

“Practicing Our Faith: Use Your Words”

2 Corinthians 4:1-7

August 8, 2021

Have I mentioned yet this morning how grateful I am to see you all here? Seventy-four weeks, 518 days. Have I mentioned yet how grateful I am for the steadfastness of your faith? For the constancy of your compassion? On this long and winding journey, we have been reminded again and again of our reliance on one another to experience and share God’s mercy. So, I think Paul’s opening in this morning’s passage is a good place for us to begin again. Since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. By God’s grace we have not lost heart. And today is a good day for the church, as I trust many more good days are to come.

I find that in the absence of solid ground, when floating on a sea of uncertainty, we humans look for footholds. We reach for life rafts. We find these, I think, in the practices that shape our lives and form our faith. A wise soul has said, “We do not think our way into a new way of acting. We act our way into new ways of thinking.” It was the Greek philosopher Aristotle who wrote about the power of habit. Aristotle wrote, “We are what we repeatedly do.”

All virtues, then, are habits. Practices matter. When beliefs do not come easily, when our minds and hearts are turned in knots by the context and circumstances of our lives, practices provide solid ground for the formation and sustenance of our faith. Practices matter because over time we become what we practice. Our habits shape our character. So for the rest of August, I want us together to spend some time exploring some of the practices of faith that are core to the way of life taught and embodied by Jesus. The scriptures we will explore this month underscore the conviction that the practices of faith are essential to that critical journey that moves us

from doctrine to discipleship, from believing in Jesus to following Jesus.

Barbara Brown Taylor always has the right words. Here’s the way she captures that move in her book *An Altar in the World*:

“To make bread [or love], to dig in the earth, to feed an animal or cook for a stranger—these activities require no extensive commentary, no lucid theology. All they require is someone willing to bend, reach, chop, stir. Most of these tasks are so full of pleasure that there is no need to complicate things by calling them holy. And yet these are the same activities that change lives, sometimes all at once and sometimes more slowly, the way dripping water changes stone.”

I believe with all my heart that faith is a way of life. I trust with all my soul that practices are what shape our lives. So this month we’ll explore practices, and this morning we will begin with our words.

Among the deep convictions that have led me into pastoral ministry and that continue to inspire me in this calling, none is more important than this: The spoken word matters. How we speak to one another, what we choose to say, which script we read from, and whose words we choose to hear have an incredible impact on every aspect of our lives. As a teenager, before I was convinced that ministry was my call, I knew that the spoken word was my passion. No matter what I did professionally, I knew that it needed to include the opportunity to speak in front of people. And now, even in a time dominated by the ubiquity of visual images displayed on screens, I believe that words have the power to create worlds of meaning. Words have the power to comfort us, challenge us,

motivate us, discourage us, wound us, and heal us. I believe that this human voice we have been given can be a channel for a divine message because I have experienced it in my own life. I have heard the word of God in the stories of fellow travelers.

I know that sometimes it seems that what was spoken in the time of the prophet Samuel is true of our time as well: “The word of the Lord was rare in those days” (1 Samuel 3:1). This certainly does not mean no one is talking about God, or using God language. On the contrary, I am fascinated by the near universal use of religious language across all areas of life these days. I say that I am fascinated by it, and not impressed or relieved, because most of the God talk I hear today has very little God in it. Perhaps like me, you have noticed a proliferation of empty religious vocabulary in popular culture, advertising, and the political sphere. Just a couple of examples should make my point clear. Several years ago, the Nike Corporation (a name, by the way, which comes from the Ancient Greek Goddess of Victory) began advertising its products, particularly a new line of shoes promoted by LeBron James, using the slogan, “We are all witnesses.” For years you could find the phrase on billboards, t-shirts, television commercials, and the rotating displays on the sidelines of every NBA game. “We are all witnesses.” The language of witness contains a great deal of meaning off the basketball court for those of us who are people of Christian faith. The word itself was originally used for Christian martyrs, those who were executed for witnessing to the resurrection of Christ.

Now, at almost every major sporting event, especially in playoffs and tournaments, we see signs that simply say, “We believe.” I always find myself wondering what the fans holding those signs believe. “We believe.” The words are powerful and deeply moving, but what is the message behind them? I’m nervous about politicians who speak about God with ease and familiarity. I’m anxious about how God makes an appearance in every televised award acceptance speech and touchdown dance. How televangelists make pronouncements with utter

certainty and absolute clarity about the will of God. How best-selling authors of spirituality and self-help books, Instagram evangelists, and Twitter influencers speak for God. “Thus sayeth the Lord.” Even the guy next to me on the airplane yesterday explained the mystery of God to me in great detail and with no ambiguity. I am amused by those highway billboard messages—perhaps you’ve seen them—with quotes attributed to God, quotes like, “Don’t make me come down there,” as if God wasn’t already among us.

Do you sense a lack of depth and authenticity amid the flood of references and allusions? Do you lament the emptiness of so many words, which as Tom Long has written, “Strike the ear with the dull clink of counterfeit coins”ⁱ? Would you agree with me that the flood of empty religious language leaves a drought of meaning, of weight and significance?

To speak of God requires reverence and care. To speak of God invites the practice of reflection. How do we speak faithfully of God in ways that convey the depth and meaning that we intend to carry? I would suggest avoiding slogans, sound bites, and greeting card theology. I would advise against embarrassment or constant apology. I certainly wouldn’t recommend coercive fear or mean-spirited judgment. I commend testimony. Be a witness. Tell of divine encounters, where God has met you and transformed you. The spiritual practice of testimony responds to the pervasive question—Is there something of God here?—with authentic stories of personal impact.

In this morning’s scripture, the Apostle Paul shares the conviction that lies behind his own testimony. It is quite simple. Paul says, “God has given me a story to tell and I am compelled to tell it.” Paul describes this story, his testimony, as treasure, treasure contained in a clay pot. Paul’s point is this: Focus on the treasure and not the pot. Tell the truth that the extraordinary power belongs to God and not to us. Give testimony. If you’re eager to go deeper, if you want to move beyond empty slogans, if you want to be a witness to something real, something

significant, something life-changing, tell and listen to stories of testimonies.

How has the love of God changed your life?
Through whom has God spoken most clearly to you?

Paul writes to the Corinthians: “We do not proclaim ourselves. We proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord.” This is critical, a message missing from many of those who promote themselves. Paul says we are invited, encouraged, commanded to move out of the way, to let the light of God shine through, to let the light of God be reflected in us and in our words. For if we shine, is it not because we are shined upon? We are not the source of the light; we are mirrors reflecting it.

Perhaps you have experienced that unexpected moment when, in the midst of an ordinary conversation about some routine topic, a word of testimony is shared. A story of vulnerability and grace is offered, and all of a sudden the room changes. The listeners lean in to hear a little more clearly, and what seemed unimportant only a moment ago is now central, for someone is sharing an encounter with God.

As people of Christian faith, we must speak of God. We must share the treasure, let the light shine, witness to God’s grace and love and mercy. We are compelled to speak because we have heard. So this week, in a conversation over lunch, on the phone with a friend, out in the yard with a neighbor, at work with a colleague or at school with a classmate, practice giving testimony. Do not use your words to condemn another or promote yourself, but with reverence say aloud what you believe and how that conviction is shaping your life. Speak your truth. Give your testimony.

My friends, the way forward from church, for this church, is all about learning to tell God’s story, not to cast aspersions or set criteria. When we are tempted to exclude or judge or dismiss, may we pray for the grace to first listen to the stories of others. If we are anxious about our own failures, our weaknesses, or mistakes,

remember that the treasure we carry has been trusted to vessels of human clay. Recall the truth that God uses what we offer. Leonard Cohen sang it well: “There’s a crack in everything/that’s how the light gets in.” So it is with these clay jars that form our lives.

Some of you know *Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood*, and some of you know it but won’t admit it. It’s a PBS Kids show and worthy successor to its model, Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood. It’s full of the kind of short songs that make wonderful and sometimes annoying ear worms for children and adults alike. One example is the title of this morning’s sermon, which comes from an episode on sharing your feelings and asking for what you need rather than fuming, hitting, or crying—good advice for us all. “Use your words.”

Beloved, when words are used to defeat, divide, distract, despair, discourage, and beat down, when angry shouting dominates the narrative and we are cautioned against reading the comments for what we might find there, I’m convinced that the words we speak in this place matter more than ever before. We need them now more than ever before. Words like, “All are welcome in God’s house.” Words like, “Child of God, you belong to Jesus Christ forever.” Words like, “The body of Christ broken for you.” Words like, “You are forgiven.” Words like, “May the God of hope fill you with joy and peace.”

Use your words. The language you use, the conversations you have, the observations you make, the stories you tell, the harsh comments you leave unspoken, the tenderness you choose to express—they offer God more than enough to work with.

One word at a time, chosen carefully and spoken in love. That’s how we carry the treasure. That’s how we live the faith. Amen.

ⁱ Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, Jossey Bass, 2004. p. 8.