

Protagonist Corner

What's So Bad
About the Good News?

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If we cannot hear the invitation to join hands with sisters and brothers in the faith for concrete sharing, prayer, fasting, learning, common meals, then we will not likely muster the courage for simple acts of compassion.

During the Vietnam War years complaints against the press were often loud and long for reporting only bad news. Why not report some good news once in a while? Why is it we must hear about war and death all the time and nothing about the "good" things that are happening?

The response is so often the same when any one of a number of "social issues" is raised among church folk. Workshops are even offered in the seminaries on "How to Preach on Controversial Issues" (or, "How to Preach the Bad News and Get Away With It!") Again and again we raise issues of world hunger, poverty, racism, war, political repression, sexism, criminal injustice, ecological crises, the death penalty, inadequate housing. . . . And they become substance for special observances, sermons, offerings, and studies.

The Bad News seems so clear for middle class American Christians: that we must give up, give away, fast, do with less, share, simplify, repent, reduce, turn around, and stop doing one thing or another; that we must live out of an ethic of resistance against the powers and principalities; that we must struggle against the rich on behalf of the poor; that we must feed the hungry, visit the sick and the prisoner, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger.

The New Testament ethic unmasked is so direct, so simple, that it overwhelms and depresses us as if it were Bad News. To think of simple justice embarrasses us: we are so much better equipped to write about and study social issues and learn pastoral psychology to creatively handle the guilt and anxiety that grow from the gap between our words and our deeds.

But the Biblical demand for justice does not call us to the task of social analysis, however helpful analysis might seem. *The Biblical call is to simple acts of compassion: feed, clothe, visit, welcome, share, give.*

But we, like the rich young ruler, often go away very sad because we are very rich and very lonely. And because we are very rich and very lonely the Good News sounds so Bad. And because the Good News sounds so Bad, we can hardly hear the promise: *Sell all you have and give to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven; then come and follow me.*

Is this the call that sounds so harsh? Is this the Bad News that sends us scrambling for some more complex and ambiguous passage of scripture for our meditation?

We cannot hear the Good News because it is easier to hear the Bad News. We cannot hear the Good News because we are rich and because we assume that we must act alone. And does not Jesus often point to a relationship between being wealthy and being separated from other human beings?

Part of the power of the Good News is that Christ does not call us as solitary individuals. "Follow me" is not an invitation to the lonely wandering of heroic individualists but an invitation to join with those others who also follow after the Christ. "Follow me" is an invitation into the community of disciples—that motley band of misfits who joyfully join hands with the leper, the lost, the least, and the last.

Who can alone give up the burden of anxiety about food and drink for tomorrow? Who can bear the loneliness of a decision to give away possessions? to share? to follow the Christ who leads us to such poor and vulgar folk?

But what happens when one lives in a Christian community in which economic resources, meals, prayer, and fasting are shared? Do we tire of hearing of the early Church whose members held all things in common? "They spent their time in learning from the apostles, taking part in the fellowship and sharing in the fellowship meals and the prayers."

Note the central activities of the early Christian community. Every day they shared meals, prayer, learning, and taking part in the fellowship. They held their possessions in common. And the Holy Spirit worked powerfully among them. The themes are those of joy, gladness, and awe as they were shaped by the hearing and re-hearing of the Good News and the witnessing of miracles and wonders as they were discipled in community.

Jesus' command to "Follow me" and the persistent biblical demand for justice, mercy, and compassion are Good News because God gives the gracious gift of community to those who have ears to hear. Living in a Christian community of sharing and discipleship can not only change our lives but can also shape our hearing: opening our ears to the Good News and the promises of the Kingdom and making our hearts glad and bold as we hear and experience the power and joy of the gospel.

But if we wander alone, trapped by our wealth and possessions, the Good News continues to sound like just another guilt trip. The radicality of the gospel demands things that we simply cannot do. If we insulate ourselves from the poor, the hungry, the despised, then poverty and hunger continue to be "social problems" to us, and they always sound like Bad News in a sermon. If we cannot hear the invitation to join hands with sisters and brothers in the faith for concrete sharing, prayer, fasting, learning, common meals, then we will not likely muster the courage for simple acts of compassion.

Ours is an ethic of the promised Kingdom. The task now is to mend the gap between word and deed: the gap between speaking the words of the Good News and hearing and doing the deeds of the Bad News. Responsible preaching must share the Good News that the Lord binds together the faithful disciples; and preaching must be bound to the task of building the community of the faithful. The Lord promises to bind together those who love the Kingdom. Hearing the promise, let us be about the task of joining hands to share, visit, welcome, feed, clothe, and give.