

August 11, 2019
19th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Dr. William C. Poe

HOW ABOUT SOME GOOD NEWS?
Luke 12:32-40

Remember back a few years ago, when there was a whole series of jokes going around that began, “I have some good news and some bad news”? I remember hearing a lot of them, and maybe you did, too. The tragedy of such jokes, of course, is that the bad news always seemed to outweigh the good news!

And, Lord knows, we need to hear some good news. So much of the news we see and hear sounds and looks bad to us. Mass shootings so far this year now outnumber the days that have passed so far in this year. Natural disasters, global warming, terrorism both international and domestic, the number of displaced people and refugees, all continue to mushroom, and there seems to be little being done to alleviate any of them. In fact, the need for good news is so great that, for some time now, magazines, newspapers, and online news services have been offering a “good news corner,” in an effort to balance off all the bad news they have to tell.

As just about everybody knows by now, the meaning of the old English word “Gospel” is *good news*. We Christians are supposed to be about spreading and living good news. The problem is, even what we call “good news” often ends up sounding like “bad news” to us!

For example, some people say, “It all boils down to the Great Commandment. Just love God and your neighbor, and that’s all you have to worry about.” That may sound good, but what makes it sound all too soon like bad news is the fact that none of us is consistently good at loving our neighbors! Most of the time, we have enough difficulty loving our families and friends! If “all we have to worry about” is

loving our neighbor, then we better start worrying, because we're all in big trouble! That good news sounds a lot like bad news!

Other people say, "The Church's mission is to the poor, the disenfranchised, the oppressed, the unloved. We must be about righting the injustices and inequities in our society and in the world around us, rooting out the causes of war, bigotry, and poverty." Well, that is definitely a part of the good news the Church has to share, but it can start sounding like bad news to some of us. We would really rather not hear that our style of living, or our political stance, or our reading of governmental budget priorities, might get called into question by the Gospel! If the Church is going to tell us those kinds of things, then maybe we'll start looking a church that won't challenge us in this way!

Other people say, "Jesus is the best example we have of how we ought to live." That sounds so good on the surface, but who of us can ever hope to live up to Jesus' example? If Jesus is our example, and we are supposed to live up to that, then once again we're in trouble, and the good news sounds a lot like bad news.

Some people like to tell the good news this way: "The resurrection is just a poetic way of saying that the spirit of Jesus lives on as a constant inspiration to us all." That view of the resurrection and of Christ's continued presence with us may be more palatable to some 21st century minds than more orthodox notions of bodily resurrection and real presence. But if all the resurrection means is that Jesus' spirit lives on like the spirits of Abraham Lincoln or Mahatma Gandhi, or even Adolph Hitler, but that otherwise he is just as dead as anybody else who died 2,000 years ago, then as Paul writes, "*our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain*" (1 Cor. 15:14). If the enemies of Jesus succeeded in killing him permanently, then like Socrates, Thomas More, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, and so many others, he is simply another saintly victim of the wickedness and folly of humankind, and the cross remains a symbol of ultimate defeat.

All this isn't anything new. The good news sounded like bad news

to Abraham, when he kept getting answers to his questions about a heir that sounded a lot like, “The check’s in the mail”; it sounded like bad news when Jesus told his followers that material wealth could be a hindrance to following his way; it sounded like bad news when the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews reminded his readers that all the great people of faith died without having seen the fulfillment of God’s promises to them.

So where is the good news? If the good news itself keeps on sounding like bad news to us, where do we turn? Is there really anything “good” and “new” about the good news?

Yes! What is both good and new about the good news is the incredible claim that not only does God love us even in the midst of our weakness and sin and want us to love others and ourselves and even God too, but that if we will allow God to do it, God will actually bring about this transformation in our hearts and lives.

What is both good and new about the good news is the hard-to-swallow insistence that Jesus lives on with us not just as another haunting memory, but as the power of God working in countless ways to make us -- even *us* -- more loving and whole, beyond anything we could accomplish on our own.

The Gospel can be viewed either way -- as good news or as bad news. At least in part, it depends on what you’re looking for. One writer says that it’s like a conflict between a podiatrist and a poet: “One says that Susie Smith has fallen arches. The other says that she walks in beauty like the night. In his own way, each is speaking the truth. What is at issue is the kind of truth you’re after.”

One truth is that the world is full of bad news. Sometimes, even the good news seems to be filled with bad news. But, if we will receive it, the good news we call Gospel can enable us not only to deal with the bad news we hear, but also to do something about at least some of it.

And that's just about the best news there is.