

Grace, Mercy, and Peace be unto you from God our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

[Introduction]

The gospel in seven words. That’s our theme this Lent. That’s our goal during these forty days leading up to Easter. As we take seriously Peter’s command that we prepare ourselves to confess the hope we have in Christ, we’re considering how we might summarize the gospel in seven brief words. As we’ve been saying for several weeks now, seven words can’t possibly say everything that needs to be said about Jesus in seven words. But forcing ourselves to summarize the gospel helps us get to the heart of the matter. It forces us to answer this important question: When it’s all said and done, what is the good news of Jesus Christ?

Over the last two weeks we’ve been thinking about some prominent and recurring images and themes in the Bible. Two weeks ago, we considered captivity and freedom—and we talked about how Jesus frees us from captivity to sin and death. Last week we reflected on death and life—and we discussed how Jesus gives life to those who are dead in sin. With both of these themes we noticed that confessing the gospel involves two fundamental truths. First, the gospel is bad news before it is good news. It is the bad news of a creation that has turned away from its Creator. This bad news is the source of all that is wrong with this world. But the gospel is also, and even more so, good news. It is the good news of a God who loves his creation and reigns over it in mercy and love through the God-man, Jesus the Christ.

[A Loneliness Epidemic]

I’m convinced that, despite (and maybe, in part, because of) the global and immediate connectivity we have at our fingertips on our phones, we are in the midst of a sweeping epidemic of social isolation. And it’s not just me. Fortune magazine published an article just a few years ago (June 22, 2016) called, “Chronic Loneliness is a Modern-Day Epidemic.” The article describes the physical and emotional problems associated with loneliness. Studies have shown that the percentage of people who are regularly lonely has more than doubled.

In the 1970s and 80s, 11–20 percent reported frequent loneliness.

In 2010 the numbers jump to 40–45 percent.

Perhaps you can relate.

Perhaps you know what it means to feel alone.

Sometimes we feel that way because we are literally the only person in the house, or the apartment. Let's be honest. Even if you are an independent person, life can get kind of lonely.

Other times we feel alone even in a crowded room, or in a big family. We may be sharing space with other people, but there seems to be a distance, or a disinterest, or a dearth of real connection.

Then there's loneliness that sneaks up on us through social media. You've got hundreds of friends, thousands of "likes," and you find yourself alone with your phone, trying to convince yourself that this is community enough.

It's an epidemic, friends

Add to is the past year with the COVID epidemic.

Loneliness has exponentially grown.

Isolation and the search for community But it's not new. The Scriptures have much to say about isolation and community. Already in Genesis, even before the fall, God acknowledged that it was not good for man to be alone. So he made a companion for Adam. Then came sin, and with it, separation. Isolation. Adam and Eve became divided against each other, reflecting the division that arose between themselves and God.

Sin does that. It divides us. First from God, then from each other. Consider the effects of sin in your relationships with your loved ones. How many of us are divided from members of our family? How many of us wish we were closer with friends and loved one? Consider the church. The divisions in the church can be even more painful. We come here and gather together, and yet we often feel so far apart. It happens to members of a congregation. It happens to members of a synod. It happens to members of the Christian church on earth.

[*The God of Community*]

Notice our psalm for this evening. Notice the good news in this passage. ***“Sing to God, sing praises to his name; lift up a song to him who rides through the deserts; his name is the Lord; exult before him. Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation. God settles the solitary in a home”*** (Psalm 68:4-6a).

God settles the solitary in a home, David writes. And he should know. He spent a lot of time alone, running from King Saul, hiding for his life. He knew what it meant to be divided, separated, isolated.

But notice what God did about this. Even when David committed terrible sins, God did not leave him in isolation. No, he forgave him and restored him and returned him to the community of God's people. That's what God does. He doesn't just forgive us and then leave us alone. We are baptized into the body, into the family of God. That's Paul's words to the Corinthians (12:3). We belong to another now, for good.

Imagine a family reunion. A gathering of many people who have come together to celebrate. Imagine an elaborate dinner, a feast prepared for the whole group to enjoy. Now imagine all the mess from our family reunions has been removed. No more quarrels. No more grudges. No more awkward conversations. No need to avoid that one particular cousin. Can you picture it? That's the image we get from the Scriptures. Revelation 7. Isaiah 25. Matthew 22. Each of these passages give us a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven in terms of a community meal. No more loneliness. No more isolation. No more division or separation.

Community. As it should be. As it will be.

We get a glimpse of this at the Lord's Supper, of course. Gathered sinners, receiving forgiveness, confessing the Lord Jesus, joining together as one. No more isolation. No more separation. We come to this table together as one body, joined in faith and life and the forgiveness of Jesus. Perhaps more so than at any other time in our life as Christians, the mutual participation in the Lord's Supper stands as a visible reminder of the community we have in Jesus. And this image sees us through the lonely times. It reminds us we are never truly alone when we are in Christ.

[Conclusion]

It was not good for man to be alone in the garden of Eden, and it's never been good for any of us to be alone since. That's why, to-night, we consider the gospel in terms of the gracious community into which God places us. We are baptized into Christ and each other. We commune with the Lord as one body around one table. We live together through good times and bad, glorifying God and supporting one another in Christian love and charity. And we look forward to the eternal reunion God has in store for all who believe.

Let's try this: "Jesus refuses to leave his people alone."

In Jesus's name. Amen.

Tonight, we're going to examine another prominent biblical theme. But before we do, let me encourage you to continue the process of trying to articulate the gospel in your own words. There are many images and concepts and truths about God's love for us in Christ that you could draw from. The themes we've considered the last two weeks only scratch the surface. As these weeks of Lent continue, I encourage you to continue your own study of the Scriptures, to reflect on the language of your favorite hymns, to think about faithful brothers and sisters in Christ and how they model the Christian life for you. And let that raw material supply you with words for your own seven-word confession.