

Isaiah 61:1-3

Mark 1:29-39

February 7, 2021

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

THE MINISTRY OF WORD AND DEED

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Then there's the story about the Presbyterian minister who preached for the first time in her new church. The sanctuary was full because people were anxious to check her out. Following the service, the members of the Pastor Nominating Committee were feeling mighty proud. Their new preacher had just delivered the best sermon the congregation had ever heard. Everyone was raving about how good the preacher was.

The word got out around town and the next Sunday there were even more people in worship. The preacher got in the pulpit and . . . she preached the same Sunday as the week before. The first-timers were overwhelmed, but the folks who had been there the previous week were puzzled. Still, they gave her the benefit of the doubt. After all, she had been busy moving in and getting settled in the manse. And it ***was*** an excellent sermon.

On the third Sunday, there was an even bigger crowd in worship. Some people came because they heard about the excellent preacher. To be honest, others had heard about her preaching the same sermon two weeks in a row and just wanted to see what might happen. Surely, she wouldn't preach the same sermon again! Well, sure enough, the preacher preached the same sermon for the third time! Now the members of the Pastor Nominating Committee were hurrying out the door and there were plenty of parking lot conversations. What was going on?

You know what happened on the fourth Sunday, don't you? After worship, the elders confronted the preacher in her study. The clerk of session said, "Preacher, folks are wondering what's going on. That's a mighty fine sermon you've been preaching, but don't you have any other sermons you can use?" The minister looked at the elders and said, "Yes, I have plenty of other sermons I can use." The clerk said, "Oh, OK, when do you think we might get to hear some of those other sermons?" The minister said, "Just as soon as everybody starts obeying the message of the first sermon!"

I wonder if that's how Jesus felt as he "went throughout Galilee, preaching the message in their synagogues." (Mark 1:39) What do you suppose Jesus' sermons were like? We learned last Sunday that he preached and taught as one with authority, and not as the scribes. We learned two weeks ago the main theme of his preaching: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (Mark 1:15) And today's Old Testament lesson was Jesus' sermon text when he preached in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth and stomped all over the congregation's toes: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and

recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19)

Between last Sunday's story about Jesus teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum and driving out an unclean spirit and today's story about Jesus healing Simon's mother-in-law and many of the sick who flocked to her house, going out to a deserted place to pray, and setting out on a preaching tour, we get a glimpse into a very busy 24 hours in Jesus' life. Last Sunday it was tempting to focus on Jesus cleansing the man of an unclean spirit. Today it would be easy to home in on Simon's mother-in-law and the crowds getting healed. Actually, those healings and cures take place under the umbrella of Jesus' preaching and teaching as one with authority. And Jesus himself tells Simon and the other disciples and us what is the priority of his ministry: "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." (Mark 1:38)

Jesus' ministry of word and deed is a very good model for our congregation's ministry. Even with the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, our church is involved in outreach ministries: the St. Nicholas Project at Christmas; the Helping Hands Food Pantry; the Feed Our Hungry Children/Backpack Ministry Offering; the Prayer Shawl Ministry; today's "Souper Bowl" of Caring Offering; and the Disaster Recovery Group of Duplin County, just to name a few. But you know what? We don't have to be a church to do any one or even all of those things in our community (but I'm glad we do). Our unique calling as a congregation in the body of Christ is to proclaim the good news of God. Our deeds and ministry follow our proclamation.

St. Francis of Assisi is said to have described our Christian calling this way: "Preach the gospel at all times, and if necessary, use words." We have plenty of other ways of saying the same thing: Practice what you preach. Walk the talk. Actions speak louder than words. The way you live may be the only sermon anyone ever hears. Now, there's nothing wrong with living that way, and Francis' advice is pretty good. But based on Jesus' inaugural sermon and his insistence that the reason he came was to preach the good news, Jesus himself might say, "Share the gospel at all times, and do good deeds if necessary." That's what Jesus did as he went throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.

In his commentary on today's gospel story, Lamar Williamson describes Jesus' ministry of word and deed and what it means for our Christian lives: "The preaching which dominates the announcement of [Jesus'] ministry (1:14-15) and the conclusion of this [story, *sic.*] is intimately linked with teaching, healings, and exorcisms . . . Jesus not only announces the kingdom's coming but also, by his authoritative words and deeds, incarnates its hidden presence. . . Disciples are those who receive it, enter it, and share Jesus' mission of announcing it."¹ Another Christian writer and preacher says something similar, which is worth pondering as a congregation: "Jesus' ministry is comprised of proclaiming the good news of God's coming kingdom, healing the sick, and resisting the forces of evil by casting out demons. How might that rather focused mission statement – proclaim, heal, resist – inform our congregation's sense of its mission?"²

That's actually a pretty good description of Presbyterian world missions over the last 200 years. From the beginning, Presbyterians set out to evangelize the world, to preach the good news of God. But in addition to a preaching ministry, Presbyterians have always built schools and health clinics and hospitals. Presbyterians have helped people with agricultural projects and clean water projects. To paraphrase Mark 1:39, "the Presbyterian Church goes throughout the world and the country, proclaiming the message and feeding people, healing people, teaching people, working as partners with people, and the list goes on and on and on."

Several years ago, I wrote a book review for a biblical journal called *Interpretation*. The book I reviewed is by William H. Willimon, former dean of the Duke Chapel and now a professor at Duke Divinity School. It is called *How Odd of God: Chosen for the Curious Vocation of Preaching*. Willimon writes about what it means to be a preacher and to proclaim God's Word in season and out. But he doesn't limit his observations to us individual ministers who preach on Sunday mornings. Instead, he also writes about **the church's** calling and responsibility to proclaim the good news of God. Willimon says, "The church bears witness to an active, busy Christ, and the best the church may hope for is that we are truthful witnesses, giving testimony to Christ's miraculous work, not surrogates for an active, living, presently working Christ."³

I still find myself thinking, "How odd of God to have called me to preach the good news!" As I said last Sunday, I take preaching very seriously, as my main responsibility and as a joy. It has been said that a sermon isn't a sermon until it has been heard. In other words, what comes out of the printer on Wednesday or Thursday isn't really a sermon until it's been proclaimed and heard.

The "Directory for Worship" in our church's *Book of Order* takes that transformation one step further, in the spirit of Jesus' ministry of word and deed: "The proclamation of the Word is incomplete if it fails to evoke the response of the people of God. When the Word is proclaimed, we are called, above all, to discern Jesus Christ, receive his grace, and respond to his call with obedience. . . Through the sermon, we encounter Jesus Christ in God's Word, are equipped to follow him more faithfully, and are inspired to proclaim the gospel through our words and deeds."⁴

I began this sermon with a preacher joke, so let me end with a variation of that same joke (which I had never heard before). A brand new minister arrived at his first church. Unfortunately, he conducted eight funerals in his first four weeks. It was as if folks had waited for their new pastor to arrive before they died. The preacher was overwhelmed and didn't have time to write a new sermon each week, so he preached the same sermon four Sundays in a row. The elders were concerned, so they contacted the chairperson of the presbytery's Commission on Ministry and asked her what they needed to do. The COM chairperson asked the elders what the sermon was about. Well, they couldn't really remember and they scratched their heads and hemmed and hawed. So, the COM chairperson said, "Let him preach it one more time."

Let us proclaim the good news of God one more time . . . and another time after that . . . and another time after that . . . and let us use our deeds, also, because we know they are necessary in a world full of needs.

Let us pray: Almighty and ever-living God, your Son, Jesus Christ, healed the sick and restored them to wholeness of life. Help us to see the signs of your kingdom and recognize your power at work in your Son, that we may join the apostles and prophets as proclaimers — in word and deed — of your saving love. Amen.

NOTES

¹Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983)pp. 57, 9.

²David Lose, “Epiphany 5B: Jesus’ Ministry and Ours,” at *In the Meantime* . . . 01 Feb 2021 at www.davidlose.net.

³William H. Willimon, *How Odd of God: Chosen for the Curious Vocation of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), p. 121.

⁴Office of the General Assembly, *Book of Order*, Sections W-3.0301 (p.89) and W-3.0305 (p. 90).