

“The unfinished gospel”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Romans 5:1-5 and John 16:12-15

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Well, it’s over. The hit HBO show *Game of Thrones* has ended with what many consider a whimper. I won’t give away any spoilers; I’ll just say that the thousands of parents who named their daughters Daenerys may have made a mistake. Fans are so upset that therapists are reporting new patients with what they’re calling the *Game of Thrones* depression. Nearly a million fans have signed a petition demanding HBO remake the entire last season.

Just imagine if people got that upset about real problems!

Of course, it’s not the first show that’s outraged fans with its finale. When another HBO hit *The Sopranos* ended, people freaked out. I would say “spoiler alert” but it’s been 12 years, so... At the end of the final episode, Tony Soprano, the head of the north Jersey mafia, is seen sitting in a café with his wife and son. His daughter is approaching the café. A possible gunman is coming out of the bathroom. The door to the café opens. Tony looks up. Suddenly, the screen goes black. And that’s it. That’s the end of the whole show that revolutionized television and made America fall in love with the bad guy who goes to therapy. People were trying to fix their TVs because they thought they were broken. Some fans loved it. Others hated it. Did Tony die? Did he survive? What happened?

The show never tells you.

Which is frustrating. Even those of us who like ambiguity still want our questions answered at some point. It would be like me standing here and announcing that I know some really great, life-changing truths, but I’m not telling you, because “it’s not about the destination, dude; it’s about the journey”—and they’re totally over your head anyway.

Somehow I feel that wouldn’t go over well.

Yet, that is precisely what Jesus says to his disciples today. He makes this startling statement: he hasn’t told his disciples everything. There are many things he hasn’t shared with them yet, because they’re not ready. And now he’s going to die.

Take a moment to let that sink in. The man who says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life,” the Son of God, our Lord and Savior, says that even he has not given his disciples everything there is to know. Even if we were somehow able to adopt all of Jesus’ teachings in his lifetime, live exactly as he did, internalize all the wisdom he shared, we still would not have all the answers.

It's like we've gotten to the end of a really great show, only to hear those dreaded words: TO BE CONTINUED. The screen goes black, and we wonder if something's gone wrong.

In fact, that's exactly what some people think; like so many *Sopranos* fans, they try to adjust the screen and insist that Jesus didn't mean it. Their theology tells them that everything they need to know can be read right there on the surface of Scripture, without any interpretative act or ongoing revelation needed. If the New Testament says that women shouldn't speak in church, then they shouldn't speak in church—simple as that.

The problem with this approach is the inherent inconsistency. If the truth is right there, then we should take Jesus at his word and assume he meant what he said, and not try to squeeze our way out of this one just because it doesn't conform to our theology. Jesus says that the revelation of truth will continue after his death.

Meanwhile, others take the opposite approach. They say this proves that there's a lot more we have to learn outside of Christ. He's just one piece of a much larger puzzle. The problem is that's not what Jesus says either. He says the Spirit will not speak on its own, but will speak whatever it hears from Jesus. It's through the Spirit that Jesus is going to continue to be present with the disciples and teach them. In John, Jesus isn't part of the truth; he is the truth. He isn't a step along the way; he is the way. He is the full revelation of God—it just happens that that revelation is ongoing. It continues even now: the unfinished gospel, being written and perfected by the Spirit, as we come to better understand the truth that is Jesus.

Paul himself says this when he writes in 1 Corinthians 13: “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”

In that same passage, Paul makes the analogy to children. There are lots of things we parents don't tell our children because they're not yet ready to hear it, and there are lots of things our children don't tell us adults. We'll tell them eventually, when they're ready. There are a lot of things that just cannot be understood until they've been experienced.

This has three major implications for us.

First, the United Church of Christ is right: God is still speaking. The Word of God did not die and stay dead on that cross 2,000 years ago, having spoken all he had to say. Those who would bury the Word of God in the tomb of incontestable doctrine, those who would shut the Bible and say there's nothing new to understand, those who would halt the ever-reforming nature of the church, would do well to remember that death tried to do exactly that and failed. Jesus, the Word of God, rose to life, ripped away the stone from his tomb, and spoke again. He's never stopped speaking since.

He speaks right now, as our friend, as a living presence we call the Holy Spirit, in re-opening that Bible and asking new questions.

Second, if God is still speaking, we better keep listening. There's always more to learn and become. Always more to hear in prayer, experience in life, give in love. The gospel goes on. There's always another page.

Eugene Bay, president of the Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, writes, "What the text wants most [is]... an openness to fresh encounters with the revelation of Jesus... John imagines a Christian community that is not locked into the past but understands what Jesus means for its own time. He anticipates that changing circumstances and the emergence of new questions—stem cell research, for example, or the ability to prolong life by artificial means, or growing religious pluralism—will require the community to think afresh."

That's exactly what we're going to be doing next week, when we try to listen with fresh ears to what the apostle Paul says about sexuality and gender identity.

Third, despite our initial frustration, Jesus says this in order to comfort us. He knows the suffering, the chaos, that await his disciples, await us. Research has shown that such personal crisis can lead people to seek stability in the only part of life they think they can control: their worldview. In other words, the more hectic a person's life the less tolerant they tend to be of intellectual and religious ambiguity. They hold onto "their" truth because they feel like it's the only thing keeping them afloat. If Jesus wanted the disciples open to the mysterious guidance of the Holy Spirit, he couldn't just take that lifeboat away; he had to give them something else to hold onto, something that would lend their lives sufficient stability for them to tolerate ambiguity. And he gave them the best thing of all: himself. He said, "I will be with you." He promised the Holy Spirit, not just as a guide or teacher, but as the gift of his ongoing presence.

This is really important. Because when we encounter fundamentalists, people stuck in their ways, people who think they know it all, our response tends to be a concerted effort to prove them wrong, to teach them, to scold them for such black-and-white thinking. And of course it almost never works. What if we behaved more like Jesus? What if we tried to find out what instability, what crisis, exists in their lives and cared for that? Perhaps in caring for their wounds, in loving them, we'll offer them the presence of Jesus. And when they have that to lean on, when they know just how deeply they are loved and saved, perhaps they will gradually open to greater ambiguity and begin listening again.

Today, Jesus tells us: God is still speaking; we should still be listening. We should be open to new understandings of the good news that Christ is dead, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. And as for those who aren't listening, who think the book of Christ has closed once and for all, let's find out where they're hurting and love them into openness.

There's more I have to tell you, but I'm not going to share it with you right now. You'll just have to wait. **Amen.**