

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Preaching What We Practice”

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Matthew 10: 24-33

‘A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!’

‘So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.’

‘Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.’

One of the strengths of this congregation is that we have some excellent lay preachers. Many of our members have had the opportunity to preach the Word of God from the pulpit during the minister’s absence. I have heard it said that everyone has at least one good sermon to preach. Here at Meadowbrook Congregational Church, we truly put that old saying to the test. While there are some who might be reticent to speak in front of others, much less preach a sermon, I believe that it is important for us to talk to others about our faith and to hear it from others. This explains the beauty of our Spiritual Journeys program. I would like to thank Steve Keller for filling the pulpit wonderfully last week when I was away at the National Association meeting in Scottsdale. I know that Don Faber and Steve Pearson will also be preaching this summer.

I am reminded of a monastery in Germany that trained young men for various responsibilities within the priesthood. One man there in training lived in mortal fear of being called upon to preach in the daily chapel service. As he thought about his fear, he decided to head it off by going directly to the monitor of the monastery and discussing the problem with him. The student said, “Sir, I am willing to do any menial job that you assign me. I would be delighted to go out into the field and plow, fertilize, and irrigate them by hand. If you would care for me to do so, I would be happy to get down on my hands and knees and scrub the floor throughout the monastery. It would be a privilege for me to polish the silverware. Any menial job that you call upon me to do I shall be happy to do. However, please do not ask me to preach a sermon in the chapel.”

The monitor looked at the young man and immediately recognized that the opportunity to preach was just what he needed. He replied, “Tomorrow you are to conduct the chapel service and preach the sermon.” The next day the young man stood behind the pulpit and looked into the eyes of those assembled. He was most apprehensive. He didn’t know what to do. He

started the sermon off by saying, "Brothers, do you know what I am going to say?" All of those assembled shook their heads in the negative. The young man continued, "Neither do I. Please stand for the benediction."

Naturally this infuriated the monitor. He said to the young man, "I am going to give you a second chance. Tomorrow you are to conduct the service in the chapel and this time I want you to preach a message."

The next day, the scene was the same. And the young man began as he had the day before. "Brothers, do you know what I am going to say?" This time everyone nodded their heads in agreement. "Since you already know," he continued, "there is no point in my saying it. Please stand for the benediction."

The monitor was now filled with rage. Once again he went to the young man and literally roared. "I am tired with your foolishness. Tomorrow I will give you a third chance. If you don't preach a sermon, I am going to put you in solitary confinement and on bread and water."

On the third day the scene was still the same. The young man began his sermon as he had the previous two days. "Brothers, do you know what I am going to say?" Some nodded in agreement. Others shook their heads no. The young man then said, "Let those who know tell those who don't know. Please stand for the benediction."

The gospel lesson this morning is a continuation of words Jesus used in teaching his disciples about what they might expect as they go forth teaching and preaching and healing among the people. I particularly want to focus on verses 32 and 33. Here Jesus says, "If anyone acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge them before God. But whoever denies me before others, I will deny them before God." Jesus is summoning the disciples and all of his followers to be absolutely fearless in bearing public witness to him, saying that he will stand by all those who would speak boldly for him.

The lesson begs of us the question, "How good are we at professing our faith publicly?" What do we say or how do we act when we are given the opportunity to verbalize our sense of belonging to Christ and responsibility as a child of God. Chances are we aren't as good as we wish we might be. Chances are such public profession seems a bit embarrassing and challenging. Chances are, we would prefer to avoid such situations altogether.

I remember attending a National Association meeting a few years ago and eating lunch at a fast food restaurant with some other attendees from different churches. I knew that we came from different theological backgrounds but everyone likes burgers and fries! I was just about to dive into my fries when one member of the group suggested that we pray. I was not opposed to that, as long as the prayer was short enough to keep my fries warm. As we bowed our heads, this person began to pray. It was a long prayer. And it was a loud prayer. I can remember opening my eyes just a bit to take a peek to see if anyone else in the restaurant was staring at us. I have to admit that I was a little embarrassed. Perhaps that is what we all must feel like when we are asked to publicly profess our faith.

It is important to reflect upon the time in which these words were written in the gospel of Matthew. Proclaiming Christ at that time meant real persecution. Following Christ at that time meant personal sacrifice, pain, and deep distress. It is far easier to be bold in faith today than it was in that time long ago. But it is still not easy.

Our society generally views religion as a more private matter. Most of us talk about Jesus in church but keep it to ourselves in other places. Those who would profess their faith at work or in their neighborhood are regarded with a certain suspicion. Candidates for public office who openly profess a certain faith may gain some respect but are also subject to special scrutiny about their beliefs. Our culture, our national identity, and our preference for tolerance sometime force us into a shell. We generally don't want to be thought of as fanatics or proselytizers.

Yet in our silence, could it be that we have lost something special? In our embarrassment to deliver a message, have we forgotten that there is a message to preach? In

our desire not to offend, have we neglected to speak at all? And in doing so have we left the impression that our faith isn't worth talking about at all?

It has become fashionable for us to say that it is more important to practice what we preach. Actions speak louder than words. But sometimes actions demand explanations. Jesus seems to lift up the importance of our speech in matters of faith. If we perform acts of Christian love, but hesitate to say why we act, others will have no idea what might motivate us. If we heal and lift up, but fail to acknowledge the source of our spirit, others are left to guess what might drive us. If we gather for worship and leave to serve the world but do not educate our children that we do this in Christ's name, then we fail to teach them what they need to know about our faith.

Preaching what we practice is a way to publicly profess Christ. By our example we acknowledge Christ's truth and the grace of God. But when others inquire as to why we do what we do, we must be ready and willing to speak lovingly yet boldly. Preaching what we practice keeps us thinking about what it is we are doing. Preaching what we practice keeps us constantly discerning God's intention for our lives. Preaching what we practice keeps Christ's spirit alive as fuel for further service.

A little boy returned home from his first day at Sunday School. His mother asked him, "Who was your teacher?" He replied, "I don't remember her name. But she must have been Jesus' grandmother. She didn't talk about anybody else!"

Perhaps we needn't be that obvious. But we do need to be clear. Our words as well as our actions must indicate how what we believe and what it is that matters. Practice what you preach, but never fail to preach about that which you practice.