

Delivering the Faith

Jude 1-16

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**Pentecost, May 24, AD 2015
Gerrit Scott Dawson**

This is a great day in the life of our church! We are keeping festival with the church through the ages and around the world as we celebrate Pentecost, the day when the Lord Jesus sent his Holy Spirit upon his disciples. You might even say that Pentecost is the birthday of the church. This was the day we began our mission of proclaiming the gospel to all nations. The Holy Spirit came on the disciples to communicate the story of Jesus with such power that thousands repented and believed. He has been doing that ever since as the gospel goes forth.

This is also the day we celebrate the ordination of Josh Maddin to Presbyterian ministry. Ordination means the setting apart of a person for particular service. Josh will be ordained as a minister of the Word and sacraments, specifically called to be the Assistant Pastor for Youth and Families at our church. We will be asking for the Holy Spirit who came down on the disciples at Pentecost to come down in full measure upon Josh as he consecrates himself to a life of service to Christ through his church.

Now as Presbyterians, we don't believe that pastors are in a different class than "ordinary" people. We're certainly no holier than anyone else. Our particular work for the kingdom doesn't elevate us any higher than anyone else's particular work for the kingdom. Ministers are like every other member of the church: Christ calls us and claims us as his own. He asks us to love him with our whole heart, mind, soul and strength. He asks us to offer him our lives and then serve him in whatever area he leads us to live and work. In this sense, we come to realize, "I'm not just a doctor. I'm Christ's doctor in this particular place for these particular patients. I'm not just an insurance salesman. I'm Christ's insurance provider to protect the life and property of these particular people in this Christ like way. I'm not just a Mom. I'm Christ's Mom given to care uniquely for these precious children of the covenant. I'm not just a retired guy. I'm Christ's retired guy who has been given time to notice and bless the people whom God sends my way."

Every single one of us, then, begins with the reality of belonging to Christ. Steve Brown used to close all his services saying, "Go from here knowing that the central fact of your life is that you belong to Jesus Christ. His work is your work. And he is your companion." Start with Jesus as the center, and then discover that

he has made you uniquely to praise and serve him through your unique gifts in your unique placement in the world. Right where you are, right who you are, you are in ministry. You belong to Christ and his work is your work.

Josh undertakes a very public expression of his calling to serve Jesus. He undertakes the service of leadership. He consecrates himself to watch over the flock of Christ in this place. He devotes himself to lead and teach and pray and care. And we have given him a very wonderful privilege. From the abundance of God's provision in our lives as contributors, we have said, "Josh, we want to provide for you and your family so that you can devote your full attention to caring for our youth and their families. We see such unique gifts and training in you that we want you to be free for the service of Jesus Christ in our midst." That's an awesome calling, and an enormous challenge. A privileged life and a demanding one. This congregation abundantly provides for the lives and families of our pastors. Then, quite rightly, our church expects that this calling costs us nothing less than our whole lives. We give our attention, energy, focus, imagination, prayer and time to this beloved flock.

Yes, today we celebrate the gifts and calling of one man in our midst. But Josh is a public representative for what is true of each of us. Jesus calls each of us to himself in a voice pitched so we can hear. He saves each of us personally. And then he sends each of us particularly. He sends us into our lives to partake of his massive mission to redeem the world.

We can certainly feel this in the opening line of Jude's letter today: "To those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ." What a wonderful way to be addressed! It's OK if you need to stop right here and just ponder what it means to try on this greeting as the essential truth of your life. Who am I? According to Scripture, I am called. The voice of the Triune God reached me. He called me to himself. He called me to give my life and my heart to him. The Father calls me his Beloved. The Lord Jesus himself keeps me and my life belongs to him. Before I am anything else, I am this: beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ. That's the deepest meaning of my life.

Now it takes a lot of practice and discipline to think of yourself in those terms. An enormous marketing machine all around you wants you to think of yourself first in terms of your appetites, your desires, your ambitions, your fears, your needs as your defining reality. Ask yourself whenever you view a commercial, read a blog, pipe in the news, or watch a story about life in these days, "Who do they say that I am? What do they think I fear? What are my rights? What

are my needs?” Then ask how that lines up with the deeper story of who you are that comes from Scripture. Unmask the marketing machine and rehearse the counter story. If you don’t, you will simply be swept along by the louder voice. It takes work to claim the better narrative. So we remind ourselves that like Jude, I am a servant of Christ Jesus. He owns the right to my life. And that’s just fine, because through his call and claim I discover that I am beloved to the Father and kept by and for Jesus. I need fear only God, because he is the one to whom I am accountable. And he is my savior. That’s the deepest truth. That’s why I come to be with these people: I need to hear the story of the truth again and again.

Even in the church, however, it’s easy to miss the truth of our calling in Christ. So almost immediately, Jude turns his attention to a problem among the believers. He writes,

Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain people have crept in unnoticed...who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord Jesus Christ.

Jude longs to write about only the joyful parts of our salvation. He’d rather just talk about all the good things we have in Christ. But it’s not that easy. He realizes that we must contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints. The Biblical understanding of who we are is never easy to hold onto. It’s always slipping away from our awareness. The Biblical truth about Jesus is not easy to hold onto. It’s always being threatened by ideas of a God more suited to our liking. It has ever been so. You don’t just get to have the truth and grow steadily without any resistance. The world, the flesh and the devil all resist you. If you experience no resistance, it’s probably because you aren’t trying to move forward in faith and service. You’re probably not training your mind to grasp who Jesus really is. Resistance is usual.

The gospel must be contended for. We’re in a fight. A fight, I am joyful to say, that over the long haul, Christ wins. Through the ups and downs of history, the dark periods and the light ones, the church of Jesus Christ yet proclaims the gospel. Sometimes the gospel gets buried for years under the sins of the church, but it always emerges. The Holy Spirit given at Pentecost has preserved the gospel over the long term. Way back in the fifth century a French theologian named Vincent of Lerins, wrote of “that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all.” Vincent’s principle has helped us see that for all the

differences in belief and doctrine across the centuries, there has yet always been an essential gospel story that every true believer has held. There is a core story that has been delivered to us and that we deliver to the next generation. Outside this story, one cannot legitimately be called Christian. Within the bounds of that story, we may have widely different views on matters but still find a deep unity.

What is the faith once delivered? What is it that has been believed everywhere, always and by all? What is this essential gospel we must contend for? Well, how great that today is Pentecost Sunday! We can simply go back to the first Pentecost and listen in on the message Peter gave to the crowds that gathered. When Jesus sent the Spirit upon his disciples, the roar of a mighty wind was heard. Tongues of fire danced over the heads of the disciples. And they began to praise God. Not in unknown languages. But in the languages of all the people who were in Jerusalem for the festival. Immediately, the gospel was cross-cultural. People rushed over to see what the commotion was all about.

Peter told them. This story is about Jesus, a man from the town of Nazareth way to the north of here. God was with Jesus. He taught with authority. He did mighty deeds of healing and power. You've heard of him. Well, when the time came according to God's timing, the people turned against Jesus. God offered his Son to the world, and you crucified him. You killed him. But God raised him up because it was not possible for Jesus to be held by death. We are witnesses that the crucified Jesus lived again. Now he has gone back to heaven. There Jesus received from the Father the Holy Spirit and Jesus in turn has poured out the Spirit on us. That's what you've just seen and heard. So here's what you need to know: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.

That's the Gospel story. God's Son came to us as Jesus. He was crucified *by* our sin but also crucified *for* our sin. Our sinful hearts rejected him. But he took that rejection and made it the way he took away our sin. On the cross. Then God raised him from the dead. Jesus is the Lord of life. The Jesus we rejected is the Lord and Savior of all. Turn to him and live. See your life according to the way he sees you, not according to the marketing machine of this world. Obey his Word not the immediate inclinations of your body and appetite, no matter how much the culture may encourage you. Live by his Word and so live fully. Live for his mission not yourself and so discover the meaning of your life. That's the faith once for all delivered. That's the faith worth fighting for.

Jude, as we read, was pretty serious about that. He had no time for perverting the gospel of grace into freedom to sin. He had no time for people

teaching a Jesus less than the Lord and Savior of the world. For this is the message people are dying to hear. This is the truth about our lives we desperately need. It requires a people set apart by their calling to belong first, last and always to Jesus our Lord and Christ. If you know Jesus, he has called you. If he has called you, then he sends you to be part of his mission. Your life consecrated to Christ. This may be as an attorney or a landscaper, a biologist or an artist, a builder or a writer. Or it may be as a servant leader in the church.

For Josh, this means the call to be a teaching elder at First Presbyterian Church. There is a faith once delivered. A story that has been believed everywhere, always and by all who belong to Jesus. Josh, that's the story you are called to know in ever deepening ways. That's the story you are called to tell in a thousand different ways. Sometimes simply. Sometimes in all its complexity. Always in love. Josh, this is the call that is upon you, and you represent all of us. You are called by God to belong to him. He has saved you and so he claims you. You are beloved to the Father and to us. You are kept by Jesus Christ for the sake of Jesus Christ. Hands will be laid upon you that represent the faith once for all delivered through the ages. We will pray and see your calling enacted, knowing that each person in this room is called to the same faith in the same level of consecration but in unique situations and gifts. All to the glory of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.