

“Celebrating 100 Years: the Ministry of the Word”
1 Thessalonians 2:1-8
Sunday, October 23, 2011
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

According to E. Eugene Williams, the longest sermon on record was preached by Clinton Lacy of West Richland, Washington in February of 1955. It took 48 hours and 18 minutes to deliver it. Small wonder someone proposed the adoption of a new Beatitude: “Blessed is the preacher whose train of thought has a caboose.”

By comparison, when Roy DeLamotte was chaplain at Paine College in Georgia, he preached the shortest sermon in the college’s history. However, he had a rather long topic – “What does Christ Answer When We Ask, ‘Lord, What’s in Religion for Me?’” The complete content of his sermon was in one word: “Nothing.” He later explained that the one-word sermon was meant for people brought up on the ‘gimme-gimme’ gospel. When asked how long it took him to prepare the message, he said, “Twenty years.”

Today’s sermon is the second in a 4-part series leading up to the UMC of Yucaipa’s 100th Anniversary celebration on November 13. Woo-hoo!!

The particular topic for today is “The Ministry of the Word.” In preparing for today’s message, I went through stacks of old worship bulletins from as far back as 1955. Many thanks to Linda in the church office for bravely opening the doors of “the historical cupboard” to find them for me. We are lucky she wasn’t injured by an avalanche of precariously piled files and booklets and God knows what else!

I. Declare the Gospel

I was looking for old sermon titles from the second Sunday of November, or our church's anniversary Sunday. I won't read all of them to you, but I will lift up some highlights.

The farthest back I could find was a sermon by Bernard G. Kemper on November 10, 1957. His theme? "X-Ray of the Soul." Interesting title. Makes me want to hear more.

November 8, 1964? "How to Handle the Liquor Problem." Clell C. Gray preached that one. Makes you wonder about alcoholism in Yucaipa in the 1960's!

Rev. Dougherty preached a sermon, on November 13, 1966, that almost certainly referred to the war in Vietnam, entitled, "What Kind of Peace Do We Want?"

On November 14, 1971, George A. Myers preached this sermon: "A Fool and His Penknife." I have no idea what that topic could have been; if anyone knows, please tell me after the service!

I came across many inspiring titles by Albert B. Cavanaugh. I liked this one from 1980 the best, because it rhymes: "A Little Man Who Stood Tall, Had a Ball, Heard a Call."

And let's not forget the associate pastors, who were apparently assigned the task of preaching the annual Stewardship Sermon back in the 1980's. Bill Johnson, in '85 – "I Gave at the Office," and Kathleen Puntar, in '86 – "The Joy of Giving."

More recently, Pastor Ron Faux preached this past summer on the themes of "Grappling with God" and "Dreams and/or Miracles."

And our candidate for ordained ministry, Jessica Stryko, preached an excellent sermon on the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 tragedy, on the theme of, "The Spiritual Practice of Christian Community."

Finally, I want to be sure to mention Paul Kielhold , Lay Leader and Lay Speaker, who preached this past summer on the theme, “What is the Church?” I hear it was a rousing sermon which, unfortunately, did not get recorded, due to technical difficulties. Great topic.

I share a bit of this church’s sermon history as a reminder that the Word has been faithfully preached in this place for 100 years.

The ministry of the Word, or “the message of the gospel,” is central to the faith and practice of Protestant Christians. Protestants believe that the Holy Spirit works through the preached word to change people’s hearts.

In today’s passage from 1 Thessalonians, the Apostle Paul provides insights into his theology of preaching. These insights can be equally applied to any sharing of the gospel message. In fact, the first point Paul makes is that one ought to declare the gospel despite great opposition.

What might be some of the opposition that we would face, as Christians in Yucaipa in the year 2011? Certainly, we do not face the fear of death that Christians of Paul’s time faced, or that people today, in other parts of the world, face.

In Yucaipa I think the greatest opposition we face is fear of the disdain and ridicule of others. We do not live in a society where people get beaten and killed for being Christian. We live in a free society in which many folks are secular and don’t understand the value of the Christian faith. We live in a society in which we have to be careful how much of our faith we share in certain settings, because there are laws to protect people from hearing too much prayer or too much Jesus. But we are not openly persecuted for our faith.

At the same time, there is social fear. For young people at school, if their friends are not Christians, it can feel very risky to share the faith. They might end up losing friends or being laughed at or even getting beat up on the playground.

For adults this fear can take the form of disapproving friends and family members, or even losing your job, if your boss is not supportive of your Christian identity.

Paul says, "...as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition."

Paul is our example, when we feel afraid to share our faith with others.

John Wesley, at the age of 87, in a letter to Alexander Mather, uttered these thrilling words: "Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin and desire nothing but God, and I care not a straw whether they be clergymen or laymen: such alone will shake the gates of hell, and set up the Kingdom of Heaven upon earth."

We are called to declare the gospel despite opposition.

II. Please God

Paul continues. In verse 4 he reminds us that God entrusts us with the message of the gospel. And so, reasons Paul, it is God, and only God, whom we should seek to please. In other words, we should not worry about pleasing our friends or our family or even our boss; our first priority ought to be to please God.

Well. I don't know about you, but I am all about worrying what my friends and family and colleagues and bosses – and congregation! – think about everything. I am totally concerned with pleasing people as much as possible. Not that it's at all possible, but I sure wish it was!

You know, there is even a 12-step group for this sort of thing, this people-pleasing addiction. I think it's called Co-dependents Anonymous, or something like that. People-pleasing is a sickness! It's a real problem!

And what Paul recommends is that we get over it. Paul recommends is that we keep our eyes on Jesus, keep our thoughts on God, and seek to please only Him.

It's great advice. It's biblical. It's spiritually sound.

And it's a tall order. It's tough. It's a real challenge.

One day at a time we work on this one. Pleasing God. Making this our priority.

No, 'priority' is the wrong word. Paul does not say to please God first, and then please others. Paul says to please God. Period. We are not to concern ourselves with pleasing other people -- with pleasing "mortals" -- at all!

Charles W. Colson, in his book, The Body tells this story:

"Theodore Epp, founder of Back to the Bible radio ministry, realized something was wrong when he stopped receiving critical mail. Convicted that he was not challenging the flock enough, he changed his preaching. 'I'm afraid that when I'm pleasing everybody, I'm not pleasing the Lord,' he later said, 'and pleasing the Lord is what counts.'"

Colson continues, "This is not to suggest that a pastor is only successful when he is upsetting people! But he must be certain that he is first and foremost faithful to the One he serves. He is fulfilling a divine commission when he preaches. Just as an ambassador is entrusted not with his own message but with his superior's message, so the minister is entrusted with the Word of God. Before it is delivered, therefore, every message should be laid at the foot of His throne with one question: 'Is it faithful to You, my Lord?' Or as one German pastor would always pray in the pulpit, 'Cause my mind to fear whether my heart means what I say.'"

John Wesley, according to Moody's Anecdotes, “used to ask his young men whom he had sent out to preach on probation two questions: ‘Has anyone been converted?’ and ‘Did anyone get mad?’ If the answer was ‘No,’ he told them he did not think the Lord had called them to preach the Gospel, and sent them about their business. When the Holy Ghost convicts of sin, people are either converted or they don't like it, and get mad.”

We are called to please God. Period.

III. Share Your Own Self

The most beautiful verse in today's passage is verse 8. Let me read it for you again:

“So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.”

In sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ, our ultimate goal is to care so deeply for others that we become willing to share our own selves as well.

William Penn put it this way: “For nothing reaches the heart but what is from the heart, or pierces the conscience but what comes from a living conscience.”

This is what makes sharing the gospel so challenging. We must share our own selves, our true selves. We must dig deep into our own hearts, we must suffer the pangs of our own conscience, in order to share the gospel with others. It is not an easy task.

But it is a task to which preachers are definitely called. Ultimately, it is a task to which we are all called, as Christians. It is the task of sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with a hurting world. This task involves being authentic, being transparent, sharing our Selves with others.

We get there little by little, one step at a time.

Closing.

The Apostle Paul has a lot to teach us about the ministry of the Word. In 1 Thessalonians, chapter 2, he teaches us to declare the gospel, to please God, and to share our own selves.

The Holy Spirit is at work, bringing people to new life in Christ every day. Pray earnestly for the people you meet each day: that God might show you a new way to reach them for His kingdom. It might be that God calls you to declare the gospel through the spoken word. It might be that God calls you to examine your own life and the ways you seek to please yourself and others, while forgetting to please Him. It may be that God calls you to share the gospel by sharing your own self, by digging deep and being more transparent with others.

Into the future, I pray that we can follow the example of the Apostle Paul. I pray that we can say as a church that we care so deeply for the people of our mission field of Yucaipa-Calimesa-Beaumont that we are determined to share with them not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because they have – through earnest prayer – become very dear to us.

Amen.