

What's good news for a coffee snob?

My last church was pretty into coffee - we operated a coffee shop on a college campus as one of our ministries. And in order to ensure we had the best coffee around, we brought in some professional roasters to teach us the ins and outs of coffee - what makes good coffee good?

I walked out to the foyer to meet them, and when I walked up, they were all laughing and snapping pictures of our coffee station.

Our church gave away free coffee on Sundays, but it wasn't good coffee. It came in a big bag of black liquid coffee concentrate that we loaded into a big machine. And it was really gross - it took a good bit of cream and sugar to cover the taste of the coffee sludge.

These guys, being professional roasters, had walked in and spotted the coffee machine and recognized it immediately. But what made them laugh was the sign painted over the coffee station. In big, cursive letters was written the verse from Psalms, "Taste and see that the Lord is good."

They saw our sign and laughed, took pictures to send to their coffee friends. Because they couldn't imagine anyone who knew anything about coffee drinking that sludge water and having any thought that God was good in any way.

Because coffee sludge in a bag isn't good news to a coffee person.

That might seem like a strange connection to make - between coffee and God (unless you drink coffee in which case you know exactly how good the coffee news is).

But I'd like to suggest to you today that if we want to be serious about talking with people about Jesus, we have to start with what is good news FOR THEM. And what we'll see today is that HOW God is good news for us is an almost infinite variety. It could be coffee or science or even wine.

This is all grounded in God's love for us. Because God loves us, God is working around us all the time. So we can learn not to be surprised when people find good news about God almost anywhere!

Message

We're in the Church season of Epiphany, the season that follows Christmas. Epiphany celebrates the God came not just for us, but for the whole world. Appropriately, then, our Epiphany series this year is called Good News for a Change. We're talking about how to talk about Jesus... with anyone. The \$20 word for this is Evangelism, and it's a word with enough baggage to make just about anyone break out in a nervous sweat. Whether you've been preached at or sat through those classes on how to preach at people, Evangelism conjures to mind that combative, confrontational, in-your-face kind of approach, or maybe just having no idea how to talk about Jesus with people we really care about.

Throughout this series, we're going to explore a lot of the ways we get Evangelism wrong, and why it's a lot more fun than we would've imagined. We began last week by talking about what the Gospel even is. Then last week, we spent some time asking how God is good news for US specifically. We individualized the good news about Jesus.

So today, we're going to flip that idea around. If God is good news for us in unique ways, then that means God is good news for other people in that same individual way. And if we can learn what each person's good news might sound like, it makes it easier for us to talk with anyone about Jesus. Because hey, who doesn't like good news?

Now if you've been in church for a while (or been around church folks), this is not how we've been taught to Evangelize. Whether it was memorizing the Romans Road (which is a series of Bible verses in the book of Romans designed to lay out the path to salvation) or the Four Spiritual Laws, which begins by asking people if they're bad, then sort of tricking them into equating something like murder with lying, they all share a common approach:

They're universal. They treat all people the same. These more traditional approaches to Evangelism don't care what race you are, whether you're rich or poor, whether English is your first language, what generation you're part of, whether you're into superheroes or the NFL or mommyblogging, none of it. They paint us all with the same brush.

What's fascinating to me about all those programs is that when we read the Gospels - which remember is just an old English word for Good News, so the Gospels are collections of Good News about Jesus - so what's interesting is that when we read how Jesus was good news to folks, it was really varied.

[Scripture Slide 1] Turn with me to John 2. This is just after Jesus' baptism (which we looked at last week) and the calling of his first disciples in John's version of the Good News.

Jesus is hanging out in or around his hometown, and he, his family and his disciples have been invited to a wedding. Weddings in Jesus' world were huge, multi-day affairs (they went on as long as seven days), and it was the family's job to host the party.

Hospitality was a huge deal in Jesus' culture - a party blunder could bring shame on a family for a generation. So, spoiler, there's a party blunder in this story. Let's read it together, and listen for how Jesus is good news in here:

The next day there was a wedding celebration in the village of Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples were also invited to the celebration. The wine supply ran out during the festivities, so Jesus' mother told him, "They have no more wine."

"Dear woman, that's not our problem," Jesus replied. "My time has not yet come."

But his mother told the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”

Standing nearby were six stone water jars, used for Jewish ceremonial washing. Each could hold twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus told the servants, “Fill the jars with water.” When the jars had been filled, he said, “Now dip some out, and take it to the master of ceremonies.” So the servants followed his instructions.

When the master of ceremonies tasted the water that was now wine, not knowing where it had come from (though, of course, the servants knew), he called the bridegroom over. “A host always serves the best wine first,” he said. “Then, when everyone has had a lot to drink, he brings out the less expensive wine. But you have kept the best until now!”

This miraculous sign at Cana in Galilee was the first time Jesus revealed his glory. And his disciples believed in him. -- John 2:1-11

There's so much to talk about in here - Jesus' weird exchange with his mom, or the way John calls this a sign, how by Jesus using ceremonial washing jars, he was illustrating that his resurrection is filling the old ways of God's people with a new meaning (we're going to come back to this one in a minute).

But can we hang out first on the miracle itself? Jesus turns water into wine - a lot of water (around 150 gallons!) into a *lot* of wine. And when the caterer tastes it, he freaks out because this wine is the best wine.

Now, if you don't know much about wine, one of the big rules is, "The older the better." Wine is made each year, and stored in casks to age. New wine is literally grape juice - it hasn't fermented yet. And once it starts to ferment, it takes a few years to get drinkable.

The older the wine, the better.

So in weddings, the host would serve the oldest stuff first, so while people are still sober, they're impressed with what you're serving. As the old stuff runs out, hopefully people are getting a little toasted and they're not paying as close attention to what they're drinking, so you can start serving the newer (and cheaper!) stuff.

At this party, they've burned through all the stuff -the old and the new and apparently even the juice. It's a huge social faux pas. People are going to be talking about this wedding for a long time, and not because it went well.

Then, because his mamma told him to, Jesus saved the party. (Were they family friends? Was Mary just compassionate? No idea.) Jesus turns water into wine and it's declared to be better than the wine they started with, the best wine so far!

Can you imagine in the years after Jesus ascended to heaven, when his followers are sitting around sharing stories about how they met Jesus, what led them to follow him, and hearing the father in this story?

I'll tell you why Jesus is good news for me: he made a killer wine.

Wine? Really?

Well no, not really. Because it's not *really* just wine, is it?

There's the layer John adds to it - that in turning this ceremonial washing water into wine for a party, Jesus was painting a picture of his resurrection, that he was transforming the rituals and rules of God's people into a big party with room for everyone and more than enough to go around.

That's good news!

And then there's what that wine meant for the father and his family. The wine was his reputation. It meant he could go around holding his head up high. Maybe they had run out because he was poor, or just a poor planner. Whatever the reason, Jesus didn't let his failings or shortcomings become something he and his family had to carry around with them like a scarlet letter. He made *them* new too, by making that wine.

That's why we got rid of that coffee sludge in a bag after those coffee roasters visited. We realized that, even though we weren't 'coffee people', there were a lot of coffee people in our community, and by offering them coffee sludge while proclaiming 'Taste and see the Lord is good!' we were making a joke out of Jesus.

These guys knew coffee. It's not just a beverage to them. They knew the people who grew and dried the beans, had relationships with the people who packed and shipped the beans. They themselves knew how much care went into roasting the beans to get the perfect flavor profile.

And they knew how completely the coffee sludge in a bag erased and ignored all that.

Because Jesus really is much better than coffee sludge in a bag.

And it's *never* just coffee. Just like it's never just wine.

The Romans Road doesn't have room for how Jesus is good news for coffee drinkers. Or wine connoisseurs. Or fathers-of-the-bride.

The Four Spiritual Laws can't start a conversation where those folks live.

This is the real limitation of those kinds of approaches. They're too narrow. They can't connect with everyone, everywhere, because we all come from different places.

Fortunately, God is not confined to such narrow approaches. God is at work in all of us, around all of us. And if we can learn to start with what's good news for them, Jesus becomes much more real to them.

I have a friend who grew up with a lot of Christian relatives. He's always been a practical, science-minded person (he's an engineer these days, if that tells you anything).

He was shocked when he learned I was a pastor, not long after we started hanging out, and it was quite a while after that before we started talking about religion.

Eventually, we got to the heart of the issue for him: his family growing up had insisted he believe in a literal reading of Genesis, one that ignores much of modern science and insists, for instance, that the Earth is only 6,000 years old. As a scientifically-minded person, he felt he was being made to choose between faith and science.

That's not an uncommon issue. I've met dozens of people like my friend, who have been presented with a particular, narrow interpretation of the Bible and told it's the only way to understand Scripture (which isn't true), and that if they can't accept that, then they can't believe in God (I've heard that from multiple people in my own life, and it's just as wrong).

So when my friend finally broached that subject with me, we talked about other ways to read the Bible that harmonized with science, he got really interested. Just a couple of months ago, we were hanging out with a big group when faith came up. He said to the whole group, "The thing that's converting me is that apparently you can believe in both faith and science. You don't have to choose one."

That's good news for my friend. I know a lot of people who don't particularly care about faith and science. They're happy their cell phones work and that's about as far as they think about science. For them, faith and science don't really matter. But for my friend (and people like him), that's where the good news has to start. He couldn't get to anything else about Jesus until he realized God wasn't insisting he check his brain before he believed.

Faith and science. Wine. Coffee. We could go on and on, making list after list of ways people have come to know the good news about Jesus (and we will as our series continues).

But here is the call before us: We spent last week considering how Jesus is good news for us. We saw that it's more than just the theological, universal answers. Jesus gets v specific with us. The same is true for everyone we meet. God is already at work in the lives of your friends and family, your coworkers and neighbors. Our call is to build relationships with them, to get to know them. When we do, we are able to discern God's fingerprints in their lives, and we come to understand that God has invited us to point out where God is at work, to become a part of their journey to discovering Jesus.

Friends, this is a beautiful, powerful gift.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus' good news is a meal for anyone who's hungry and thirsty!

1. With whom is God inviting me to share the good news of Jesus this week?
2. How is God good news for them?
3. How is God calling me to share with them this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Have a convo this week w/ someone doesn't know Jesus. Make it all about them. Ask how you can pray for them.