

“God Speaks Hard Words to Hear”

January 31, 2016

Word of God Speak series – 3rd Sunday after Epiphany

Soon enough, we’ll be filing our taxes. You’ve probably seen information about tax breaks. We can all use some benefits, right? And every year, we’re bombarded with hints about how to get all of the benefits we’re entitled to. What can we write off? What else can we get?

What’s in it for me? We ask that a lot these days. Time is so precious. Finances are slim. Responsibilities are overwhelming. So making decisions about how we’ll spend our time and money is tough. What benefit will I get for this? What deal can I make so I get something out of this?

We’re confronted by passages that call us to consider our thinking on the benefits of faith. Luke 4 is one of those. Are we simply looking to get something out of faith? A pay-off? Someone has said that we have an option between grabbing power and giving power. We can use our faith and our gifts to grab for ourselves or to give for others’ benefit.

Here are two examples: first, Albert Schweitzer was training to be a concert organist, but changed his track to become a missionary doctor. He gave up riches and fame to work in Africa. Another is Millard Fuller, who was a millionaire by age 30, but wasn’t finding enjoyment. He made a goal to build 1 million houses, and the result is Habitat for Humanity, which continues to change lives.

Jesus was a word and deed person. He wanted to get people involved in ministry, and so he was involved with people. He knew that we learn best when we’re hands-on. When he preaches in Nazareth, he tells the people that his ministry will be hands-on. And he’s already well-known for his ministry of healing.

The Spirit of the Lord is on Jesus, and he’s clear about his mission: preach good news to the poor, proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, release the oppressed, proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. His ministry is focused on release and recovery - on liberation that’s not limited by what people thought God would do or how they thought God would act.

The people in Nazareth seem okay until Jesus goes beyond what they thought. They’ve hoped for the fulfillment of this Scripture for more than 500 years. They’ve prayed for a deliverer. They had been waiting for this! They want their Messiah who will free them from the Romans. It’s when Jesus says that this Good News isn’t **just** for them – that’s when they get angry. That’s when it doesn’t make sense.

Remember these are Jews in the synagogue, and Jesus has grown up among them. Perhaps that story of him in the Temple of Jerusalem had spread from years

before. Even at 12 years old, he was connected to God. He was among the teachers listening and asking questions about the Scriptures. We don't know a lot about Jesus' early life, but perhaps there were moments when he knew of God's claim upon his life. He was the One they were waiting for – the Messiah.

SHOW MEDIA - ENCOUNTERS: HOMETOWN BOY

God speaks hard words to hear. This week, Myke shared with me that a man called the office asking about some of the things that he saw on the sign. They had a conversation about the sermon titles, and they talked about how we need to hear hard words. We need to hear Jesus again even when we don't want to hear it. Even when it sounds like nails on a chalkboard!

For Jesus to say that the Messiah will bring peace – and to say that even Gentiles are included in this Good News? It was inconceivable! But Jesus reminds them that it's always been God's intention. Even when the old prophets were around, God reached out to people who weren't Jews and healed them. There was this widow - from what's now Lebanon - who was kept alive by Elijah, one of God's prophets. There was Naaman, the Syrian army commander, cured through the word of Elisha, another of God's prophets. Both of these happened at times when Israelites were left uncured and unclean. Yes, God's plan for salvation is for everyone – not just for some!

This news is enough to get them going – they want to kill him! Things turn sour quickly for Jesus. The people run him out of town. It has always seemed extreme to me – how they treated Jesus. He was someone they knew, yet God's message and purpose in him was bigger than all the pride they had. Regardless of their expectations, he had work to do.

It reminds me of how radical our faith in Jesus Christ really is. Those who listened may have thought of themselves as God's special people. They wanted to maintain their identity as God's chosen people. But don't we struggle with that attitude in the church, too? Sometimes we think we know what Jesus would do or whom he cares about. We think we have Jesus figured out. But not one of us has a monopoly on Jesus. Hard words...

His words about how inclusive God's love really is make me uneasy. I'd rather focus on Jesus as a person – not really on what he calls me to do. I could talk about God's amazing grace all day long, but if I'm not willing to truly live in God's grace - to extend God's grace - then how am I following this Jesus who preaches in the Temple in Nazareth?

I'd rather focus on my claiming Jesus as my Savior and Friend – not on his claim on my life. But maybe that's where we struggle the most – we forget that we're not the

giver of grace, God is. We don't control how God moves in the world. We're called to follow God's leading.

God's love isn't exclusive to one nation, one ethnicity, one religion or denomination, one political party, "good" people or "church" people. God loves the person whom I find it very hard to love. God's love breaks down every barrier and throws out every label that we create. I have no more claim on God's love than anyone else. Those are hard words to hear.

Jesus says God is for all people. God comes not only to us and our friends, but also to those we don't think are worthy of God's attention. Hard words! Our faith doesn't entitle us to anything more or less than anyone else's. And if we follow Jesus, then we are called to reach out to people we have the hardest time caring about! It might be unpopular. It might bring us stares and ugly comments, but Jesus' ministry was never without controversy!

And the ministry isn't about the church, but who the church serves – Jesus Christ. It's a blessing to realize that people are involved and committed, but there's always more work to do. You and I may have found our place in the church – a ministry we called to serve in – but there are people all around us who feel like there's no place for them in the church. There are always people who feel like outsiders, like no one cares, like God doesn't care. What will we do about it? Jesus breaks boundaries to reach hurting people. Can we do any less? Will we do any less?

The image of the water into wine - that reminder of the celebration of God's grace is still here. Jesus transformed the water of ritual Law into wine - an opportunity for joy. From the outset, Jesus is doing something new. He is changing the game. He is making folks uncomfortable - not just to make them uncomfortable, but to challenge our thinking and our feeling.

So I share with you a prayer by Henri Nouwen called "A Prayer for Courage":
God, give me the courage to be revolutionary, as your Son Jesus Christ was.
Give me the courage to loosen myself from this world.
Teach me to stand up free and to shun no criticism.
God, it is for your kingdom.
Make me free, make me poor in this world.
Then I will be rich in the real world, which is what life is all about.
God, thank you for the vision of the future, but make it fact and not just theory.

May we make God's vision fact, not just theory. May we do it with courage and boldness – with the knowledge that Jesus Christ is with us! Thanks be to God. AMEN.