

Date: June 29, 2025 (The Feast of St. Peter and St. Paul)

1. Texts: Ezekiel 34.11–16; Psalm 87; 2 Timothy 4.1–8; John 21.15–19.
2. Subject: discipleship.
3. Topic: love God, live the gospel.
4. Aim: instruct, inspire.
5. Proposition: “We learn from Peter and Paul that there are only two things that matter: loving God and living the gospel, no matter the conflict, no matter how hard.”

LOVING GOD, LIVING THE GOSPEL

Last week, we started out with “poor, old Elijah” who was so despairing that he asked God to kill him. “Suicide by divine wrath” I called it. This week we start out with poor old saints, Peter and Paul.

You see, these two apostles didn’t start out as equal partners in the gospel. They each had their own understanding of what it meant to be a disciple of Jesus. They fought publicly over membership in the Church. They were never best friends and never cordial colleagues.

It didn’t help that Peter was amongst the original 12 apostles. It didn’t help that Paul started out persecuting Christians. I’m sure it didn’t help that Paul was well educated and a Roman citizen, while Peter was a tradesman from the backwaters of the country. No, these two pillars of the Christian Church did not get along. One article I read said that the only time the two men were truly united was in their martyrdom around the year 64.¹

But considering what we witnessed when our Church was going through the debate on Canon XXI, none of us should be surprised. People of strong convictions always do defend those convictions strongly.

However, that’s not really what we are to learn from Peter and Paul. It’s not the strength of their disagreement that provides the best insight. It’s the strength of their lives.

Both Peter and Paul demonstrated two fundamental realities of the Christian faith. The first was to love God. The second was to live the gospel.

¹ “Saint Peter and Saint Paul, Apostles”, *For All The Saints*, ABC Publishing, Toronto, 2007, p. 208.

Peter made the first clear in that three-fold interaction with the resurrected Jesus—“Peter, do you love me, even more than you love your fellow disciples?” Three times Peter had to avow his love for Jesus, to which Jesus responded with, “Care for your brethren.” Peter was to love God and to live the gospel.

Paul demonstrated the same realities. After all, it was because of his love for God that he started out persecuting the Church. It was because of his love for God that he suffered.

Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea;²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters;²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked.²

He illustrated the gospel with his own missionary journeys and the persecutions he experienced. Paul was to love God and to live the gospel.

Even if this brought them into conflict with their society and with each other. The disciples of Jesus are to love God and to live the gospel.

Now we have to figure this out for ourselves.

Obviously, loving God is not having a sentimental attachment to the idea of a God. We don't “love God” in the same way that we “love chocolate”. In this discussion, as in our marital and family relationships, “love” is the choice to be in a relationship with God that is marked by trust, self-sacrifice and surrender to the will of God. We choose to believe that God will be God in our lives and despite our failings. We choose to trust in God, even when the world is pushing against us. We hand over our lives to him so that his life might be made visible in us. That's loving God.

² 2 Corinthians 11:24-27.

“Living the gospel” is just as easy to define.

We live the gospel by living the life of Jesus in our circumstances given our characters. We embody Jesus in our choices, our words and our actions. It’s not, “What would Jesus have done back in his day?” We plan and evaluate our actions and words by asking, “What would Jesus do if he were in my shoes right now?” That’s living the gospel.

Peter and Paul were united in loving God and in living the gospel, even though these cost them their lives in the end.

The time has certainly come that we as congregations in this diocese must be similarly united in loving God and in living the gospel. It is only in loving God and living the gospel that we will keep our congregations alive and our churches open.

This loving and living begins within our families and the closest circle of friends. We allow them to see God at work in and through us as we make connections between the parish and those closest to us.

But we intentionally broaden the connections to include neighbourhood and community groups. We are verbal in the defense of our God and sacrificial in our love for others. It’s not that we’re merely polite in our conversation and nice to others. Being nice and kind is not the same as living the gospel. The person who lives the gospel makes the connection with Jesus and his salvation clear. The link between who Jesus is and who we are becoming is made clear in our words and actions. We are becoming the proclamation of Jesus’ gospel in our daily lives.

In the end, much more united Peter and Paul than divided them. They lived out their love for God in visible and tangible ways. They proclaimed the gospel in their lives as well as in their deaths. By doing all this, they created a model by which we will be able to save our congregations, if only we will find the courage to love God and to live the gospel. AMEN.