

"The Harmony of the Gospels"

Matthew 2:11-23; Luke 2:39-40

[Prior to our Scripture lessons I will remove from in front of the pulpit the Charley Brown Christmas tree I placed there early in Advent. The point is that no illustration derived by man can compete with the full truth and implications of Scripture itself. Everything that "points to" the Gospel is secondary "to" the Gospel itself.]

I want to begin my message with a few opening remarks.

It is sometimes asked how I decide on what to preach, that is, how is it that I decide on either specific texts or topics. First off, please know that there is no set formula. But second, there is a fluid and flexible process I go through. One piece of this jigsaw puzzle (to use a favorite metaphor of mine) is that I listen to comments made in relation to a given sermon or comments made in regard to other things. For example, following this past week's sermon a comment was made to me noting how this person really appreciated the 2 birth stories involving Simeon and Anna. This person really appreciated the wonder and awe of the experience they each had of holding or seeing the Messiah in accordance with the prophecies. Sometimes dwelling briefly on something so simple as the wonder and awe such an event would induce can be a most moving part of a message.

The other example is as follows. It was not initially a planned part of my message but kind of either an afterthought or spontaneous inclusion. At the beginning of my sermon I asked if anyone had noticed something missing in regard to the little Charley Brown Christmas tree that I had placed early in Advent on the little table in front of the pulpit. I noticed at least one person nod in the affirmative. For those who hadn't noticed the absence I noted that I had failed to include Linus's blue security blanket. I then mentioned that in a former sermon I had briefly mentioned the particular moment in Linus's presentation of the Gospel reading from Luke (2:8-14) where Linus approaches the microphone and begins his recitation. It was at that particular moment that Linus drops his security blanket. As I noted, I had never noticed that tiny bit of theatrics but only learned about it from the observation of which I read in my research. But the central point here, for the moment, is that I only alluded to what was very profound about that tiny bit of theatrics. I didn't go into a full theological explanation and application of it. But the main point is that the theological point was made that Linus let down, or shall we say, set aside his insecurities as represented by the blue blanket as he considered "the true meaning of Christmas, Charley Brown." This person commented that my sermon helped him "focus on the awe of Jesus' birth and ponder the blankets I need to put at the base of the Christmas tree." The primary point of relating this to you is that sometimes people zero-in on a particular point that was not a main, or even intended, point of mine. In fact, it isn't even in the text of my sermon. It was only an impromptu contribution leading into my message. But more importantly, it was this person's "application" of this unintended and unplanned theological point that took me by surprise. Rarely is there a point to a sermon if there is no application in one fashion or another. I was both surprised and pleased that someone would take a

theological point I had not made intentionally and then applied it perfectly. A whole sermon could be built around the single concept of the base of the Christmas tree, a real world representation of both the birth and death of Jesus Christ as the proper place to take, drop, and leave our insecurities.

A derivative point of this is that God can, and does, use the various things we say and do in ways we do not intend or anticipate. The Holy Spirit took what I only included as a spur-of-the-moment introduction and used that single point in another person's heart in terms of application. The Holy Spirit can do far more with what we do than we may ever know.

Please know that I contacted these two individuals, with a copy of the sermon script thus far, and both have graciously given me permission to share these stories.

The over all point of these two recent experiences is that not simply do I take my work very seriously but that I try and listen carefully to your responses and let those responses be clues as to what to preach on and by which to ask the question, "What are the things that matter to people?"

In terms of the first, it was the coming to greater awareness of the Bible story (regarding Simeon and Anna), the focus on the awesomeness of holding and seeing, personally, the Lord's Messiah. Sometimes we who are better acquainted with the Scriptures and various stories tend to forget that not everyone has the same level and breadth of knowledge, awareness, and experience. This is why sometimes we must dwell on the obvious and familiar, that is, because these stories, people, and events may not be all that obvious and familiar to others. This may involve the younger among us as well as those who are older but less steeped in the Christian faith and knowledge of the Bible.

In terms of the second, unintended points and unintended applications caution me to not think too narrowly in terms of pertinent points and applications. It cautions me to consider what you think are important topics and thus respond accordingly. This brings us now to the subject matter of today's sermon, as inferred in the title *The Harmony of the Gospels*.

I hope that you find our sermon title a bit odd, for, if we consider, that is, juxtapose, the two Scripture passages under consideration, we might see them as less than harmonious. Luke's Gospel seems to suggest that upon completion of Judaism's ritual requirements, Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus return, forthwith, "to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth." With no word or information to the contrary, it seems that upon their return they remained there where Jesus "grew and became strong" and "was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him." The next event of Jesus's life journey, according to Luke's Gospel, is probably some 12 years later.

But Matthew's Gospel, on the other hand, seems to tell a very different story. There is no calm and uneventful return to Galilee but a frantic flight to Egypt. Some have found it strange that not a word is found in Matthew's Gospel about the fulfillment of the ritual requirements that Luke's Gospel provides. The single point for the moment is that many have seen in these passages a "disharmony", a theological and practical dissonance. Thus, some have seen these differences as reason to doubt the veracity, or truth, of what is presented.

What I am presenting is the idea that despite what might be said, despite what many have claimed, despite whatever one might seem to deduce from Scripture, there is no disharmony in the Gospels. They truly are harmonious. One way to understand this is to understand what God was doing in and through the two different Gospel authors and the audiences they were speaking and writing to. Different needs were being met. This is not at all different than what I referred to in my lengthy introduction. Sometimes there is more going on than meets the eye. Let us remember the single unintended point and application in terms of Linus's blue security blanket. God had a specific purpose for that inclusion even though I couldn't have known it. God had an unknowable number of purposes for an unknowable number of unidentifiable person in terms of both Gospel presentations. This should melt our hearts or make us tremble with quaking knees to realize that God is always doing far more than any of us will ever know, on this side of eternity and most probably on the other side.

For the benefit of those who have never studied our passage from Matthew in depth, and as a refresher for those who have, I want to connect a few theological dots that are important, the process of which will help us understand that the Gospels, despite their seemingly different stories, are in fact harmonious.

Let us remember something that has been conveyed recently, that is, Matthew was writing primarily to a Jewish audience with a distinct and specific purpose in mind. Matthew's primary purpose and job was to convince the Jewish community that Jesus was, not in probability but in fact, the long awaited Messiah. As it can best be ascertained, Matthew wrote his Gospel somewhere around 60 A.D., some 30 years after Jesus's death and resurrection. One suspects that the truth claim about Jesus being the Messiah wasn't making much head way. Thus, Matthew, inspired, guided, even driven by the Holy Spirit went about his Gospel writing to thus convince the very people of which he was one. Matthew himself was Jewish and he wanted them to know the joy, truth, and benefits of Jesus's Messiahship.

I want us to consider Matthew 2:13 again, briefly, which reads, "When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." (NIV)

I am convinced that Matthew's Jewish audience would have easily seen the numerous theological and thematic connections between this part of the birth story and that of Joseph, of "many colors" fame, as found in Genesis 37 and following. Dreams were a particularly important theme in the story of OT Joseph. There is the theme of Joseph's journey to Egypt, a journey that was not of his own doing but forced upon him by circumstances outside his control. And then there was the return at the appointed time. And then there was the theme of the presence of evil, and evil men, in the world. These are not fairy tale stories and fiction but real life happenings! Another critical theological point of the OT story is that, in the end, God would bring things to a good and proper conclusion, though in God's time, not ours. Thus, the theme of God's providence and sovereignty is present and preserved in both. Any Jewish audience undoubtedly would have made these connections.

And yet, there is more. It was with specific intent and purpose that Matthew's version includes clear references to some important OT prophecies. "And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'Out of Egypt I called my son.'" This was a clear and distinct reference to Hosea 11:1.

"A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more." This was a reference to Jeremiah 31:15.

We must remember that if Jesus was, in truth, the Lord's Messiah he would have to be the fulfillment of the prophecies made in reference to him.

If one wonders why such theologically and thematically well-connected story, such as Matthew presented it, didn't make it into Luke's Gospel, it is most likely that a Gentile audience, that is, a non-Jewish audience, would not have understood the thematic or theological connections that a Jewish community would have made. The absence of Matthew's story in Luke's is not a sign of disharmony but merely that of a different target audience, the relevance of a particular story, and the expectations and needs of each.

I want us to now consider a present day reality in the United States that I've repeatedly referred to these past weeks. There are more and more people that are turning away from a true Biblical faith. The United States, as a nation and in terms of its culture, is becoming less and less Christian. There has been an increasing skepticism about an increasing number of truth claims of the Church. There is a decreasing reliance upon the Christian foundations of truth and morality. There has been an increasing faith and trust in self, self-awareness, self-determination. Interestingly, there has been an increasing faith and trust in government that has moved farther and farther away from the moral and ethical foundational bricks upon which it was founded.

As you know, I do my work with a particular audience in mind, and that in a particular time in history - in the here and now and in terms of whatever audience happens to be here whether physically or virtually.

Our church's official name is Bickleton Evangelical Community Church. The term "evangelical" asserts that we have "good news" to share with the world, no less than did Matthew and Luke. As I stated a few moments ago in terms of Matthew, but which goes for Luke as well, we, too, want folks of our place and day "to know the joy, truth, and benefits of Jesus's Messiahship." This is our hope and purpose, too.

I want to move towards the end of my message with a few observations and lesson for all of us.

First, please know that not all, probably not many, of the comments made to me will make it into a sermon. But also know that my aim is to get permission before I do. But beyond that, please know that your comments are often times more important than you know for they can inform me about what not only interests you but what benefits you. Also, as in the one case, it demonstrates that application of a point or illustration can be made without my offering a list of applications. You are thus encouraged to not simply consider the applications I see as fitting and proper but consider applying a given point or illustration yourself. I think most pastors would be far more pleased with an apt and proper

application of your own via the working of the Holy Spirit than the ones that I present.

Before I close my sermon I have a little more to say in regard to *Charley Brown Christmas*, though in terms of its creator, Charles Schulz.

In terms of the Christian faith and the church, Schulz will always be famous for Linus's recitation of Luke 2:8-14. One would think that, as Schulz zeroed in on the most critical part of the story, he had it all together, faith wise. As it turns out this is not quite the case.

Though reared in a nominally Lutheran family, he became active in the Church of God (Anderson, Indiana). He joined youth group and for some 4-5 years attended church 3 times a week (twice for Bible study and once for worship). He read his Bible through 3 times and taught Sunday School. Tellingly, it is said that Schulz was always looking for what the Bible passages "really might have meant." This statement is telling for it alludes to a skepticism that stands in contrast to conviction as expressed in Linus's recitation. In an interview of the late 1980's Schulz confessed, "I do not go to church anymore. I guess you might say I've come around to secular humanism, an obligation I believe all humans have to others and the world we live in." Lest we not understand and haven't heard of it, secular humanism is a belief system by which traditional, orthodox Christian doctrine is set aside for what amounts to "just be kind and nice to one another."

I could be wrong but I doubt anyone will ever truly know what happened to Schulz's earlier level of faith and trust in the Scriptures. What I do know is that we all have to be on our guard for all the forces of our world that would tear at the fabric of our faith.

I don't know if it is as much a relief that 2021 has arrived as it is a call to arms, in one sense or another for another year in Christ's kingdom. There is relief that we made it through an incredibly complex, perplexing, and frustrating year. And yet, here we are. We have had successes. Are we thankful that God has seen us through? Are we dedicated to the challenge that stands before us? Are we going to remain true to our calling. I couldn't help but think of the epistle of Jude. Jude tells us that he himself is "a servant of Jesus Christ and a brother of James." He pens his letter "To those who have been called, who are loved by God the Father and kept by Jesus Christ." He is writing and speaking to us here today as well. He begins by saying to us, "Mercy, peace and love be yours in abundance."

But Jude then gets down to the purpose for which he puts pen to paper (as we would express it). "Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord. Though you already know all this, I want to remind you that the Lord delivered his people out of Egypt, but later destroyed those who did not believe." (NIV)

Let us never forget that the Christian faith was entrusted to us. The Gospel of Jesus Christ was entrusted to us to not simply have and to hold but entrusted to us to pass on and share with the world. Lest we missed it, this is a most audacious thing on the Lord's part. Trust us who are flesh and blood with the sanctity and future of the greatest message in all human history? But it is also a fantastic thing. We must never forget that everything in the Bible is harmonious. It takes humility to accept it but it also takes courage. It takes humility to admit and accept that we do not and most likely cannot understand how everything fits together. But it takes courage and confidence in God to stand firm in what we know to be true. May we stand firm in 2021, and may all glory, honor, and praise be unto God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.