

## **“The Gospel in Miniature”**

Dear friends, Greetings on this Trinity Sunday, as we remember and celebrate the saving work God has done for us as a three-in-one God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

To get us going today, let me share a little story. I still remember when it happened. It was (without question) the smallest Bible I had ever seen. The woman who showed it to me was wearing it around her neck. It was on a chain. It was like a necklace. (Maybe you've seen something like it.) And it was no bigger than one-inch by one-inch in size.

She told me it was a gift (she had received) from her children on her (most recent) birthday and she'd been wearing it ever since. And I could tell she really wanted to show it to me, so she did.

I asked her how she read it because it was so small. (No problem.) She pulled out a magnifying glass. And sure enough, it was all there.

Now, it wasn't the entire Bible. It was the four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and the book of Psalms. But it was all there in this one-inch by one-inch frame, tiny little pages containing the entire gospel story.

Well, today, on this Trinity Sunday, I want us to zero-in on (one little verse) that gives us, in a similar way, a summary of what the entire Bible is all about. It's a miniature version of the story. It's a summary statement of what God has done for us in Jesus. It's also one of the most familiar and (most memorized) verses ever written: John 3:16. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.”

Martin Luther called it “the gospel in miniature.” He said it was as concise a statement of what the Bible is about as you'll ever find. And he said that if you understand what this verse is saying, if you dig into what it means and why it matters for your life, you'll not only understand what's behind (the entire biblical story) but you'll also have a good and a solid foundation upon which to build your faith.

Today I want to do a little foundation building by spending our time with this one verse and perhaps (a few) that surround it. Under that same theme, “The Gospel in Miniature”, I want us to think about what really is at the foundation of our faith; a summary of what the Bible is all about.

Let's start with a question. We're talking about the saving work of God, what God has done for us in Jesus. Let's start with a question. (It's a simple question.) “What is the gospel?” What is the gospel? (We've asked that before.) We use that word all the time. What do we mean when we say it? If someone said to you, “What is the gospel?” what would you tell them?

Well, you might tell them a number of things. You might say (for example) that the gospel is the story of Jesus' life. It's the story of what God has done for us in his Son. He lived, he died, he rose from the dead, and he did it for us. You might say it's the story of Jesus' life...and if you said that, you'd be right. The gospel is the story of Jesus.

You might say it's the good news. That's what the word means. It means “good news.” The gospel is the good news of what happened for us in Christ. And it's good news because it tells us of God's forgiveness. It tells us of how much we're loved in Jesus, and that there's a place being prepared for us in heaven for eternity. You might say it's the good news.

You might just simply repeat the verse, “that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...” The gospel is the story of God's gift to this world in Jesus. It's the story of the sacrifice the Father made, when he allowed Jesus (his only Son) to go to the cross. There are a lot of ways to talk about the gospel.

Do you remember what the Bible says about the gospel? (Do you remember what it says?) The Bible says the gospel is “the righteousness of God.” It says the good news is that the righteousness that belongs to God is given to us in Jesus Christ.

Romans, chapter one, Paul says, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel...for in it the righteousness of God is given to those who have faith.” Second Corinthians, chapter 5, the apostle writes, “For God made him who

had no sin to become sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” The Bible says the gospel is the “the righteousness of God.”

And so, what does it mean to be righteous? (Let’s take this a step at a time.) If the gospel is the righteousness of God, what does it mean to be righteous?

The word righteous means to “be morally justifiable, to be right and without fault.” In the Bible, when that word is used, it means “to be holy, to be found without sin, to be perfect in action, word and thought.”

Now, the good news is that in Jesus, you and I become righteous. We become holy, without sin, we attain perfection in the sight of God because of Christ. The gospel is that the righteousness that belongs (only to God) is given to us through our faith in Jesus.

When I was in seminary, they talked about it as the doctrine of imputation. (We’ve said this before.) To impute means “to attribute” or to “ascribe to someone else”, something that wasn’t originally theirs. That’s exactly what happens for us in Jesus. In the cross, we become what Christ is, and on the cross, he became what we are. His righteousness is attributed to us, ascribed to us, given to us and our sin is attributed, ascribed, given to him.

That’s exactly what the verse says. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...” Jesus became our sacrifice. Jesus paid our penalty. He took upon himself our sin. The gospel is that in him (in Jesus), we’re forgiven. In him (in Christ), we’re made to be right (we’re made righteous) in the sight of God.

Paul says, “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). Peter says, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to a righteousness that is found only in him” (1 Peter 2:24).

It’s quite the teaching, this thing we call the gospel. It’s quite the truth, this good news that belongs to us in Christ. We become what Christ is, and he became what we are...so that “in him, we might become the righteousness of God.”

It’s the gospel in miniature. (“For God so loved the world...”). It’s a summary of what the entire biblical story is all about (“...that he gave his only Son”).

And so, why did God give his Son? (Let’s keep this going.) What was it that caused the Father (out of love) to send his Son to the cross? (I think you know.) It was our sin. It was the fallen nature of our lives. The Bible talks about our transgressions, our trespasses, our iniquities, and our rebellion. Most literally, to sin means “to miss the mark.”

To miss the mark - that’s a term taken from archery. When an archer is aiming at a target, the goal is to hit it straight on - in the middle, in the center, in the exact place where you aim. When we sin, (the Bible says), we miss the mark. We don’t end up hitting the target we’re trying to hit.

Now, I won’t ask you to raise your hands. You know your life. You know how far and how often you’ve missed the mark. (And so do I, in my own life.) The Bible says, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). It says, “There is none that are righteous, not one” (Romans 3:10).

In fact, all religion (this is basic, but it’s important), all religion, in one column, is the word “Do.” (We’ve said this many times.) All of our human effort is what we are (in ourselves) able to do. The Christian faith (in contrast), the gospel says, “It’s all been done.”

Everybody’s trying to do it for themselves. They’re trying to work their way up to God. (Better than my neighbor, grading on a curve, the family plan, my grandma was a Christian...you know how it works.) We think we can do it, but we can’t. It’s not possible.

The gospel comes to us in our sin and tells us that God has come to us. And he’s come to us in his Son. (He comes to us in Jesus.) And not only has he come to us (in Jesus), but he’s done everything needed to pay the price. The Bible says, “Jesus paid it all for us upon the tree.” It says, “He forgave all of our trespasses...nailing them to the cross” (Colossians 2:14).

It’s the gospel in miniature. It’s a summary of what the entire Bible is all about. Remember the verse? “For just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”

Now, it’s not where we’re focusing here today, but do you remember the connection with the Old Testament story from the book of Numbers? Out in the wilderness, on their way to the Promised Land? It was the nation of Israel, led out of slavery in Egypt, after more than 400 years...by the grace and mercy of God.

What do they do? (Do you remember?) They start to complain. (Sound familiar?) And so, what does God do? God sends poisonous snakes and whenever anyone is bitten, that person would die.

Now, maybe that sounds harsh. And maybe it was. But it worked. It was God's way of getting their attention and he did. They repented. And so God told Moses to set a bronze snake on a pole and to lift it up, and whenever anyone was bitten by a snake, if they looked to that bronze snake (on the pole) they would live.

Now, it's a different context and a much different approach. But that's the gospel. That's what happened for us in Jesus. Jesus was lifted up on a cross. Jesus was raised up from the dead. He ascended up into the heavens. And as we are bitten (in this life) by the deadly venom of sin, as we look to Christ, who was lifted up for our sake, we find the antidote we need.

The Bible says Jesus is the end of the law, the end of its demands, the end of its condemnation. That's what the Law of God does. It condemns us. It's demanding. It sets up rules and regulations for how to live. (And what happens?) The more we look to the law, the more we see how it is we measure up. And the more clearly we see how we measure up, the more clearly we see our need for Christ.

It's like a mirror, (Luther said), the Law of God. When we look into it, we see our sin. When we face it, we see the need (in our lives) we have for Christ.

"But now" (the apostle Paul says), in the gospel, "a righteousness from God apart from the law, has been made known... a righteousness that comes through faith in Jesus Christ, for all who believe."

The Bible says Jesus is the end of the law. He's the fulfillment of the law. All of its requirements, all of its demands and condemnations have been met in him. And it's for everyone who believes. It's for anyone who places their faith in Christ.

These are the basics. (This is nothing new today.) We teach this to our kids (growing up). We talk about it with our youth as they're learning (and forming) their own adult faith. And we keep saying it (as adults) because it's so easy to forget.

Jesus made the claim. He said, "I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life." And he said, "No one comes to the Father, except through me."

Now, some have said (as a critique) of the Christian faith that it all sounds so exclusive. It sounds like you have to have Jesus (in your life) if you're going to make it into heaven. (Do you know what?) In that critique (about needing Jesus) to get to heaven, they're right. That's what Jesus said, and that's what (in the Church) we teach and believe. Jesus is the only way.

It's true. The gospel makes some of the most exclusive claims this world has ever known. Only in Jesus! Only in and through Christ! He's the only way. It's one of the most exclusive claims ever made. It's also, (the gospel), at the same time, one of the most inclusive invitations ever given.

Remember the verse? "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him..." Whoever believes in Jesus! Whoever comes to faith in Christ! No limits!

Yes, without question, the Christian message is as exclusive as it gets. (You can't get to heaven without Jesus.) But there's, also, an inclusiveness (in it) that invites, if not welcomes, everyone who has ever lived.

It's the gospel in miniature. It's a summary of the story. It's an open invitation. And it's a call to live by faith.

I don't know if you noticed, but in the closing verses of our text, there's quite a contrast being made between darkness and light. In fact, so important is this contrast that it's mentioned five times in the final three verses.

Now, most often in the Bible, when it comes to this particular metaphor, we find light being associated with good and darkness being associated with evil. There's light in the world...and there's darkness. There's evil in this world...and there's good. But when John uses this metaphor, he uses it in a different way. For John, Jesus is the light. And the darkness, he says, is a life lived apart from Christ.

The irony in the story, the irony of the human condition, the irony of the gospel is that not only did the world reject the light, the one who came to be its light, but it put him on a cross and laid him in a tomb. And why? Because, as John tells us, "The world loved darkness more than light."

But that's not the end to the story (and that's the good news), because John goes on to say, "The light has come into the world, and the light has shined in the darkness...and the darkness has not overcome it."

In closing today, (I started with a little story), let me close with another. (Maybe you've heard it.) It's a story about a little girl who was watching television one night with her father, when all of a sudden the

television went off and the two found themselves sitting in the dark. To try to find out whether the trouble was with the television or with the electricity to the house, the Dad got up and tried one of the switches in the room. But to no avail. The electricity had gone out.

Well, as the story goes, not realizing there was no power to the house at all, thinking she had a good idea, the little girl said to her father, "Daddy, why don't we just try another switch?"

Now, that's a cute little story; an innocent remark from a young child who had no idea how it all worked. But how many people in this world, who find themselves surrounded by darkness, keep trying other switches, instead of turning to the One true light who came into this world to save?

Paul says, "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

My friends, that's the gospel. That's the good news that comes to us in Jesus. And that's the summary (on this Trinity Sunday) and on every Sunday that we need to hear, time and time again: the righteousness of God, given to us in Jesus; the end of the law, the antidote we need; an exclusive claim, an inclusive invitation; the Light of the world that leads to life...Let's pray...