

TELL THE RIGHT STORY

MATTHEW 25:34–40;
LUKE 1:46–55; 4:16–21

As Christians, we are called to share the good news. For some of us, our encounters with Jesus lead us to dramatically transform our lives. We can point to a clear *before* and *after*. For others of us, it seems we have known Jesus our whole lives, and God's presence has been a constant source of comfort, strength, and guidance to us. Either way, if our faith is important to us, we yearn for some way to share the story.

But what, exactly, is that good news we long to share?

The answer may vary for each of us. For the woman suffering from terminal cancer, the good news may be that she does not suffer alone. For the person recovering from addiction, the good news may be that there is always hope for change. For the undocumented immigrant, the good news may be that there are no borders to the welcome of God. For the young college student on their own for the first time in a new city, the good news may be that they are never alone. For the widower grieving a beloved spouse, the good news may be that their beloved now rests with God.

It's important that we keep the story straight when we're sharing the story of Jesus, so it's worth spending some time thinking about how each of us defines that good news. It is also important that we are clear on just how very radical and transformative the gospel actually is. Those who wish to follow Jesus in sharing the gospel must take care not to lose sight of what it is that we are proclaiming. It is easy to be blown off course and to mistake the gospel for little bits of advice on how to be successful in life or how to achieve inner contentment, soothing counsel to be woven into the fabric of the countless other messages that lay claim on our lives. Too often, the story of Jesus gets watered down and condensed into trite sayings that can be etched into wall hangings or painted onto coffee mugs, sound bites that provide comfort or encouragement but really have nothing to do with the earth-shaking, radical upheaval that Jesus came to proclaim.

What we are announcing is, after all, the *realm* of God, called in the Gospels "the kingdom of God" or "the kingdom of heaven." The realm of God has laid claim over all of life. The gospel we're talking about is not simply about our individual lives and our personal transformation. The gospel is a message about an overturning of the social

structures, an upheaval of the status quo, a re-ordering of the powers that be, so that our human life on earth is more aligned with the God of love and grace. The gospel has size: breadth and depth. Those who follow Jesus in announcing God's realm are proclaiming a sweeping reality that gathers up all aspects of life in God's promise to renew creation and redeem humanity.

If sharing the good news is a task we Christians seek to take on, we had best keep our story straight. The good news is not just for me, or for you. It is for all of us, and for the world God loves.

Take some time to write and reflect on your faith story. Was there a clear *before* and *after* moment, or has the Christian faith always been part of your life? How has being a follower of Jesus changed or impacted you?



Credit: Rich Copley | Presbyterian News Service

➤ What do you think about the idea that the good news is not only about individual transformation, but about the radical upheaval of the status quo?

➤ How would you describe the good news told in the Gospels?

PRAYER

Dear God,
Give me wisdom as I seek to follow you, so that I might share your good news with those who need to hear it.
Amen.

FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE

The good news of what God is up to in the world can't be distilled down to one specific passage. If it could, we wouldn't need four Gospels, all telling the story from a slightly different vantage point, plus all the rest of the scriptural witness. There are, however, a few passages that help us keep the story straight.



Luke 4:16–21

JESUS' FIRST SERMON

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' inaugural sermon occurred at the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. That Sabbath, Jesus stood up to read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah:

“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.”

—Luke 4:18–19

Then, as the eyes of everyone in the congregation were fixed on him in breathless anticipation, he announced, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). The realm of God was fully revealed and present in him.

Notice how God's realm turns the world upside down. In the kingdom of this world, the poor have two kinds of news, bad and worse; but in God's realm, they are given good news. In this world, captives stay imprisoned and enslaved, and the oppressed remain under the thumb of the oppressor, but the realm of God brings the jubilee year, “the year of the Lord's favor,” when the land is refreshed, society is liberated, debts are canceled, and joy is given to the people (see Leviticus 25:8–12).

FOR THE LEAST OF THESE

In this passage from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' teaching makes it clear that the good news is not simply about a spiritual relationship with God, but about meeting actual, physical needs: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me” (vv. 35–36).

Matthew
25:34–40

When we consider what it means to go and tell the good news, we would do well to remember this passage, in which the good news is shared, not by conversation or proclamation, but by a cup of cold water, a warm jacket, a bowl of soup, or a smile in a prison visiting room. If we keep the story straight, we will remember that the good news of Jesus is that those on the margins are cared for and loved.



THE MIGHTY FROM THEIR THRONES

If we're paying attention when we read the Gospels, we don't need to wait until Jesus grows up and starts preaching in order to understand the message he brings. Before Jesus is even born, his mother, Mary, knows that the good news will turn the world upside down. "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly," she sings. "He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (vv. 52–53).

Notice the language she uses. These are not things that are going to happen in the future; God has already done this. God has already turned the world upside down. This is the good news Jesus comes to share. The work of following Jesus is to tell this good news and to continue the work of creating a world where this is true.



Of course, it's impossible to distill the full story of what it means to follow Jesus into one sentence. Some people point to John 3:16 as *the* Scripture that explains the gospel. Others point to John 1:5 or the greatest commandment in Matthew 22:36–40.

- If you had to choose one verse of the Bible that best captures the gospel message, what would it be?
- Would it be one of the passages explored here? Something else? Why?



Read through the passages listed above and make a list of all the places where God's vision turns the world upside down and challenges the status quo.

- What kind of world comes into focus when you look at it this way?

FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW



In some of the earliest baptismal liturgies of the church, those being baptized would first be asked to renounce the rule of Satan over their lives. Sometimes they would face west as they did so. Then they would turn toward the east—reorienting themselves, literally—and would confess their belief in God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then they would enter naked into the baptismal pool and, coming out of the waters, they would be given a white robe, the garment of Christ. Baptism, in other words, was understood, not as a nice ceremony marking one’s membership in the church, but as a radical change in citizenship. “I no longer wish to belong to the kingdom of this world,” the one being baptized was saying. “I desire to be a citizen of the kingdom of God.”

Sharing the good news means first and foremost claiming our place as a citizen in the kingdom of God, committing ourselves to following in the way of Jesus, which so often runs counter to the rules and standards of the world around us. Looking back through history, we can see many examples of Christians who oriented their lives toward sharing the gospel, even when it was at odds with the culture they lived in. We might think of Cesar Chavez, who drew on Christ’s teachings about nonviolence in his work, organizing farm workers to advocate for better working conditions. Or Oscar Romero, a Roman Catholic bishop in El Salvador, who accompanied the poor and defended human rights in the midst of great violence; he was murdered by the military for his actions. Consider church leaders who welcomed and celebrated same-sex relationships and queer identity long before it was culturally normative to do so. Or congregations who have become sanctuary churches in recent years and opened their doors to immigrants facing unjust deportation, turning their buildings into safe places for people to live.

Commitment to a life oriented toward God is not only sometimes countercultural but also points us to a transformed world. As Mary predicts in Luke 1:46–55, Jesus comes to turn the world upside down. The good news is not just a food pantry but a transformed system so that all are fed on their own. The good news is not just a safe place to stay but a world in which families don’t live in fear of being torn apart. The good



Indeed, there are many ways of following Jesus that faithfully tell the good news of the gospel. However, there are also ways of practicing Christianity that are counter to the way of God. To keep the story straight, we also need to be aware of and name the ways that the Christian message has been corrupted. Whenever church leaders use coercion, whenever there is abuse at the hands of those given power by the church, it is not the way of God. Any message of Christianity that promotes violence as a way to protect the faith is not the way of God. Any expression of Christ that denies the humanity of each person is not the way of God. Any message of good news that is not rooted in the expansive love of God is not really good news at all.

news is not just a handout but a job that pays a living wage. The good news is not just a bed in a homeless shelter but a home of one's own.

If we are to go and tell the good news, we need to keep the story straight. As followers of Jesus, we are citizens of the kingdom of God, orienting ourselves to a world in which all are fed, loved, welcomed, and safe.

- Can you think of other examples of faithful followers of Jesus who oriented themselves toward the way of God instead of the way of the world?

- Who do you know in your own life who has lived in this way?

Liberation theology, first articulated in Latin America but now studied and embraced around the world, asserts that God has a “preferential option for the poor.” That is, the physical and spiritual needs of the poor and those on the margins are the essential concern of the scriptural witness, and ought to be ours as followers of Jesus as well.

- In what ways do you see this theological understanding expressed in the Scriptures? In what ways do you see it lived out in your faith community?

PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

To keep the story straight so that we can share the good news, we would be wise to push ourselves to articulate what the gospel actually means to us. Even lifelong Christians can benefit from occasionally reexamining and restating their faith convictions.

THE GOSPEL IN SEVEN WORDS

In 2012, *The Christian Century* magazine issued a challenge and invited writers and readers to express the gospel message in no more than seven words. “It’s instructive,” the editor of the project wrote, “to see what Christian proclamation boils down to when someone is put on the spot and only has a few words. What is the essence of the essence of Christianity?”¹

➤ How would you answer that question?

➤ Can you express the gospel message in seven words?

7
WORDS

Once you have your own answer, visit the *Christian Century* archives ([bit.ly /FMSevenWords](http://bit.ly/FMSevenWords)) and read some of the responses printed there. Do you find any you agree with? Disagree with? Why or why not?

1. David Heim, “The Gospel in Seven Words,” *The Christian Century* (August 23, 2012), www.christiancentury.org/article/2012-08/gospel-seven-words.

MONEY AND TIME

Another way to keep the story straight is to be clear about your commitments and values. What are the values that guide your life? One way to explore this is to examine how you spend two of our most valuable resources: money and time. Are you spending your money in ways that affirm your values? Are you spending your time in a way that lives up to your commitments?

Look back to “Finding the Practice in the Bible” and read those passages again.

➤ What values do you see expressed in those words?

➤ In what ways does your life align with those values?

➤ What changes would you like to make after this reflection?

FOR FURTHER READING

- *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone*, by Heather McGhee, explores the history of racism in the United States and points out the ways that white supremacy has hurt everyone. While not written from an explicitly Christian perspective, this book offers food for thought to those of us wanting to keep the story straight: If it's not good news for everyone, it's not good news.
- *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved*, by Kate Bowler, reflects on her own diagnosis of cancer while challenging some of the trite and cliché sayings often ascribed to Christianity. This is a good book for anyone wanting to dig deeper into what the good news actually is.

FOLLOWING JESUS

For those of us who live in places where Christianity dominates our culture, it is sometimes easy to accept a watered-down version of the good news. To be a follower of Jesus, however, requires us to think deeply about what the gospel really means to us. We do a disservice to our faith when we reduce the good news to bumper-sticker theology, and perhaps we ought to be suspicious when our Christian beliefs align too closely with the values of our culture.

As we live out our call to “go and tell,” let’s keep these questions in front of us:

- Who is the good news for?
- If it’s not good news for everybody, is it really the gospel of Jesus?

- How will you tell the right story?

Psalm 98 is a song of praise, inviting us to rejoice in what God has done.

*O sing to the LORD a new song,
for [God] has done marvelous things!*