

I've Got Amazing Good News for You!

3rd Sunday of Easter, Year B. April 26, 2009.

In my opinion, the greatest achievement of the Congress of the United States of America since the turn of the century (I mean the 21st century) was passage of the law establishing the National Do Not Call Registry. Since 2003 we've been able to eat our suppers in peace without being pulled away from the table by phone calls from people trying to sell us aluminum siding or persuade us to switch our car insurance to Geico.

I wish the same rules applied to email. Even with a good spam-blocker, some of those aggravating emails always seem to get through – each with a subject line intended to pique our curiosity, make us read more, or lure us to visit the sender's website. Most of us are smart enough to delete this junk immediately. But how would we handle an email tomorrow morning from an old friend, but with a spam-like subject line that said: *"I've got amazing good news for you!"*

Our first thought would probably be, "Oh, this one might really be interesting. I know my old fraternity brother and roommate, Harry, isn't emailing to offer me a great deal on carpet cleaning. So I'll check it out." We click on it, and there's not much to read, just one line: *"Phone me. This is my cell number. I've got amazing good news for you!"*

We haven't heard from good old Harry since Christmas. But he's an old and trusted friend, someone we've known for forty years. What kind of "amazing good news" might such an old friend have? It can't be just to tell us about the birth of still another grandchild, or his plan to take the family on a sailing trip through Polynesia. No, this has to be something out of the ordinary. What kind of news could it be?

The first assumption for most of us (for men, anyway) is likely to be that Harry's "good news" has something to do with making *money*—specifically, news about how *we* might make some for ourselves. This is a sad commentary on the value system of our age, but it's realistic. We think: Harry is a very successful guy; maybe he has a hot stock tip that will help us get back in the market in a big way. Or maybe our old roommate won the Powerball Lottery and wants to share his winnings with us. Or, at the very least, he wants to treat us to tickets to next year's Super Bowl. *"Good old Harry. He was always a heckuva generous guy."*

So we whip out our cell phone and punch in Harry's number, regretting that we didn't already have him on speed dial. (But we'll fix that right away.) After a couple of rings, Harry answers. We exchange the necessary pleasantries: ask about the wife, the kids, the weather back there in Cincinnati, etc. And then we say, *"Well, listen buddy, I got your email this morning and I'm pretty doggone curious. I want to hear about this amazing good news. Lay it on me, man!"*

And Harry says, *"Well, here it is. And it's the best news ever. Your sins can be forgiven! I've found us a Savior."*

OK, you're here in church this morning and so you're primed to expect this kind of thing. But on a work day, with the kind of build-up I've described, would your old pal Harry's "amazing good news" really *sound* like "good news" to you? Or would you be disappointed when you finally heard it? — Be honest.

You were hoping for money, maybe big money – or at least Super Bowl tickets – and this "news" turns out, instead, to be about what? ...Religion? ...Forgiveness of sins? ... "A Savior"? Oh,

my. Oh, my. Now what do we say to Harry? *“Look, old buddy, I’m an Episcopalian and we don’t get much into this sort of thing”* ?

Of course, if Harry’s message arrived on a day when we were dealing with a load of guilt, or feeling badly about something we had done or *not* done — that is to say, on a day when we actually *were* troubled by an awareness of sin — then it might sound like authentic good news. But how many days like that do we have, especially compared with how many days we spend trying to figure out how to rebuild the value of our investments?

Not many people want to talk about their sins. I should know. I’m a priest. You might say that I’m in the business of dealing with sin. But I don’t get more than a handful of requests each year for advice on the subject. Not too surprising, really. Do many of us go out for lunch with friends and discuss how to find forgiveness for sins? Maybe that happened a lot back in Bible times, but not today. If one of our friends is troubled, we’re more likely to suggest that they find a good therapist, than to suggest that they need to repent and turn to Jesus.

All the lessons we heard from the Bible this morning say something about sin and forgiveness. Did you notice that? In the gospel reading from Luke, Jesus tells his disciples in the upper room on the first Easter Day, after he has greeted them and shown himself to be really alive: *“Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS OF SINS IS TO BE PROCLAIMED IN HIS NAME TO ALL NATIONS, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.”*

As Christians, we’re supposed to be able to speak of our personal experience of being forgiven. (That means WE’RE supposed to be Harry in my story about the email! We’re the ones who have the amazing good news to share.) That’s part of what Jesus meant when he said, *“You are witnesses of these things.”* But do people in our world feel that they *need* to repent of anything and be forgiven? We’re taught to have healthy self-esteem, to think positively, and to recognize the good in ourselves. Nobody talks about *SIN!*

People never hear about sin, except in church — and even in church we preachers try not to use “the ‘s’ word” very much because we don’t want to make people feel *uncomfortable*, God help us! (If any of you are feeling uncomfortable right now, blame God, not me.)

At a time in history when few people seem to have any sense of sin, an appropriate question might be: *Is the need for forgiveness of sin still real, whether a person FEELS that need or not?* Out here in the semi-arid, mountain west everybody needs to drink more water than they do at sea level. We can get dehydrated without knowing it, and by the time we start to feel really thirsty, dehydration has already set in. I think the same holds true of sin. We need forgiveness long before we’re aware that we have a “sin problem”.

Since many people react negatively to the word *sin* let me offer a little exposition of the meaning of the word. The ordinary New Testament word for *sin* is a Greek word that literally means “to miss the target.” A hunter, or someone who enjoys target shooting or archery knows that sometimes, despite the marksman’s best intentions, he or she misses the target —by a little, or by a lot. But there are other times when a hunter doesn’t even spot the target until it’s too late. Or he aims at a false target. (That’s why so many cows get shot during deer season.) Or his gun isn’t loaded. Or he isn’t paying attention.

I would say that we become conscious of SIN when we recognize that we've missed many of the goals, the targets, the *ideals* we once set for ourselves when we were younger and less worldly. Maybe we failed even to aim at some of them. And I'm talking about MORAL goals here, SPIRITUAL goals. We become aware of our SIN when we see what's happened to our ideals and how badly we've "missed the targets" we once believed were important to us. For example,

- We wanted to help others, but instead we've mainly looked after ourselves;
- We intended to be patient, but instead we've become short-tempered;
- We planned to treat all people the same, but instead we've played favorites and practiced prejudice;
- We wanted to be honest, but instead we've learned how to be deceitful;
- We intended to be forgiving, but instead we've become vindictive;
- We planned to be generous, but instead we've become stingy;
- We wanted to love our neighbors as ourselves, but instead we've ignored our neighbors and only loved "number one."
- We intended to live our lives for God, but instead we've lived for wealth, success, reputation, or influence.

We have not only failed to live up to God's expectations for us, we haven't even lived up to our own ideals and values. And that, my friends, is *sin*. By any other name, it's still the same.

There's not a person alive who wouldn't like to have a fresh start . . . to see the negative power of those mistakes and missteps nullified. Who among us wouldn't want to be delivered from the grief that goes with recognizing how far from the mark, how wide of the target, our life's arrows have fallen? Therapy can be somewhat useful, but Freud and Jung and all the rest can only take us so far, and no farther. There is no suitable substitute for Jesus and the new life he freely offers, if we only will repent and seek a fresh start from him.

Sin is still alive and kicking in our world, even if its proper name has become unfashionable. Calling it something else takes away neither its sting nor its consequences.

The "old, old story" is still Good News, the best news we can ever hope to hear. It's better than a hot stock tip, a free trip to the Super Bowl, or a share in the Powerball Lottery. We can be forgiven for all the times we've missed the target, or not even taken aim. Because Christ is risen, there's hope for us. Christ is risen, and a fresh start is possible for us. Christ is risen, and we can be forgiven.

That's the most amazing good news anybody can ever hear.