

“Talk – on Purpose”

First Presbyterian Church
July 5, 2020

Hebrews 10:19-25

A patient in a mental hospital in Nebraska was suffering from depression that was so bad he no longer smiled or spoke. All attempts to help him were abandoned years ago. He was considered hopeless. But a young chaplain took a special interest in this man and visited him every day. He read to him and talked to him and tried to reach him.

One day as they looked out the window, the chaplain began describing the scene. The trees blowing in the wind. The pigeons. The squirrels. And suddenly, incredibly, a hoarse, hesitant voice spoke: “I, I had a pet squirrel once.” And that was the breakthrough¹ – simple words, reaching deep into the soul, and bringing forth hope and new life.

How do we affirm another person through our words? How do we bless another person through our speech? That is the focus of today’s sermon, third in our series titled “On Purpose,” which can be found and shared on our YouTube channel, available at www.fpcindep.org.

In our New Testament lesson today, the Letter to the Hebrews speaks of hope and new life. Hebrews was written specifically for followers of Christ who came from the Jewish tradition. More generally, it was written for any of us seeking to understand the fullness and power of Christ amid our traditions, the practices we engage in everyday. “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering,” says Hebrews, “for he who has promised is faithful.” Hebrews is tying what we do and experience today to the faith and hope we have for tomorrow, faith in better days to come.

Of course, not all our tomorrows are better than today. You go through a bad day and tomorrow comes and it’s just the same, or so it seems. Take for example, the young rabbi who found a serious problem in his new congregation. During the Friday service, half the congregation stood for the prayers and half remained seated, and each side shouted at the other, insisting that theirs was the true tradition. Nothing the rabbi said or did solved the conflict. Finally, in desperation, he asked the synagogue’s 99-year-old founder, “So tell me, was it the tradition ... to stand during the prayers?” “No,” answered the old rabbi. “Ah,” responded the younger man, “then it was the tradition to sit during the prayers?” “No,” answered the old rabbi. “Well, what we have is complete chaos!” said the young rabbi. “Half the people stand and shout, and the other half sit and scream.” “Ah,” said the old man, “THAT was the tradition.”²

¹ Peter James Flamming, in a sermon, “Words are worth a thousand pictures,” January 30, 2000.

² Barbara Lemmel, “Makeshift communities,” *Christian Century*, January 6-13, 1999, 15.

The point is, despite what's happening today and despite what happened yesterday, each day holds new promise, new hope, for those who look to Christ, over and above the ways of our world, screaming and shouting at each other.

The tradition and practice raised up as an example in today's New Testament lesson is the tradition and practice of entering the Temple in Jerusalem, which at that time, only the High Priest was permitted to do.

When Hebrews says, "... We have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus," it's talking about the Temple of God as a new and spiritual sanctuary. When Hebrews says we enter this new and spiritual sanctuary – this holy place with God – "through the curtain" that is Jesus' flesh, it's talking about the Temple curtain that once separated people – separated us – from God. In other words, through Jesus we have a new curtain, a new passageway to God, open to us through his death and resurrection.

We see this play out in the Gospel According to Matthew (27:50-51), where it describes the death of Jesus, saying, "At that moment, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split."

What this means is that we come into the presence of God freely and joyously through Jesus Christ, and that means all of us, joyfully united, being of the same mind and purpose as Christ. And yet, this world is far from being of the same mind and purpose. Amid all the distraction and destruction we see each day, how is it that we can ever be of the same mind and purpose. It is only through the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The word Gospel literally means "good story," good news. We come together in thought, word and deed by sharing together in the Good News of Jesus Christ, by reminding each other – and ourselves – what we know and believe about God and Jesus and us as God's people, which we do through our faith-based practices and traditions.

We don't have to look far to see someone who has lost sight of Jesus – maybe, sometimes, even just looking in the mirror. We don't have to travel far to meet someone who has strayed from the ways of Jesus – maybe, sometimes, no farther than our own hearts, encountering our truest selves. Whether you're looking at yourself or at someone else, the love and acceptance of the Lord, the hope and promise of our faith is the only way forward toward a better tomorrow.

This is why Hebrews encourages us, saying, "Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together – as is the habit of some – but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

The approaching Day that Hebrews is pointing to – and I mean Day with a capital “D” – is the Day of Christ’s return, when all creation will be an expression of God’s glory. What Hebrews is saying is every day that we don’t see God’s glory fully and faithfully reflected is a day we need to proclaim the hope and assurance of Christ’s victory, victory over all that opposes God’s will. In other words, we need to encourage one another everyday in the faith of Jesus Christ, calling on ourselves and others to reflect the love of God in word and deed.

The things we say to one another – the things we say to ourselves – whether through our words or our actions, they have a divine purpose, and that purpose is to reflect the love of God and faithfulness of Jesus Christ.

It’s easy to doubt God’s love, particularly when things aren’t going well. It’s easy to lose sight of Jesus, particularly when the peace and love he embodies gets overshadowed by so much chaos and divisiveness. But that’s just when we need to reconnect with God and recommit to Jesus.

If you or someone you know is struggling in their faith, in their self-worth, in their sense of safety and hope for the future, look to Jesus. Remember and retell the story of Jesus, who lived among us as a blessing for all, who took up the cross to redeem all creation, who ascended to heaven in the promise of new life in all our tomorrows.

In Christ, God assures us that this current day of darkness will give way to a glorious day of light, a never-ending time of love and togetherness. Our purpose today is to live into that hope for tomorrow, and to tell others about it, through words and deeds that are a true reflection of the life, and the death and the resurrection of Jesus and all that means for us and our world today. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

God of liberty, we rejoice in the blessed abundance you have bestowed on our cherished land.

We praise you for the freedom of religious expression which allows us to gather the way we have today.

We praise you for the freedom to say what we think. We praise you for the freedom to dream our own dreams and to strive to make them come true.

In freedom we are strong, yet freedom is a fragile thing. Thank you for the men and women who help to defend our country, and guide the decision makers by your divine wisdom and desire for peace.

Help us protect our freedoms through the exercise of personal and civic responsibility. Give us as citizens the discernment to realize that poverty and violence anywhere weakens the nation everywhere.

Help us choose leaders who will do what is necessary for the well-being of the nation. Help the citizens of this land to achieve consensus on our most pressing issues, so that united we can help our elected leaders govern with clarity, consistency and decisiveness.

As people who have been freed forever through the blood of Jesus Christ, help us to guard against the tyranny of self-interest and greed.

Inspire us to be advocates for people whose voices cannot be heard in the public debate, that all your people may have a share in honor and prosperity and hope.

We pray, too, for those struggling with illness and disease, and especially for those we have kept in thought and prayer these recent weeks.

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen**