty glory
Is costing me too dear;
And when the Lord's bright glory
Is dawning on my soul,
Tell me the old, old story:
"Christ Jesus makes thee whole." Amen.