

SERMON: Speaking of God
TEXT: Luke 4:21-30

1-30-22

I was in the second semester of my sophomore year at Macalester College when I decided to drop out. I just didn't know what I wanted to do, and I was not cut out to be an academic. Plus, I had explored several careers I thought I might be interested in, but they all required post-graduate work. And I was sooo tired of school.

Well, when I shared the news that I would be quitting at the end of the semester, I got yelled at. Not by my parents. Not by my siblings or my friends or my boyfriend. Not even by my academic advisor. I got yelled at by Dr. Scott Nobles, the Chair of the Speech and Debate Department. You see, I was majoring in Speech Communications and had taken two or three courses by that time. I enjoyed the courses and excelled in them, but I had no idea where it was leading. I tried being a part of the award-winning debate team, but I learned very quickly that I was not cut out for it. I did not see myself as an attorney or a broadcast journalist or a speech therapist or a public relations specialist.

Looking back on that time in my life, I'm pretty sure I was clinically depressed. But very few people knew how to identify depression in the 1980's.

Certainly, Dr. Nobles didn't. And I was confused about why he was so angry with me. He told me I was making a terrible mistake and that I would one day regret it. At that moment, what I regretted was telling him about it. I think he might have been angry about something else, and I was a convenient target for his anger. Or maybe he was depressed, too.

If only he could see me now! In a career that depends heavily on my public speaking abilities.

Of course, I understand now that it was God's plan all along for me to be a preacher. But I had no inkling that I would someday be SPEAKING OF GOD.

In three of the four lectionary passages for today, there is some mention of speaking. We are familiar with First Corinthians 13 as "the love chapter." But it begins with an image of what I would call *empty speech*. "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." Several verses later, the Apostle Paul writes of our childish ways. "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways."

We cannot speak of God without speaking of love. SPEAKING OF GOD with anything other than a tone of love, is just noise. And children, though they may not have the words to speak of God, often express a mysterious knowledge of God greater than any theologian.

In Jeremiah, we read that the Lord appointed Jeremiah as a prophet to the nations before he was even conceived. But Jeremiah is reluctant to accept the task. “Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” To God, however, age is no excuse. “You shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you.” Touching Jeremiah’s mouth, the Lord assures him, “Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”

You have probably heard the humorous little prayer, asking “Lord, put your arm around my shoulder and your hand over my mouth!” But I like the idea of God putting words into our mouths. Whenever we’re worried about not knowing what to say or about saying the wrong thing in difficult conversations, perhaps we should ask God to give us the words we need.

Moving on to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus has just concluded a public reading from the prophet Isaiah, commenting, “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” He proclaims that he is the one about whom Isaiah wrote. And his hometown crowd is bursting with pride. “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.” But their pride soon turns to rage when Jesus tells them not to expect any special favors.

SPEAKING OF GOD, Jesus tells the uncomfortable truth.

“But the truth is,” Jesus said, “there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”

I will admit that it took me a long time to realize what Jesus was saying here. He is giving examples from Israel’s own history, when respected prophets of the time were called by God to serve those from foreign lands rather than their own people. While Israelites were starving, God sent Elijah *not to help them*, but to help others who were also starving. In particular, a foreigner: the widow at Zarephath in

Sidon. And God sent Elisha, another prophet, to cleanse Naaman, a man from Syria, rather than cleansing the many lepers in Israel.

These are historical truths that the people of Nazareth seem to have conveniently forgotten.

It is clear that the Israelites in Jesus' hometown of Nazareth - his own people - are feeling entitled to be first in line for his miracles, his abundance, his mercy, and his love. They have placed themselves above others. They want those on the margins to stay where they belong, to go to the back of the line, to be satisfied with whatever is leftover - if anything. But, speaking as the anointed one of God, Jesus is making the point that the outcast and those on the margins of society are the ones who ought to be served first. The poor. The captives. The oppressed. The widows. The orphans. The foreigners. The least and the last.

SPEAKING OF GOD, Jesus speaks the truth. Unfortunately, the people of Nazareth misunderstood. Jesus wasn't rejecting them. Rather, Jesus was reminding them that God's love extends beyond the borders of the town, beyond the borders of the nation, beyond the borders of their understanding. God's love is for the hometown crowd, of course, but it's also for the whole world. And it's important to

bring that message first to those who don't know, who haven't met Jesus, who haven't received healing, who haven't felt unconditional love.

Each year, the Presbytery of Giddings-Lovejoy chooses a theme and provides opportunities for churches and church leaders around the Presbytery to learn about a particular topic. Last year, the theme was world missions, and at each Presbytery Gathering we enjoyed the opportunity to hear from Mission Co-Workers in various parts of the world.

This year, the theme is Evangelism. And because that "e"-word has such a negative connotation, we do have a lot to learn. In our minds, we imagine having to knock on doors and talk to strangers about Jesus, or standing on a street corner preaching repentance. But evangelism is so much more than that.

Using a resource developed by the PC(USA), we will be learning about 8 Habits of Evangelism: Worship, generosity, justice, radical welcome, sacraments, teaching, prayer, and fellowship. As I study these habits with others around the Presbytery, I hope to share what I learn with both of my congregations.

SPEAKING OF GOD, the words we use and the messages we send are so important. And it is my prayer that God will put the words in our mouths, as he did with Jeremiah. It is my prayer that all our words and actions will be infused with love, as Paul preached to the church at Corinth. It is my prayer that we will boldly tell the unpopular truths, as Jesus did, opening the door of welcome to neighbors near and far, and recognizing all people as children of God. It is my prayer that we will be inspired to learn and embrace the habits of evangelism, for the vitality of our church and for the growth of God's kingdom on earth... to the glory of God!

AMEN.