

Wednesday, March 6, 2019 – Ash Wednesday
“Seven Words”

1 Peter 3:15

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Structure

Adapted from CSL “The Gospel in Seven Words”

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Tonight we begin the season of Lent. Lent is a time of reflection and repentance. A time of somber and sober contemplation. A time of preparation as we remember the most important events in human history.

Not everyone knows these things, of course. People are increasingly unaware and uninterested in what God has done for us in Christ. Much less do they understand anything about *Lent* – the screen attached to your drier? The past tense of lend? Let’s imagine that someone you know, who has no connection to or history with the church, asks you about the cross on your forehead. Maybe they wonder why you aren’t joining the group for happy hour the next six Wednesdays. Or maybe they catch you humming the tune of a favorite Lenten hymn and are curious about where you heard it. Let’s imagine they ask you what Lent is all about. What would you say? How would you describe it? Or better yet, if someone were to ask you what *Christianity* is all about, what answer would you give?

The author Will Campbell tells the story of how one of his friends had been badgering him for a succinct definition of Christianity. His friend didn’t want a long, fancy explanation. He wasn’t looking for a laundry list of doctrines or creeds. “I’m not too bright,” his friend said. “Keep it simple. In ten words or less, tell me the Christian message.” What would you have said? If you were asked to describe the Christian message using only ten words, which would you choose?

In business, it’s known as the “elevator speech.” The idea is that you should be able to explain your business, or your product, or your idea, in the time it takes to ride in an elevator. The fact is that many of our conversations are very brief. We often find only short snippets of time or 140 characters.

Christians don’t really have an “elevator speech.” But we do have something else. We call it a confession. Not a confession of sins—although we do that, too. I’m talking about a confession of faith. The Scriptures are clear: to be a Christian is to be a confessor. To the Romans (10:9), Paul says: “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in

your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” In 1 John 4(:13–15) the apostle tells us: “Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.” And Peter encourages us to plan ahead. “Always be prepared to give an answer to anyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15).

To be a Christian is to believe and confess the good news of Jesus. But what is that good news? Who is Jesus? What impact does he have on life here and now? There is much confusion today about these questions. There’s a lot of misinformation and misrepresentation about what Christians believe and how their beliefs shape their lives. At such a time as this, we have a great opportunity (and an urgent responsibility) clearly, confidently confess the gospel of Jesus Christ to this lost and dying world.

Back in 2010 an article was published in a Christian magazine called, “The Gospel in Seven Words” (The Christian Century, Sept. 2010). The author invited fifteen prominent theologians around the country to give it a shot— to proclaim the gospel as clearly as they could. But instead of letting them recite the Apostles’ Creed, he allowed them only seven words. Their versions were fascinating. Some were faithful and true and creatively insightful. Others left something to be desired, and even missed the point. I’ll share a couple of the good ones: “In Christ, God’s yes defeats our no.” “God, through Jesus Christ, welcomes you anyhow.” “God was in Christ, reconciling the world.”

Notice that each of these versions of the gospel is true. Each of them is consistent with the Scriptures. Each of them captures an important aspect of the good news of Jesus. But notice also that they use different words and different images. They highlight different aspects of the gospel. They summarize the good news of Jesus in *different* ways.

As I read this article, I couldn’t help but wonder which seven words I would have chosen if someone had asked me. Then I started wondering which seven words you would choose if someone asked you. Think about it for a moment. “Always be prepared,” Peter says. “Always be prepared to give an answer to anyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” If someone asks you what you believe, or why you go to church, or what it means to be a Christian, could you articulate it? Be honest with yourself. Would you stumble around and say,

“Well, it’s kind of complicated…” or “You know, I’m not really good at explaining things…” or “Uh, why don’t you come to my church and my pastor will tell you what I believe…”

That’s hardly being prepared. And while you could always recite the Apostles’ Creed, it would, quite frankly, be kind of weird. Our goal this Lent is to prepare ourselves. Not only to celebrate the most important events in history during Holy Week. But also to *confess* the hope we have *because* of Holy Week!

To that end, I’d like to do some work together with you this Lent. I’d like to reflect with you about who Jesus is and who we are as his people. I want to consider with you the various ways in which we might confess the gospel to our friends and family and neighbors outside the church. We won’t simply be doing this in theory. We’re going to get really practical. By the time we get to Holy Week, I’m hoping that each of us has a specifically crafted and personal confession of the gospel of Jesus Christ that we can give as the reason for our hope.

In order to do this, I’m going to ask you to do some work during these weeks of Lent. Consider it part of your Lenten preparation. On Wednesdays, we’ll be talking about what it means to confess the gospel, and I’ll be inviting you to join in the conversation. Come to midweek services prepared to speak up during the sermon! Between Wednesdays, I’d like for you to reflect on what God in Christ has done in *your* life, and to put these things into *your own* words. Write your ideas down, and keep track of the thoughts that come to mind. As we get closer to Holy Week I’m going to ask you to share with me how you’ve summarized the gospel. In turn, I’m going to share your versions with the whole group. But don’t stress out too much. We’ve got six weeks, and we’ll work together. I’ll give some more direction as the weeks go on.

But tonight, on Ash Wednesday, as we contemplate our mortality with ashes, I’d like to share another version of the gospel from the article I mentioned. This particular summary of the gospel was written by the Rev. Martin Copenhaver. He is the president of the oldest theological school in the nation: Andover Newton Theological School in Massachusetts. In his summary of the good news of Jesus, Copenhaver didn’t even need seven words. Here’s how he put it: “God gets the last word.”

In some ways, this version of the gospel is too vague—we’ll talk more about *that* next week. But I share it with you tonight because it expresses something very appropriate on Ash

Wednesday. Tonight, we wear ashes on our foreheads. We repent, but not only with words. Grief over our sin spills onto our heads for all to see. It's a sobering reality. The wages of sin is death – which means that each of us has earned our plot in the cemetery. “For dust we are, and to dust we shall return.” And yet, Copenhaver reminds us, even on this Ash Wednesday, even in the face of our own mortality, even with our guilt literally on our faces, “God gets the last word.”

That's the point of Lent. That's the reason we celebrate Holy Week. *That* is the good news of Jesus Christ—Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and Easter Sunday all wrapped into one. While death awaits all who sin, God, through the victorious resurrection of his Son, gets the last word.

That last word is a word of grace. It's a word of forgiveness. It is a word of life, and salvation, and peace with God. It's a word of hope for tomorrow, and hope forever. May this season of Lent strengthen our faith in Jesus, not only prepare us to celebrate his death and resurrection, but may it also prepare us to share our Christian hope with so many who need to hear it. In Jesus's name. Amen.