

PREACHING WITHOUT DISTINCTION

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Towson Presbyterian Church
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Luke 18:9-14

Romans 10:5-15

Many churches these days are wondering what they can do to connect more effectively with youth and young adults in their twenties and thirties. People that age tend to be much less involved in church than we older folks are. As many of you know, Session here at TPC recently decided to add a new, contemporary worship service on Sunday afternoons at 5:30 that we hope will be more engaging of this age group. The format will be more informal and less word-driven than we are used to at 10:00 a.m.

Dr. Rice and I and others working on this project have had some interesting discussions about how much you can change traditional worship without sacrificing the integrity of our Presbyterian faith and practice. One of the most challenging things to me, as a preacher, is the lack of enthusiasm among many contemporary worship advocates for sermons. Personally, the sermon has always been my favorite part of the service! As I've thought about it, though, it occurs to me that many people today—and not just young people—may “no longer understand the difference between preaching and other types of public speaking... Many people think of a sermon as an occasion for being entertained, instructed, or inspired in matters of religion—hence the customary comment at the church door, ‘I enjoyed the sermon.’

“[Yet preaching, properly understood, is much more than that. Indeed, Christians going all the way back to St. Paul, have understood preaching to be nothing less than] *the good news that God preaches* through human beings. [Presbyterians are conditioned to wait expectantly on Sunday morning] for the Word of God to be spoken—for preaching. Astonishingly enough, [God has chosen to communicate in this way: through men and women called and ordained by congregations to proclaim to the worshipping assembly what they have found in Scripture through prayerful study. But] how can anyone presume to speak the Word of God?... ‘How can any human being be so arrogant as to think he [or she] is a mouthpiece for God?’ [Our confessions caution that it is the message that deserves our attention and not the minister that preaches it. Through the inner illumination of the Holy Spirit, God can use the words of even a preacher who is evil and sinner.]”¹²

“From the beginning of biblical history, God has been responding to the plight of God’s people in and through all circumstances. That’s why we call the Bible the Word of God. This is borne out dramatically in the story of Moses... The story of the Exodus led by the mighty Moses is a classic [example] of God’s power to deliver us from evil and

¹ *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), pt. 2, Book of Confessions*, (Louisville, Office of the General Assembly, 1999), rubric 5.004.

² Fleming Rutledge, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 305-306.

free us from bondage. You know the story of God appearing to Moses [in a burning bush] as he was tending the sheep of his father-in-law, Jethro.³ There [in the wilderness,] God directed Moses to go back to Egypt and tell Pharaoh to ‘Let my people go.’

“Now Moses did not [exactly embrace this assignment. In fact, he tried to get out of it on the grounds that] he was not a good speaker; [he had a speech impediment]. But God would not be denied. [God] promised Moses that he would tell him what to say plus sending Aaron, Moses’ brother, who was a good speaker, to go along and be his mouthpiece. That threesome—God, Moses, and Aaron—fit the bill. But not without one more provision. God said to Moses, ‘I AM who I AM.’ Scholars tell us that is to be interpreted, ‘I will be there for you.’ In other words, ‘Remember, Moses, no matter what, no matter where, no matter who, you can count on me.’ [And, of course, God’s was good to his word. Working together with God’s help and Aaron’s, Moses led the people of Israel across the Red Sea to freedom.]

“God has an amazing way of developing and empowering witnesses. God is never without persons to tell of God’s wondrous works, to herald the glad tidings of God’s steadfast love and redeeming power.”⁴

Paul, in this morning lesson, is making this same sort of point about the power of testimony to God’s love. Paul emphasizes the continuity between Moses and Jesus, between Israel and the church. God used Moses to tell Israel of God’s covenant and God’s law. The Torah was the word of God; having it meant that the people would never have to guess what God required of them. The word of God would always be near and accessible. Moses told them, “it is neither in the heaven nor beyond the sea.” Israel therefore had no need to go in searching for God in such distant places. Rather, Moses said, “the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.”⁵ Through words, God had graciously reached out to God’s people, drawn near to them, had indeed come to be within them—on their lips and in their hearts.⁶

Paul goes on, that just as Israel was reassured through the law that God was not remote and far away, so Paul insists that “Christ is to be sought neither in the heavens nor in the abyss of Hades. We experience him not by gazing upward nor peering downward, but by looking (and listening) within. And how is this so? Through the ‘word of faith that we proclaim.’ By putting the gospel into words, faith becomes articulated. God’s promise becomes expressed in speech; and when we receive it in faith, we discover that ‘the word is near [us], on [our] lips and in [our] heart.’ The living Christ, who we encounter through the preached word, is as near, as present within us, as was God in the Torah given to Israel in the time of Moses.

“As we receive the word of faith that is proclaimed—‘that God raised [Christ] from the dead’—God’s word actually comes to expression within us, and we in turn express this conviction by confessing with our lips that ‘Jesus is Lord.’...Salvation can

³ Exodus 3.

⁴ L. Bevel Jones, “Heralds of Hope,” Sermon broadcast on Day1 Radio, October 29, 2005.

⁵ Deuteronomy 30:14.

⁶ Cf. Jer. 31:31-34.

thus be construed as our words responding to God's words. Through faith, God's word becomes articulate within us, and we in turn articulate the faith that saves us."⁷

Faith is about trust: not trust as intellectual concept, as you might trust the security of an investment because you've analyzed the financial statements and business plan, but trust as a relationship of mutual love. "One of the signs of our [uncertain] times is [that it is so hard to know who or what to trust. There is] a spiritual hunger in hearts everywhere. [People want a God they can trust. That's a longing that cannot be satisfied merely by learning *about* God; it can be fed only by coming to know God personally, by developing a relationship with God, by having] an authentic experience of the Living Christ."⁸

You may heard about the recent, phenomenal success of the book, *The Shack*, by William P. Young. If you haven't, *The Shack* is an imaginative story—in the tradition of C. S. Lewis—of one grieving man's transformative encounter with God, who appears to him in the form of a jolly African-American woman. No publisher would touch this book by an unknown author, so Young and several friends eventually published it privately last year. The book resonated so strongly with people, that many started buying multiple copies for friends. The "word of mouth" publicity on the book was incredible. Eventually, one of the publishers who had turned it down signed on to help with marketing and distribution. Just over a year after it was originally published as a paperback, *The Shack* had its debut at No. 1 on the New York Times trade paperback fiction best-seller list on June 8 and has stayed there ever since.⁹

The Shack is neither great literature nor profound theology, but I found it very moving in its whimsical witness to the loving and gracious nature of the God we come to know in Jesus Christ. This is the God who seeks us out, who is always near (even when we are blind to God's presence), who wants to be in relationship with us and so woos us persistently, but who never forces us to accept the gift of God's love. And I think Young has it right that while trusting God in this world where evil and suffering exist is not easy for us, that trust—that faith—is the key to the kind of relationship with God that has the power to transform us into the whole and healthy people God means us to be. Really, Young is just restating Paul's assertion in Romans that 'every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.'¹⁰

Faith is finally a matter of hearing—listening to and listening for the word of God on the lips of human messengers—those whom God sends. Often, they will be preached words, in the form of a sermon on Sunday morning. Sometimes, they may come through the more informal testimony of someone who has felt the power of God's spirit at work in his or her own life, and who now shares that witness with another. At other times, God may speak through a book like *The Shack* or a piece of music or a work of art. We take in through our senses those words or notes or images, but it is the message about the love of Christ and the message that originated with Christ that impresses itself on our hearts.

⁷ Fred B. Craddock et al, *Preaching Through the Christian Year. Year A* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1992), 398-400.

⁸ Jones, "Heralds of Hope."

⁹ Motoko Rich, "Christian Novel Is Surprise Best Seller," *The New York Times*, June 24, 2008.

¹⁰ Romans 10:13; cf. Joel 2:32.

“As Paul says, ‘It pleased God through the foolishness of what we preach to save those who believe.’¹¹ It pleased *God*. Everything depends on [God’ word, God’s action in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is the gospel.] Paul says it is ‘the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.’¹² ‘The word of faith’ for salvation draws near to you at this very moment, not because of anything you have done, not because of anything the preacher has done, but *because it pleases God to draw near through this word*. [The preaching is of the good news—that by the merits of Jesus Christ you are perfectly acceptable in God’s sight, and will be for all eternity because God is particularly fond of *you*, just as God is particularly fond of each and every one of God’s children.] ‘There is no distinction,’ Paul writes; ‘the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him.’¹³ [We don’t have to perfect or accomplished or worthy or good.] We can all rejoice to be ourselves, each with his or her own particular configuration of gifts from the Lord, and none of us feeling inferior or superior to the others, for ‘there is no distinction; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him.’ No insiders, no outsiders, just needy people redeemed by the Father of all goodness.

“This is radical grace... This is the gospel. This is ‘the word of faith which we preach.’ ‘The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart.’ God makes it happen. The preacher and the congregation are taken up into the powerful message, as Paul says: ‘Faith comes from the message, and the message comes from the preaching of Christ.’¹⁴ For some of you, perhaps for many of you, this is happening at this very moment—faith is being awakened or strengthened in you, because ‘the word of faith’ has drawn near. And when this happens, we confess with our lips, *Jesus is Lord*, and we believe in our hearts that *God raised him from the dead*, and we hear with new assurance the promise of the Almighty Father, ‘You will be saved.’

“There is nothing you can do to add to this. It is God himself who is calling forth this response from us. Two confessions of faith: *Jesus is Lord*, and *God raised him from the dead*. ‘Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.’ This is ‘the righteousness that comes from faith,’ and it is the only righteousness that we can trust before God, because it is his own gift. Believe him in your heart right now, and confess him with your lips as we sing the next hymn, and be assured for today and forever that you are the very one of whom Jesus said, ‘This man, this woman went home justified.’¹⁵ Amen.”¹⁶

¹¹ 1 Corinthian 1:21.

¹² Romans 1:1, 16.

¹³ Romans 10:12-13.

¹⁴ Romans 10:17.

¹⁵ Luke 18:14.

¹⁶ Fleming Rutledge, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 305-312.