

**“We believe, and so we speak.”**

There is a saying attributed to St. Francis of Assisi that many of you have probably heard, it's a favourite among many Christians “Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary.” I think many of Christians, and perhaps some of you like this quote, because it extols the virtue of a good life, it extols the virtue of living our Christian life, it celebrates the impact the Gospel has on our lives, and, particularly if we are living a good life, it makes us feel that we are doing our part, we are preaching the Gospel, the Good News of God just as Christ calls us to do as his disciples. After all we hear time and again how the essence of the Christian life is just about following Jesus, living Christ-like lives, asking ourselves what would Jesus do, and so it makes sense for us, and so we like the quotation and the sentiment behind it because it assures us that by virtuous living, by following Jesus we are doubly fulfilling our Lord's command to preach the Gospel to the ends of the world. In fact if we were to preach the gospel at all times, through the way we live, we might never have to speak a word to anyone about the faith we have, the Lord we follow, the God we believe in.

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Here's the problem: the quote we so often hear attributed to St. Francis, has no connection to the historical figure, in fact much of Francis' life and teaching revolved around the spoken proclamation of the Gospel, the order he founded was an order of itinerant preachers, and he was known to preach the Gospel in as many as five towns per day at the height of his own itinerant ministry. Thomas of Celano, the first biographer of St. Francis described him in this way “His words were neither hollow nor ridiculous, but filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, penetrating the marrow of the heart so that listeners were turned to great amazement.” Any preacher today would dream of such a statement being made about them, so it is clear that preaching the Gospel with words, was essential to who Francis was, and what he thought the vocation of a Christian was.

While it is clear that Francis never spoke these words, and would never have agreed with the message they conveyed, that doesn't necessarily make them un-useful to us. Maybe we could just use the quote without attaching the weight of a famous Christian thinker, maybe the quote itself deserves merit, maybe the substance of the quote is still useful? Unfortunately the dichotomy that this quote and this line of thinking makes between ‘living the Gospel’ and ‘proclaiming the Gospel’ is unhelpful, divisive and to put it quite frankly unbiblical.

I want to caution, I am not saying that the idea of living the Gospel is unbiblical, it is after all an important part of the Christian life, perhaps even the most important part of what it means to live as a Christian. We cannot proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ if our lives are not first transformed by that Good News, if we aren't living a life of following are Lord and Saviour in deed. What is unbiblical however is the idea that as Christians we can separate living the Gospel from proclaiming the Gospel, or that we can adequately proclaim the Gospel only with our lives and without using any words. Living the Gospel, living a righteous life, a kind and generous life, is only ever a part of proclaiming the Kingdom of God, but it loses its force if there are no words to accompany it. In fact one might argue that without proclamation, without the words to accompany the life we live, we are not in fact living a Gospel-centred life. In his letter to the Romans Paul asks the church in Rome “How then will they call on him whom they have not believed? And how will they believe in him whom they have never heard? And how will they hear without one to proclaim Him?” Spoken proclamation is an essential part of what it means to live the Gospel.

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In the passage we heard this morning from his Second letter to the Corinthians, Paul deals with the idea of living and proclaiming the Gospel, as being joined together inseparably. Our passage comes at the end of a section where Paul is defending his worthiness to be an apostle. Since he had not been one of the original 12 disciples, had persecuted the Church and finally primarily saw his vocation as an apostle to the Gentiles, Paul faced a lot of opposition to his apostleship. And so in many of his letters he finds the need to defend his right to apostleship, by word and deed. As our passage begins Paul has just finished describing how he and his companions have been crushed, persecuted and struck down but not destroyed for the sake of the Corinthians and for the sake of the Gospel.

By any standard Paul's life is worthy of the Gospel, he has suffered for it, he was imprisoned for it, he was starved for it, he could argue better than anyone that his life reflects the Gospel and has no need for words but even that is not enough instead he declares the he believes and so he speaks. He declares that because of his faith, he cannot help but declare the Good News of God. And he does so, so that “grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.” Isn't that just beautiful, the image of the Grace of God just radiating outward extending from person to person, like water spreading across dry land, breathing life into the ground. It is a

gorgeous vision of interconnectivity and community as the grace of God is shared from person to person, so that thanksgiving and the glorification of God grow and grow.

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Over the past year in the news we have heard of the devastation ISIS or ISIL has wrought in Iraq, Syria and to a lesser degree throughout the whole Middle East. We have witnessed with horror as they have enslaved women and children, as we have heard the terrible stories of executions, and on and on. While the majority of ISIS’s victims have been Muslim, a large component of their reign of terror has been the wholesale destruction of Christianity in Iraq and Syria. From the tearing down of churches, to the burning of Bibles, and finally the execution of Christian martyrs unwilling to renounce their faith, ISIS is systematically and methodically stripping the region of any Christian presence. And yet in the face of this brutality ordinary Christian men and women, choose to hold strong to their faith, they refuse to renounce the hope that is inside them, even though in most cases it means certain death. They are not willing to die, because the Christian faith is just about virtuous living, because it is about being a good person. They are willing to die, because in Jesus they have encountered the living God, they have experienced a taste of the eternal weight of glory beyond all measure that Paul talks about in our passage from his Second letter to the Corinthians. Their lives have been transformed by their encounter with the Risen and Ascended Christ that they cannot turn back, they cannot help but declare, even as their executioners stand by that Jesus Christ is Lord. They have believed, and so they spoke.

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In the Book of Common Prayer, in the prayer of thanksgiving at a service of Morning Prayer there is a line thanking God for the means of Grace and the hope of glory. I am always struck by those words “the hope of glory” every time I pray that prayer, and I think it is this “hope of glory” that Paul is speaking about in our passage. This immeasurable weight of glory, the promise of eternal life in the Kingdom of God, both here and now and forevermore is all the more reason that we should not hold back our tongues in confessing and proclaiming our faith.

I do not expect any of us here to face persecution or martyrdom for our faith, it is a luxury we have in Canada and in the Western world, but it will nonetheless take courage and the guidance of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel, the Good News of God with the world around us, particularly in a world that is suspicious of anything ‘religious’ or preachy. We have been conditioned to understand faith as something private, something that we do not speak about, even to each other, because it’s just not polite or it is uncomfortable or downright scary.

In the Gospel of Luke we hear Jesus promise his disciples, and promise us that when we are called to defend our faith, when we are called to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ the Holy Spirit will teach us what to say. It takes a lot of courage to trust in the Holy Spirit, to trust that God will be there for you even when you feel the most vulnerable, the most naked. At this point you are probably thinking that I want us all to go out and become evangelists, proclaiming the Gospel on the street corners, and bringing people to faith in Christ. Don’t worry, it’s nothing like that (though you’re welcome to if you think the Spirit is guiding you!). No it’s actually something bigger than that, God is inviting us to share the Gospel in the messiness of our life, in the day to day activities which make up our lives, not just in the grand evangelistic or spiritual moments which we may or may not experience.

It is as easy, and as difficult, as being able to tell someone that the reason you are generous or kind, or live virtuously is because you believe in God and in his son Jesus Christ, and that your life is different because of what they have done for you. It is as easy, and as difficult, as sharing with someone you love – a friend or family member – what our Great God has done for you. It is as easy, and as difficult as Holly and Tiarah standing before us on Pentecost and sharing with us what their baptisms meant to them. It is as easy and as difficult, as offering to pray with or for someone, even someone who does not believe in God or Jesus Christ.

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The life of Christian discipleship is marked by proclamation, both large and small, we cannot separate it from living the Gospel, we cannot reduce discipleship merely to righteous living or asking ourselves what would Jesus do. Being a Christian, being a follower of Jesus means that we have believed, and so we speak; that we have believed and so we have responded in word and in deed, to the love of God that extends to each of us through Jesus Christ. Like anything proclamation, being willing and able to share the Good News, takes practice. And so my challenge to you today is to practice, to build your proverbial proclamation muscles. Let us share with someone here in the congregation what God has done for us this week, this year or in our life, to share with someone a brief story of what has made your faith so important for to, to share with someone why you may have remained a Christian while your whole family and friends have fallen away. Perhaps you could do it over coffee hour, or you could give someone a call this week, or invite someone to dinner for fellowship and to share together the faith you both hold to.

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Amen.