

The Task of the Preacher
1 Thessalonians 2:1-8
Wilton Presbyterian Church
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The task, gift and duty of preaching is difficult. In these days of polarization, it's even more perilous. I could say something, anything, and you could easily just click the button and you don't have to listen anymore. It's that easy. We've all done it... I've done it... changed the TV channel, turned off a video, moved on from a Facebook post... or not...

How did we move from a time when we could engage with people who feel differently than we do in honest debate? The toxic exchanges we are now seeing, hearing and experiencing from people we know as well as from those whom we've never met seem more commonplace than many of us have ever witnessed. The tendency for some is just to turn it off, and maybe some days... that's a good thing.

So, what is the role of the church... and what's the role of the pastor and preacher in these days? It's tricky, isn't it? On the one hand, we risk angering some who don't want to hear anything which may be interpreted as broaching anywhere near what may be interpreted as political in their minds, and on the other hand, we cannot say enough for those who long to hear words which are comforting to those who are suffering from injustice, and to which the scriptures continually address.

Here's what I know... it's what the apostle Paul said in our scripture reading which Emma read. "...just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak not to please mortals, but to please God, who tests our hearts."

I will do that. I will preach the Gospel. I will continue to say what I believe the Spirit is guiding me to say. It's my job, my calling as the pastor and it's in the polity of the presbyterian church... to preach from these texts which we call the living word after careful and prayerful consideration, and to have no other person try to influence that. AND it's the Holy Spirit's job to work within each listener to move hearts. It's NOT my role to try and figure out how to please people and keep them happy. Quite honestly, that's beyond my paygrade. And... quite frankly, it's not possible. There will be as many interpretations of what I say each week as there are people who listen and watch. Because we all come with our own projections and suppositions.

But, I admit... more confess... that I've muted myself at times about issues of justice-making... not wanting to potentially upset good people, knowing that something... anything, I might say might make people uncomfortable and then leave... But the reality is... the Gospel is clear that while Jesus taught and personified love... he taught that love does not come without action to actively confront and change the systems which create that injustice, and of which we are a part.

That's a message that we in the progressive mainline church don't always want to hear. But in my reading of the scriptures, if Jesus were here today, I imagine he'd be outraged at what he'd see in this country right now. That might shock or anger many of us who call ourselves good Christians. Jesus was clear, when we treat those whom society deems as the least (those whom Jesus loves)... with love, compassion and justice, we are actually caring for him. But this is not merely an attitudinal call, it is a call to action. The least, the last, and the left out become the primary ones who came and come to Jesus and find life, love, and lasting hope. Jesus' promise is that as we care for those in Jesus' community, **no matter their circumstance**, we are caring for him. And in that way, we

can actually experience the presence of God, when we care for those whom society deems as not worthy!

But let me put that in another way... The Spirit of God IS here... among us... in the face of our brother and sister AND far too many of them/of us are being hurt. My guess? Jesus would be angry about that and would call us to be and do more. Jesus, would call us in the mainline church to change. Not just to give money here and there... but actually to change who and how we operate.

Jesus came to set the captive free... to free the oppressed and to bring good news to the poor. For some of the gospel writers, that meant the literal poor and for others it was the spiritually poor.

So, what does this have to do with the scripture lesson this morning?

Paul wrote two letters to the church of the Thessalonians. They were faithful people, and Paul, who had visited them before, was writing to encourage them to be a people who lived with Jesus as an example and to be Christlike in their relationships, even as he had experienced great hardship, including imprisonment for having preached that word.

Sometimes sermons need to be pastoral... and sometimes they are prophetic. Sermons in these days have needed to be pastoral in so far as we have all suffered from the far-reaching affects of this pandemic which has shaken our world to its core. But they have also needed to be prophetic in that we have been forced during these days to reckon with our nation's history of injustice against many of our brothers and sisters in Christ who happen to have brown and black skin.

How is the Holy Spirit working in YOU and consequently in US as a community in this day and time? If this sermon is stirring feelings in you, if you're angry with what I'm saying... that's ok. Consider that the Holy

Spirit may be prompting you, as it has me, to deeper awareness that something needs to change or move.

I remember nearly 30 years ago, I was sitting in a classroom at the National Council on Alcoholism, taking a course to become what was then called an alcoholism counselor. I'll never forget that day, when the expert from one of the area rehabs said something which cut through all of the intellectual reasoning I had built up to protect myself, and there and then... there was no denying... I knew I had a problem with alcohol. That moment would change the trajectory of my life forever. It would take me 15 more months before I would finally walk into the doors of Alcoholics Anonymous and stay... but that day, I believe the Holy Spirit reached in and cut through my denial... and it felt horribly, horribly... WONDERFUL. I was moved to be a different person from then on... but it was painful getting to that point.

The truth shall set you free, says the scripture.

So, what is the Gospel truth? The life of faith is not about being comfortable... if we are growing in our spiritual lives... the Spirit will be moving in us to point out things which make us uncomfortable... things which need to be confessed, individually and corporately, which have kept us closed off from God's love... The gospel talks constantly about a dirty word in this day and age... giving and loving sacrificially... but here's what I know... the inverse nature of the Gospel message is that when we do that, we live more abundantly.

When our hearts are broken open to the suffering of the world around us, WE become more alive.

So... how is the Holy Spirit moving in you on this day? What do you, what do I need to let go of, what do we need to do to change ourselves and our world so that all may live life and live it more abundantly?

Our passage concludes with the words... so deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the Gospel but also our very own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

That is true... may it be so... alleluia! Amen.