

gospel
Bob Stillerman
Ascension Sunday, 5/21/2023
Service of Dedication for Josephine Stillerman
Luke 24:44-53



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

In the spirit of every homily offered on child dedication Sundays, I'm gonna have a conversation with Josie, and I want to invite each of you to listen in.

Josie, on most Sundays, we read a portion from one of our four formal or canonized gospels: expressions written by communities claiming the names of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These last few weeks, we've been heavy on John the Evangelist, and today we will scatter in words from the author of Luke's gospel. You should know, however, that we also supplement these readings with millions of ideas from millions of sources – songs, poems, letters, artwork, stories, histories – we call this vast array of wisdom our informal canon or gospels. And they are sacred for us, too!

Little g gospel, uncapitalized gospel, is a fancy word for truth. Gospel is an authentic source of knowledge.

I tell you all this, because there are lots of people who insist that capitalized gospels (Gospels) are the only kind of gospel. But when you turn that little g into a big G, you no longer have truths, but THE truth. In the spirit of Clarence Jordan, a gospel connoisseur, I'd tell you that insisting upon THEs, and truth, and especially THE truth can get you all sorts of tangled up.

Those gospels not given primacy in your own realm lose their original purpose – to be collaborative sources – and instead become competitive sources. Add in modernity's insistence for

gospel
Bob Stillerman
Ascension Sunday, 5/21/2023
Service of Dedication for Josephine Stillerman
Luke 24:44-53



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

historical facts, even in more cosmic and mystical accounts, and its low tolerance for contradictory details, and your single truth begins to contort itself. The defense of the truth you seek to express becomes more important than the reality of the God you experience. This much is true: ours is a mysterious maker, full of boundless creativity and compassion. Would we forfeit the depth of this divine love by insisting we have the capacity to narrowly define its parameters?

So, Josie, as your Daddy, and as your minister, and most importantly, as your brother in Christ, I want to offer you a more nuanced definition of gospel, and yes, it's uncapitalized. For me, gospel is any expression that allows a person to bear authentic witness to God's hope, love, and presence in their own lives. Gospel never defines the singular truth of God, but rather it reveals truths about God. And God's truths aren't something we can possess, or hold onto, or shake at our neighbors as if to say, "We've got it, and you don't!" Rather, God's truths have a hold on us.

Now, Josie, I want to remind you that we have some eavesdroppers, and at this point, they are probably saying, "this talk of sources and truths is all fine and well, but what has it do with a text about the Ascension of Jesus?"

I'm so glad they asked!

gospel
Bob Stillerman
Ascension Sunday, 5/21/2023
Service of Dedication for Josephine Stillerman
Luke 24:44-53



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

Liturgically speaking, we are still neophytes. We're seven weeks removed from Easter Sunday, and the miraculous, unexplainable, mysteries that include Jesus' resurrection and appearances to the disciples. It's great that Jesus has been raised. It's even better that Jesus will soon leave this realm, ascending back to the Source of Creation, developing an even more enhanced connection between Parent and Child. Jesus is going back to God in a more profound way. But what in the world does that all mean for us?!?

There are three key things Jesus says in our text. First, Jesus tells the disciples that his ministry has fulfilled what the scriptures have promised. 2) The disciples are witnesses to these promises. 3) Now, Jesus is sending to the disciples what God has promised for the future.

Fulfilment. All four gospels, in their own unique way, describe the incarnation of God in the life of Jesus. Somehow, in this life so fully lived, humanity has known God and God humanity in a more transcendent way. The essence or the Spirit of God has been fused in Jesus. He has been anointed; he's been a deliverer of good news; captives have found their release; lost sight has been recovered; there is freedom for the oppressed; it is, indeed, the year of Our Lord's favor.

"God has been in your midst," Jesus says to the disciples. "What has been foretold has come to pass."

gospel
Bob Stillerman
Ascension Sunday, 5/21/2023
Service of Dedication for Josephine Stillerman
Luke 24:44-53



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

Witnesses. "Each one of you are witnesses to this fulfilment," Jesus says. In other words, this was real. Your life with me has been real. What you have experienced is authentic, and credible, and valuable. The kinship of God has revealed itself in a dozen authentic relationships, coupled with a thousand present moments, and ten thousand acts of kindness and hospitality to neighbors near and far. God's world is inbreaking into ours.

A promise. Jesus says, "Guess what? God's not's done yet. That very same Spirit that enveloped and affixed their self to me in those baptismal waters in Galilee is the very same one that's gonna envelop and affix their self to you. The umph you feel in my presence is gonna manifest itself in an equally powerful and potent way, what the Evangelist calls another advocate, and it's also gonna be something that can be shared across all space and time. God's Spirit is about to be let loose on the whole of humanity, and indeed the whole of creation.

Josie, I think about those twelve men who gathered with Jesus all those years ago, not to mention the dozens of women and children who aren't given names, but who were no less present, nor any less of disciples. It's 100% percent true that they are witnesses of something authentic. It's also 100% true that you and I will never, no matter how hard we try, replicate or duplicate their exact experience with the lived or the Risen Jesus. And I'd argue that not even the original disciples, both named and unnamed, had identical experiences. Thomas, Peter, Mary, Salome, Cleopas all have different, but equally profound connections and faith

gospel
Bob Stillerman
Ascension Sunday, 5/21/2023
Service of Dedication for Josephine Stillerman
Luke 24:44-53



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

journeys. And there are dozens of ancient gospels that lift up the lived experiences of disciples of all shapes and sizes.

What I am saying is that in Bethany, those who gathered around an ascending Jesus discovered their own truths about God – something revealed their connectedness and calling. Eventually, all of the disciples became apostles – credentialed witnesses of the Christ, and they were joined by hundreds of new believers. We know that this group broke bread together, and lived with glad and generous hearts, and provided for all as any had need, and that they spent their days worshipping and praising God in the Temple. The physical Jesus wasn't there, but we'd be hard pressed to argue his presence wasn't. The Acts Church reveals a community with every bit as much healing, love, hospitality, and generosity as their predecessors. The same argument could be made for households of faith in every generation of the two millennia that have followed.

What the text tells me, Josie, is that neither the Ascension of our Lord, nor Pentecost, the arrival of the Holy Spirit, which we will celebrate next week, are about securing a gospel that perfectly and precisely records the vital truths of God. But rather, Ascension and Pentecost remind us of the creative, constant, and eager power of the Spirit to reveal God's truths in the lives of every neighbor. The Spirit not only can, but also does, and often, fill each one of us. Our expressions, indeed our very lives, are their own gospels. We, each of us, no matter who, what, when, where,

gospel
Bob Stillerman
Ascension Sunday, 5/21/2023
Service of Dedication for Josephine Stillerman
Luke 24:44-53



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

how, or why we are, each of us, have truths and expressions worthy of sharing.

Josephine, God's Spirit dwells in you. What we commit ourselves to today, is the sharing of expressions that will help make the constancy of God's presence evident and felt in your life. So, yes, we're gonna share all sorts of gospels with you, both formal and informal. We do so in the hopes that one day soon, we might begin to hear the Gospel of Josephine shared and interwoven within the larger gospel of this household of faith. We care not for form, nor function. We care only that you might find the expressions that best reveal and illumine the giftedness and goodness God has created in you.

The Psalmist proclaims, "I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." Josephine, this is the land you occupy. May we, together, write a gospel of goodness.

Amen.