

“FOLLOW ME!”
Jonah 3:1-5; Mark 1:14-20
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This week-end it is estimated that fifty million Americans will do what they do most week-ends: attend a religious service and listen to a sermon. That’s many more than will go to a movie, millions more than will watch the Superbowl. Approximately 50 million Americans will hear a sermon before today is over.(1)

What is a sermon? Well, it is a speech, but most of us would be quick to say it is more than a speech. At least it should be more than a speech! A sermon should inspire, motivate, help us get closer to God. Perhaps the best definition I have ever heard of preaching is that of Phillips Brooks, longtime pastor of Trinity Church in Boston. Brooks said that “*preaching is the communication of truth through personality.*”(2) When my wife and I were in Turkey, we learned that the sermons the Muslim imams preach in that country are written by someone at a high level in the government, and then sent out every Friday morning to be read in the mosques across the country. In the Christian faith, while there are suggested Bible passages for each Sunday, every pastor and priest is free to use his or her own material, and no one writes our sermons for us! After prayer and study, we share from our hearts what we feel God wants us to say.

Most people are very appreciative of the sermons of their pastors, but let’s be honest, there are some sermons that are more interesting and engaging than others! Let’s also admit that the length of the sermon is a factor! Remember the days of the Puritans, when pastors felt obliged to preach for an hour or more. The ushers would stand in the corner of the room with a feather duster, ready to awaken anyone who might nod off. In my first congregation I had a young man whose name was Mark. To say that he was not overly excited about sitting in church is an understatement. One Sunday morning he told me that he had a dream. He dreamt that he had done something wrong, and that as punishment, his mother made him come to church and I “sermoned him to death.” Amused, I asked, “How many sermons would it take to ‘sermon you to death,’ Mark?” Without hesitation, he answered, “About three!”

This morning another Mark, this one the Gospel writer, tells us that when Jesus began his ministry, he began it by preaching, and his first sermon was only one sentence long: “*The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.*” One sentence! Not enough to let anyone drift off to sleep. Not enough to sermon anyone to death! Oh, but Jesus’ sermons did not bring a smile to everyone in the congregation. Jesus’ preaching did not cause a majority of the people to say, “Nice sermon, Reverend.” Instead, many were offended. Jesus’ sermons caused conflict, and upset people left and right. When was the last time you were upset by a sermon?

Now, I confess. I do not like conflict. Many of my sermons are designed to lessen the conflict we sometimes feel as we seek to live together in a pluralistic society. When I read a tough Lectionary text, such as: “*He who has two coats must share with anyone who has none,*” (Luke 3:11) or Jesus teaching on forgiveness, where it says, “*Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?*” And Jesus replies, “*Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times,*” (Matthew 18:21-22) I can feel the tension in the room. Then I stand up and say, “Relax, I can explain this to you. I’ve got three understandable, perfectly believable points to make about this text.” But not Jesus. His preaching provokes conflict, and that’s O.K. with him.

In the mid 1700’s a preacher arose in England whose sermons offended people, causing conflict in churches and eventually the forming of a new denomination. The man’s name was John Wesley. Unlike those who were willing simply to go through the motions, Wesley believed that preaching should stir the heart and cause the hearers to examine and change their lives. Due to his persistence and his conviction, the Methodist movement was born in England and eventually became the largest Protestant denomination in the United States.

But didn’t Jesus preach about the love and goodness of God? And didn’t John Wesley emphasize the grace of God available to all persons without regard to race, gender or economic class? Yes, absolutely. But Jesus and Wesley would be quick to agree with twentieth century theologian Karl Barth who said that **grace that is not disruptive is not grace!** According to Barth, grace does not mean continuity, but radical discontinuity, not reform, but revolution, not violence, but non-violence, not the perfecting of virtues, but the forgiveness of sins, not improvement, but resurrection of the dead.(3) Grace means repentance, judgment, and death as a portal to life. The grace of God comes to lost sinners, but it disrupts us to the core. It kills to make alive and sets the captive free. Grace is disruptive because God does not compromise with sin, nor ignore it, nor call it good. On the contrary, God removes it by submitting to the cross to show that love is stronger than death.(4)

Jesus’ preaching forces us to ask who is in charge of our lives and who rules the roost. It has been said that we can discern our real values most quickly and clearly by looking at our checkbooks or our credit card statements. I suspect we can identify with equal clarity what our real priorities are by looking at our daily diaries, our Blackberries and Palm Pilots over time. What does our calendar tell us about our call from God? How much time each day, each week, each month, are we giving to attentive and transformative discipleship, to fulfilling our baptismal promises?

Obviously, while the challenge of the Gospel comes to individuals and is a spiritual matter between us and God, the implications are far-reaching, affecting other people, communities, governments and systems. I remember a young man in a congregation I once served who felt the call of God upon his heart and life to be a pastor. He came to talk with me as he explored the path that he felt God was calling him to take. However, when he told his dad about his call, his father became visibly upset. You see, his father had a different career path in mind for his son. So great was his father’s influence that eventually the young man abandoned his pursuit of the ministry, and went a different direction with his life.

Others have felt the call of God and their response has benefitted the entire society. As a young boy, William Wilberforce heard the fiery and convincing preaching of a Methodist pastor. He heard his preacher say that all people are created equal in God’s eyes. This caused

Wilberforce to question the institution of slavery. He mounted a campaign to abolish slavery in England, and worked tirelessly for the rest of his life until legislation was passed freeing the slaves throughout the British Empire. Today slavery is no longer accepted as appropriate anywhere on the globe. It all started when one man took the words of a sermon to heart.

When Jesus calls people, he calls them to repent. His sermons are not about some sort of vague, feel-good “spirituality.” They are the announcement of God’s new political order, the kingdom of God. They are a call for repentance, turning around, looking in another direction, and then a call for enlistment — discipleship. The point of his sermons is not to share interesting or new information with people. He expects, demands radical response, a turning around, a change of heart, a change of direction. Jesus did not come into Galilee asking “Do you agree?” Rather he asks, “Will you join me?” Will you follow me and be willing to learn more along the way? His sermons are not lectures that we are to ponder and perhaps say, “Yes. That seems right to me. That makes sense.” Rather we are to say, “I didn’t know that the world had changed. Wow! I’ve got to move to a different world. I’ve got to live differently because I’ve heard his announcement.”

Bishop William Willimon, in writing a commentary on this passage says, “The test of my preaching is never, ‘Preacher, that was a beautiful sermon you just preached,’ but rather, ‘Preacher, I can’t wait to get out of here and put this into practice. I’m not only going to take these good words to heart, but also put them into my hands, my feet and live as if the kingdom of God has drawn near.’”(4) That’s the test of a good sermon.

Mark’s Gospel tells the story rather dramatically. Mark says that Jesus just walked up to Simon and Andrew, James and John, and said, “*Follow me!*” He saw them, asked them to follow, and the Bible says immediately they left their nets and followed him. Now that word “immediately” always bothers me. I admit it. I have a hard time making decisions; especially quick decisions, especially when a decision will have long-lasting implications. If it is a big decision, I like to sleep on it. Even then, many times I hesitate.

Jesus’ preaching does not encourage us to “go home and think about it.” He presses his listeners for a response, a decision, now. There is an urgency to the message of the Gospel. There is no time for contemplation, consideration and procrastination. The time is **now**. Martin Luther King used to say, “Not to decide is to decide.” Every day we wait is a day that is lost. The hour is late; the time is now. Simon and Andrew, James and John left their nets immediately. God expects no less from us.

The disciples are called not just to believe something new but to act on their beliefs. Jesus wants them to “fish for people.” Their new vocation will be as real and as demanding as the one they leave behind. Just as fishing requires patience, perseverance and hard work, so the sharing of the Gospel will require these same attributes. The disciples are not called to become different people, but to employ their existing skills and talents for new purposes. For some it will mean leaving the familiar surroundings of home and family. For all it will require sacrifice and a new way of life.

This morning God is calling each of us. My sermon is not as short, nor as it as profound or as compelling as the sermon Jesus preached that day in Galilee. Not even close. But the message I hope you hear is the same as the one those first disciples heard: **The time is now! Let God take over your life today!**

It is difficult for me to preach like Jesus. It is its difficult for me to respond as quickly

and as freely as did Simon and Andrew, and I suspect it may be difficult for you as well. There are so many reasons why we cannot leave everything behind and follow where God is calling us to go. We hesitate. We make excuses. Wait until I'm older, the teenager says. Wait until I'm out of school, the college student says. Wait until I'm married and settle down, the young adult says. Wait until I'm established in my career, the young professional says. Wait until the kids are in school, young parents say. Wait until the kids are out of the house, middle-age parents say. Wait until we get the kids school loans paid off. Wait until I retire. But God is calling us **now**. At whatever stage in life we are **right now**, God wants us to make a deeper commitment to Christ.

Jesus came preaching words that both challenged and encouraged, cut and healed, hurt and helped at the same time. He came heralding a new world. Not many turned around, repented, and joined up. But because of a sermon, two people responded, and then two more. And eventually the world was turned upside down.

Today that message is confronting you and me. I truly believe that just as Jesus said to Andrew and Simon, James and John, "Follow me!" so he is confronting each of us with his urgent message: *"The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news!"*

Prayer: Dear God, we believe that just as you called the first disciples, so you are calling us today. I pray that through the poor words of this sermon folks will hear your voice saying, "Follow me." Some of us have heard your call many times, and we have responded. But today we need to commit our lives to you in a fuller and deeper way. For those who are hearing your call for the first time, help them to say "Yes, Lord," this very day. For now is the time to follow you. Lead us forward, Lord. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Notes:

1. Willimon, William H. "A Sermon about Sermons." *Pulpit Resource*. Vol. 37. No. 1., p. 18.
2. Theories of Preaching: Selected Readings in Homiletical Tradition (The Labyrinth Press, 1987., p. 14.
3. Willimon, p. 19.
4. *Ibid.*