

Remember Jesus Christ!

Isaiah 43:1-7, 2 Timothy 2:1-26 (ESV)

June 25, 2006

“Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!” “Remember Jesus Christ!” Can you imagine having to tell that to a minister? “Remember Jesus Christ!” Can you imagine having to tell that to a church? “Remember Jesus Christ!” Can you realize that Paul is telling that to us yet today? “Remember Jesus Christ” is more than good advice. “Remember Jesus Christ” is a battle cry for the proclamation of the gospel, a banner for rallying the church, a call to arms for all believers, and an exhortation and a challenge to us yet today.

“Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!” When all else fails, “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead.” When the world turns against you, “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead.” When society becomes confused and lost, “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead.” And when even the church refuses to hear the gospel, then, especially, “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead.”

For you see, Jesus Christ stands at the center of history, as well as at the beginning and the end of time. Jesus Christ stands at the center of the world, whether the world knows it or not. Jesus Christ stands at the heart and center of the church, no matter what else we do. And Jesus Christ stands at the center of our lives, your life and mine. This is why we are here today, not any other reason. This is why we bear the name, “Christian.” This is who we are and what we are about.

Whatever else we think, whatever else we say, whatever else we do, we want to be sure to remember Jesus Christ, to keep him front and center, to believe in him, to honor him, to obey him, and to cherish him. Otherwise, we have nothing at all. There is always the temptation for us to turn our attention to other persons, to other figures and events, to other powers and would-be powers,¹ but we are forbidden to do so. We are forbidden to do so, that is, if we wish to continue to be faithful and if we wish to continue to be Christian.

¹*The Book of Confessions* (Louisville, Kentucky: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2004), “The Theological Declaration of Barmen,” 8.12, p. 249.

Money is not the center of life, though it would like to make us think it is. Political power does not have the final say so about who we are, though some live and die for it. Even nuclear bombs are not the greatest power on earth, though we are sorely tempted to think so. And within the church of Jesus Christ neither the ministers, the elders, nor the members are the center of attention. Instead, we are centered upon the God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ. This is what we are to remember.

It is significant that Paul did not write today's reading from a position of ease and comfort but from one of suffering and bondage. Paul did not write this letter as a free man but as one in prison and in chains. And yet, his lack of freedom does not mean that the word of which he writes is without freedom. Quite the opposite. For Paul contrasts his bondage with the freedom of the word of God: "I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!" Paul is a preacher whose significance does not derive from position, status, or even the approbation of the people, but entirely from the word of God. For the word of God is free from the constrictions of human conventions. The word of God shall be spoken whether the people want it to be or not. The gospel of Jesus Christ shall be preached whether people care about it or not. The saving word of God shall be proclaimed to the ends of the earth, without hindrance and without obstacle, for nothing can stand in its way. The inevitable victory of the gospel has to do with the freedom of the word of God.

Paul's suffering did not diminish the validity of the gospel he preached. If anything, his suffering validated the gospel he preached. For despite Paul's suffering, the gospel went forth. Through his very weakness, the healing power of God touched others. By his undeserved suffering, people were reminded of the undeserved suffering of Jesus Christ, made to remember the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and therefore given good reason to remember Christ raised from the dead. "Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory." Everything Paul did, and everything that happened to him, was all for the sake of the hearers of his gospel, all so that they might come to know the God and Father of Jesus Christ, and so knowing, believe and be saved.

With this call to remembrance and this ringing proclamation of the freedom of the word of God, Paul now turns to the most striking affirmation of all:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;
if we endure, we will also reign with him;
if we deny him, he also will deny us;

if we are faithless, he remains faithful—
for he cannot deny himself.

Did you catch the change at the end? Even when we are faithless, God is still faithful! That is the very nature of God, to be faithful. When life fades away, when friends fail, when the world dissolves, God is faithful yet. This is something we can hang onto! Better yet, we know that he hangs onto us. When the hard times come and when the storms roll in, God is faithful yet. God has called us to be here, to be together, and to be God's church in this time and place, and God has not abandoned us. We rejoice in the goodness and glory of God.

Now, think with me about the implications of this good news. On the face of it, today's reading was written by an older apostle to a younger pastor in Ephesus whose ministry had been disrupted by false teachers stirring up trouble in his congregation. And where better for Timothy to find courage and hope than in remembering Jesus Christ, affirming the freedom of the word of God, and rejoicing in the faithfulness of God? And yet, is there not something more going on here? Surely Timothy knew these basics of the Christian faith, even if he needed to be reminded of them. And the letter, though highly personal, does not seem at all private. It is as if it were written to be read by others, also. It is as if it were intended not only for Timothy but also for the church, not only for the pastor but also for the people, not only for the preacher but also for the congregation he served.

All are charged to remember Christ risen from the dead, all are urged to realize the freedom of the word of God, and all are exhorted to rejoice in—or to tremble before—the faithfulness of God Almighty. As John Calvin writes of these letters:

Here Paul advises his beloved Timothy with what kind of teaching he is to build up God's Church, what vices and enemies he is to resist, and how many annoyances he must endure. He exhorts him not to yield in the face of any difficulty, to overcome all crises by his courage, to restrain by his authority the licentiousness of wicked men and not to bestow gifts out of a selfish desire for men's favour. In short, in these two epistles we are shown a living picture of the true government of the Church.²

²John Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas W. Torrance, vol. 10, *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle*

And so it is that this word of God has been preserved for the church throughout the centuries, for all of us to read over Timothy's shoulder, as it were, for all of us to overhear, for all of us to receive and to obey, yet today.

So, how does this apply to our lives today? What does this word say to us, here at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church? First of all, we, too, are called to remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David. This last phrase emphasizes the humanity of Jesus Christ, which has been contested at different times in the church's history, though it seems not to be so now. It is what we celebrate at Christmas. Without Christ's humanity, there would be no gospel and no salvation. The first phrase, "risen from the dead," goes to the heart of the matter, affirming the divinity of Jesus Christ. It is what we celebrate at Easter. Without this, we would not concern ourselves with "the offspring of David." Without this, we would not even remember the name of Jesus today. Without this, we would not be gathered here to worship God today. Without this, we would have nothing. But with this, we have everything.

The resurrection of the crucified Christ is the chief article of the Christian faith. It is the main point of the proclamation of the gospel. Humanly speaking, there is no way to overemphasize the preaching of this good news for all the world to hear. Here is our only hope, here is our only comfort, here is our only courage with which to face life and to go out into the world. "In the resurrection of Jesus Christ we all have a sure pledge of our own. For he who confesses that Christ has risen, affirms also that we shall rise, for Christ has not risen for Himself but for us. The Head must not be separated from His members. Besides, in Christ's resurrection there is contained the completion of our redemption and salvation."³

"Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David." Of course we feed the hungry. Of course we house the homeless. Of course we clothe the naked and visit the sick. I do not know how well we go about visiting those in prison, but we are supposed to do that, too. And why do we do all these things? In the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ! Apart from him, we are nothing. Apart from him, what we do is nothing, in a world of incomprehensible neediness. And yet, if we remember him, and name his name, and speak a good word for him, we share with all the world a treasure more valuable than food, drink, or clothing. We

to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon, trans. T. A. Smail (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 10:182.

³Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, 10:309.

share with all the world the knowledge and faith of its Lord and Savior, the one through whom all things were made, the one in whom all things hold together, the one toward whom all creation hurries as we near the end of time.

Second, we affirm and rejoice in the power and the freedom of the word of God. This has been one of the most important emphases of the Presbyterian Church. There used to be a time in the life of the Christian church when the bishops could tell the priests what to preach. There used to be a time in the life of the Christian church when the kings could tell the ministers what to preach. And there used to be a time in the life of the Christian church when the landowners could tell the preachers what to preach. So it was that our mothers and fathers in the faith fought and struggled and shed blood and some even died for the high privilege of the freedom of the pulpit in the Presbyterian Church. They did this so that by the freedom of the pulpit we could recognize the freedom of the word of God. They did this so that by the freedom of the pulpit we could provide for freedom in preaching and hearing the word of God in our congregations. The two go together.

Do you realize what this high and precious freedom means? No one can tell a Presbyterian minister what to preach: not the pope, not the president, not the generals, not the captains of industry, not the elders, not the deacons, and not the members. Of course, no one can make them listen, either! The freedom of the pulpit is met by the freedom of the pews. People go where they are fed, and that is as it should be. The important point here is that our mothers and fathers in the Presbyterian Church insisted that the content of the sermon be determined between God and the preacher alone. It is to be forged in the furnace of prayer, hammered on the anvil of hard study of the word, and tempered for the hearts of those who would hear it. This is our heritage which we cannot abandon. The true proclamation of the gospel, the telling of the glory of God, and the announcement of the good news of salvation all depend upon the freedom of the word which finds its highest expression in the freedom of the pulpit. This is the only reason ministers have to be brave, to try to present themselves as workers who have no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. To forfeit this freedom would be to cease to be who we are. To give away this responsibility would be to fall into that ungodliness that eats away at a church like gangrene.

Third, on the basis of our remembering Jesus Christ and affirming the freedom of God's word, we also rejoice in the faithfulness of God. The church is not a celebration of human faithfulness, for then we would not have much to celebrate. The church is not a place to boast about human accomplishment or about the strength of the human heart, mind, or soul, for then we would not have much about which to boast. Instead, the church is the place where we proclaim, receive, rejoice in, and live by, all that God has done for us. It is God who made us, God

who sustains us, God who judges us, and God who saves us. This is the faithfulness by which alone we live. It is God who has called us together, you and me, church and pastor, and now church and associate pastor, and put us all together in this time and place to be his very own. It is God who has helped us in the past and who will continue to save us in the future. As we heard from the prophet, Isaiah:

Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

After all, “The Lord knows those who are his,” and, “Let every one who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.” And so I say to you again, “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!”

*To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God,
be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*

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