

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
Quincy, IL
Rev. Martin Eden

Pentecost 18
Saturday, September 25, 2021 at 5:00 p.m.
Sunday, September 26, 2021 at 9:00 a.m.

“The Gospel of Jesus’ Wife?”

James 5:13-20

The last couple of weeks, James has reminded us that you do not have a perfect pastor. Two weeks ago, I told you that last week we would be inducting our Sunday School staff into their offices. The fact that we are inducting them this week is confirmation that James is correct.

I get easily distracted, as anyone who has sat in a confirmation class or Bible class can tell you. Something that continually distracts my attention is when I come across something that has to do with archaeology (biblical archaeology in particular). I used to subscribe to Biblical Archaeology Magazine, but I found myself too easily distracted, as what I read tends to end up in sermons and you don't want week after week of sermons about old rocks.

The good thing about the world of archaeology is that news travels slow. By definition, when you think about it, all of archaeology is “old news” however the most often shared “news” stories tend to be the debunked nonsense of the 3rd and 4th Century Gnostic writings. Those writings are the backbone of concepts like the movie “The Davinci Code.” (A movie which I have never seen, nor will I. I like fictional movies, just not ones that mock Jesus and the church).

So if you poke around on the internet long enough, you see some of the same “old news” stories pretending to be new news. I recently saw someone attempting to prop up the debunked myth of possible evidence that Jesus had a

wife. Supposedly, about 10 years ago, they found a piece of papyrus making this tantalizing suggestion. They call it “The Gospel of Jesus’ Wife”, because they clearly wanted to make some news. It is a small fragment (about the size of a business card) written in Coptic (an Egyptian language). The fragment is suggested to be from the 4th Century containing a few words which refer to Jesus, his mother, his disciples, and most tantalizingly, “my wife.”

At least with this “Gnostic Gospel” the copy and translation of the text is easily available. A few years ago, I remember mentioning to you the Gospel of Judas because that was big news, but the promoters of it (Time Magazine, National Geographic) were embarrassed to release the actual text. Because when I finally saw it for the first time, I laughed. These early Gnostic stories are just insane – to the point that I don’t know how anyone could believe that they a part of historical reality.

So, I do appreciate that most scholars have been responsible with pointing out that, even if this “Gospel of Jesus’ Wife” is authentic (that is, it comes from the 4th Century), it still says nothing about Jesus. But they gave it the name they did because they wanted to make some news. The most “authentic” possibility is that it is a scrap of papyrus written in Egypt by Gnostics around the 4th Century. This was not written by Christians, just like the Gospel of Thomas, or the Gospel of Mary, or the Gospel of Philip, or the Gospel of Judas, the list goes on and on.

There is no need to get worked up about whether or not Jesus had a wife. The Bible is very clear about who Jesus was, the Son of God, and the reason that He came – to be that final Lamb of sacrifice on the altar of the cross; to defeat sin, death, and Satan so that you and I can live.

Questioning this because of this scrap of papyrus would be like suggesting that we don't celebrate Christmas this year because the Jehovah Witnesses say we shouldn't. If you want to find Gnostics in the modern world: Jehovah Witnesses and Mormons are prime examples. They have lots of similarities, and like the Gnostics, they want to be perceived as Christian, even while they deny the truth of Christ.

As I stated earlier, the real problem I have with this little fragment of text is the name which it has been given: "The Gospel of Jesus' Wife." Either it is a fake meant to embarrass the church, or it is Gnostic nonsense and should be dismissed as being less than nothing.

The world of archaeology is filled with discoveries that support the biblical account of history, but you will never hear about that in the news. The media only love stories about Jesus that attempt to chip away at the truth. The great thing about truth is that it is absolute and unchangeable. The same is true of God. With "news" of this "discovery," nothing has changed. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

We hear James speak of those who wander from the truth and the great and mighty work it is for someone to bring them back. The Gnostics started in the Christian community and then went another direction with their "hidden knowledge". They wandered away from the truth.

Our Scripture readings today are full of such examples. Moses had to deal with the "rabble" among the children of Israel who grumbled and complained against God. Oh, how they wandered away again and again. But when you read

the Scriptures, what does God keep doing? He sends His prophets. He sends His judges. He finally sends His Son.

The children of God wander away. This seems to continually happen. What also continually happens is that God is continually seeking out His children. It is always His desire to bring them back. The father of Gnosticism is Simon the Magician from Acts 8. He tries to purchase the power of the Holy Spirit from Peter. Peter calls him to repentance. Simon repents, but then, we know from history, he wandered away once again.

There is nothing new under the sun. All of this is “old news.” The fact that the world hates Christ and wants to chip away at His reputation is “old news.” The fact that most of God’s children have wandered away from the truth is “old news.”

Like every generation, I know we want to think that we have it harder than others in regard to life in the church – “Oh, for the good old days.” I challenge you to find any generation of the church that did not struggle with these same questions. I challenge you to find any generation of the church that did not have the children of God wandering away. Your task in this generation is the same as every generation. Your task is to seek them out, bring them back, and by the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit save their soul from death. That is what the people of God have always done.

The news of that poorly named fragment or any of the Gnostic nonsense which deserves to be considered less than nothing is not newsworthy. Tell me of someone who wandered away from the truth of Christ, who has been brought back and now lives under the grace of Baptism – that is newsworthy. Amen.