

Preach the Gospel without ceasing. Use words if necessary.

This is the bellwether motto of much of the church in the twenty-first century. And it's always bothered me - not because it is usually falsely attributed to St Francis of Assisi, but because substitute any other idea for preaching and it sounds absurd.

Feed the hungry without ceasing. Use food if necessary.

Clothe the naked without ceasing. Use fabric if necessary.

Heal the sick without ceasing. Use medicine if necessary.

For those of us shaped by the Reformed tradition, preaching is the definitive act of our worship. It's why we beedle in the Bible every Sunday morning. It's why the whole liturgy revolves around the proclamation of the word - because our tradition tells us that believing comes from hearing.

And so we train our ministers accordingly. You don't get through Seminary without taking four semesters of Homiletics. We train in Greek and Hebrew so we can explore the text in its original languages; we have sessions with vocal coaches so that we can work on diction and presentation. And all of that brings us to this passage from Luke's Gospel.

Because by every conceivable metric, Jesus would have failed seminary if he'd preached the way he preaches here.

Just five words in the original Aramaic become nine words in the Greek and English translations. But brevity isn't Jesus' only Homiletical problem. He'd also probably flunk hermeneutics in reading the 61st chapter of Isaiah and closing the book in the middle of a verse thereby changing the whole meaning. Imagine if you were reading John 3:16 in church and you read it as "For God loved the world so little that he didn't send his son, and then in sitting down he's convicted of the cardinal sin of preaching: no application. Just, "Today, the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

By every metric of the twenty-first century church, Jesus' first sermon is an utter failure.

But it's precisely here that I think Luke's goal is not to have us focus on Jesus, but to use Jesus to look at ourselves.

Luke and Acts were originally one book, written, most commentators agree as an ancient form of literature - an apologia, a defense of Paul while he was in prison in Rome on the charge of preaching a new religion. What Luke wants to make abundantly clear to anyone who will listen is that what Paul was doing wasn't new. A mission to those who were outside the covenant bounds of the religious establishment has always been what God has been up to. So why are we surprised when God expands the reaches of His grace even further?

This passage asks us to look beyond ourselves, and in doing so ask how your life is measuring up?

The essence of the preaching act is about communicating Truth. And in doing that we find ourselves relying on Binary terms. Do Good, don't be bad. Pushed to its extreme, it's about labelling things as Sin and Holiness; Right and Wrong; In and Out; Black and White; Light and Darkness.

But Luke, through Jesus is arguing a more persuasive position. Because those same categories existed in Jesus' time, except they were known as the Pharisees; as the religious leaders or teachers of the law. These were the people who created boundaries around everything and everyone. Because boundaries are about control. We put people and ideas in boxes with labels so that we can control them. And when we attach divine relevance to those boxes we are making an attempt to control God too, and that is something Luke won't tolerate. Luke's overarching point is that seeing the world that way produces the small safe God that Jesus came to break our addiction to.

So he takes everything that they considered vital to the work of a preacher and he turns it inside out.

He abuses scripture to highlight the point that scripture isn't a hammer you beat people over the head with. It's a story of God's active Grace from first chapter of Genesis to the last chapter of Revelation. It's a story of God's relentless pursuit of those who are outside the boundaries that religion superimposes on the world. It's a story about the new thing that God is all about.

He doesn't belabour his point because his point is already crystal clear. More words are just going to muddy the water. There is Good News to share with a world. Full stop.

And for the same reason He doesn't spend time on application because it's all application. Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing means – this is what Jesus is doing, and so for those of us who have adopted the term Christian, which means little Christ, then this is what we're defined by too.

Jesus sermon teaches us one thing, and one thing only: The Way of Jesus isn't a set of dogmas to which we ascribe. It's a way of living that impacts the whole way we see the world and our place in it.

What Jesus challenges us to here in Luke's Gospel is to see ourselves as part of the overarching story of God. St Andrews Calgary is not the final word on what the church is called to be, and it doesn't matter what our history is, how much money you make or how many years you've been here. What matters is how faithful are you being to the mission that Jesus has set you on.

So here are three questions you can ask yourself to see if you're paying attention to the things that Jesus is paying attention to:

**Are you doing justice, or are you hoping someone else will take care of that for you?**

In the twenty-first century, we've for the most part, relegated justice to the courts, but the problem with that is that the only people the courts will hear are those with voices. The Biblical imperative for justice found throughout the Bible isn't to support those whose voices aren't as loud as yours or mine. It's to give voices to those without them. The way of Jesus today is about going looking for the men and women and children who have no voice in our system and then standing beside them as an advocate and a friend. Today in our bulletin there is an appeal for *Inn from the Cold* that says they can't find enough volunteers. Or the Coldest Night of the Year event that seeks to be incarnationally present with those who live on the streets throughout the year. Syrian refugees, houses for the homeless in Mexico, working with the addicted, the broken or the mentally challenged, all of these are ways that the church in the twenty-first century can still be committed to doing justice, but if you and I sit back and let the few people who do everything anyway be the only ones who volunteer then we miss the point of Jesus' terrible sermon, and worse, we lose the right to call ourselves followers of Jesus.

### **Are you loving mercy, or are you loving yourself?**

This quote was all over social media this week. If the preferences of church members are greater than their passion for the Gospel, that church is dying. Take a look at the people sitting around you this morning. How many of them look like you? How many of them sound like you? Dress like you? Act like you? There's probably a fairly good chance that they come to church with you on Sunday mornings for the same reasons you do. But now look around and ask yourself this: who's missing? Who is under-represented? Who is staying away? The church that loves mercy is committed to making sure that everything that we do communicates God's love story to every generation, in every language, and to every person. Mercy means putting your needs and your desires below someone else's because that's what love looks like. And in many ways this is the hardest message for us to absorb in our comfortable middle class lives. We value our selves, and so the message the world shouts at us is look out for yourself because no one else will, while the Gospel whispers consider others more highly than yourselves

### **Are you walking humbly with God, or are you putting God in a box?**

The Gospel cannot be about making nice Canadians nicer, or there is nothing compelling about being part of a church. The church is called to be a people who are committed, not just to doing good and avoiding bad, but understanding that this flows not out of ourselves but out of a relationship with the God who is living and active with his church. We gather for worship to hear the story afresh week after week. We commit ourselves to prayer, not just on Sunday morning but throughout the week as well. We read and study our Bible, alone or with a group of people because we want to better understand the unfolding story of God. We practice the disciplines of the church, things like fasting, simplicity, silence meditation and tithing, not because they promise to make us a better person, but because they promise to connect our lives to God.

What does the Lord require of you, oh church?

But to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. Amen.