

“Getting Out the Word”

Preached 24 May 2009 at Community UMC, Romulus, MI

Text: Psalm 1; 2 Timothy 3:16-4:5

So there I was, just a few hours away from ordination, staring at the water coming out of the shower head was not going to get any warmer than cold. While it was very nice of Adrian College to provide inexpensive space in its dorms for the 1000 or so delegates to the Detroit Annual Conference, I wasn't feeling too warm'n'fuzzy about them turning off the hot water sometime Sunday morning.

As a younger man, I used to have more chutzpah about jumping into a cold shower, but not these days. So when I went to the service of ordination later that afternoon I was squeaky clean from only the neck up.

Now body odor is one of those things that an individual gets so used to that he or she has no idea whether it is offensive or not. So I knelt before the bishop, with my two sponsors (fellow pastors) directly behind me, and surrounded by all of the Conference's district superintendents, hoping that my aura would not offend.

God has a strong sense of irony. There I was, not at all that clean below the neckline, yet about to experience one of the holy and sacred rituals of the church in which I was to be permanently invested with the ministry of the gospel. But, like St. Augustine said 1600 years ago, the quality or worth of the one who does God's work doesn't make the work any less because it is God who is behind it all. In other words, God uses sinners to do the work of his Kingdom, and that's okay. Besides, unclean, broken, wounded, frail, faulty, sinners are all God can find anyway. The best we can do to help out is to come when God calls and let God fix our faults and failing by not defensively resisting him out of pride.

It wasn't long before I had forgotten about any possible body odor as the bishop placed a hand on my head and said, “Almighty God, pour upon Mark A. Miller the Holy Spirit, for the office and work of an elder in Christ's holy church.” In an instant I remembered how the resurrected Jesus commissioned his disciples by saying, “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you,” and then breathing out the Holy Spirit onto them. In an instant I could feel not only the hands of those touching my head and shoulders but the weight of a 2000 year heritage of telling the world about Christ and leading others into discipleship. And it really hit me when the bishop continued,

saying, "Take authority as an elder to preach the Word of God, and to administer the Holy Sacraments, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

In the hours and days since then I have reflected on my vocation and what it means to be ordained an elder in the United Methodist Church, having now received the fullness of the authority, privilege, and responsibility for, as The Discipline [hold up Discipline] states,

"a lifetime ministry of Word, Sacrament, Order, and Service ... Authorized to preach and teach the Word of God, to provide pastoral care and counsel, to administer the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion, and to order the life of the church for service in mission and ministry. [A] servant leadership expressed by leading the people of God in worship and prayer, by leading persons to faith in Jesus Christ, by exercising pastoral supervision, and by ordering the church in mission to the world."
(Discipline, ¶332)

But such a description is a bit stiff. Let me tell you how I got into this in the first place...

I'd been a Christian for a long time as well as a faithful church attender and tither. Except for a short bout of madness while in college, I never considered entering the ministry. Besides I was in the middle of a very successful career. I figured that there were plenty of religious nuts out there who would be happy to join up and do the Jesus thing.

And then one evening, several of us from the office were sitting in a bar just down road when it was like the lights were turned on for the first time. As I looked around, first at my friends, then everyone else in the room, I had the most profound sense that we were all living in a world of illusion and fantasy, deep within a culture that lies to us about what is truly important. It was like being in a cigarette ad or a beer commercial – you know, the kind where everyone is good looking and happy, yet you know none of it is real.

I began quickly to develop a sensitivity to the alienation and isolation of others in a world that tells us that we can and should not only make it on our own but be prosperous, successful, good looking, and thin, or be failures for not doing so. I was

learning quickly the worthlessness of the lie that the individual is the most important thing in the universe.

I was made to see how our economy functions to manipulate us into believing we are always in want, a problem easily resolved by buying this or that cool product. I was given vision to grasp how we are constantly being manipulated by politics and marketing for the benefit of an unscrupulous few whose ethic is greed for wealth and power.

I was given the mind and heart to know how false and worthless are the prejudices, stereotypes, and labels that we use to separate ourselves from others.

Most of all I was given eyes to see the working of a God who had shown us in Jesus the vision of a radically different world – a world where there were no boundaries between us – a world prosperous in love and compassion – a world, where no matter how fast things change, there is always a place for us – a world of hope.

Given such awareness, I couldn't just stand by quietly. I had to Get Out the Word!

But... what Word? ... Well, the Word of God, of course! ... But... what is the Word of God?

I suspect that the Word of God is a much larger concept than I can capture for you so I'll tell you what it means to me and you can choose whether my description makes sense or not.

The Word of God is for me, and above all else, an illusion-buster and truth-purveyor. It is living truth that cuts through the layers of illusion built up in order to serve the interests and desires of those who seek power and privilege. It is living truth that shows us the world both as it is and as God intends for it to be. It is living truth that tells me that I am worth more than the sum of the chemistry that makes up my body, the amount of money I will earn, the things I will possess, and the amount of product I will produce.

The Word of God is living truth that tells me that I am not the center of the world, that I am a part of something larger and more important than my own needs and desires.

Surprised that I didn't start by saying that the Word of God is the Bible? Don't be. The years I've spent studying the Bible and its theology have taught me that the Bible is only a tool – a means to an end. It is how we get to the Word of God but it is itself only a book – only words – not to be idolized or worshiped.

Now, even though I've pushed the Bible off its sacred pillar, make no mistake, the Word of God is nearly unintelligible without it. It is important. It demands our intention if we are to call ourselves “disciples of Jesus Christ”. And it demands respect and understanding so that it is not misused.

For the Bible is not magic, an idol to worship, a weapon to wield, a yardstick for measuring faith by how well it can be quoted, or a place to hide from the task and trouble of bearing one's cross in the world.

It is not a resource from which to pick and choose only that which can be bent to affirm our own assumptions and prejudices. We cannot use the Bible to manipulate God into supporting and blessing our most selfish and worst impulses.

It is not an “easy answer book” for Christian living – a complex and sometimes difficult enterprise in a complex and broken world. The Bible is a disruptive and disturbing vision of what we are created to be as individuals, families, communities, cultures and societies over against what we are now. The Bible raises our doubts and questions about life so that we are brought to a place of imbalance and discomfort so that we may be more open to the voice of God.

But that voice of God we do hear spoken to us we hear through Scripture because our Scripture, the Bible, is the authoritative revealing of God and God's purpose. Its pages contain artifacts of particular times, place, cultures, and human voices, ... but unlike a history text or a modern biography, the Bible is alive and speaks to the church of all ages.

And within its pages we hear the Word of God spoken most clearly in what the beginning of John's gospel calls “the word made flesh” - Jesus Christ. Indeed, the only way to really know Jesus is through the Bible ... and not the Jesus who simply shows and teaches a morality that answers the question, “What would Jesus do?,” but the Jesus who shows us a radically alternate world – a world transformed by working with God and not against him... A world in which the blind are made to see, the lame are made to walk, the lepers are cleansed, the outcast are befriended, the poor and oppressed are given relief, the hungry are fed, the naked are clothed, the homeless are

taken in, and all of us know hope and joy because through God, the evils of this world are overcome!

That, my friends, is what the Word of God is about. And that is what fuels my calling to preach.

But to preach what?

As I knelt there before the bishop ... as he conferred The United Methodist Church's authority as a minister of the gospel upon me ... as I could hear the echo of 2000 years of Christian proclamation in my head ... From Paul and Barnabas to Irenaeus and Tertullian, Augustine to Abelard and Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, and all who have preceded me ... And that echo repeated the same thing: Preach the Word of God in the Good News of the Crucified and Risen Jesus Christ who in dying won us our forgiveness and freed us forever from enslavement to our negative and selfish attitudes and behaviors, that which we call sin, and who, in rising, overcame the world for us.

Preach the Word of God that there is Good News for all who turn to God...

The Good News that we are not beholden to the powers of this world that would define us and label us and put us down by telling us that we are worthless. Worthless because of our age or our looks or our education or employment status or our skin color or our nationality. That God loves us enough to have sent Jesus to die for us tells us that none of those lies are true.

The Good News that nothing separates us from the love of God and in his grip we are safe from all that would destroy our souls.

The Good News that no matter what happens, things will somehow come out okay in God's keeping.

The Good News that led by Christ and in the power of the Spirit, there is nothing we cannot get through together. Not sickness, economic calamity, nor anything else in this world.

The Good News that if we open ourselves to Spirit vision we will not be taken in by the deceits and illusions of this world that would manipulate us merely for profit or political gain.

The Good News that we can be healed of all that makes us less than beautiful creations of God's hand in his image.

The Good News that whether it be our faith as individuals or our ministry as a church, if God wants us to succeed and grow then nothing will prevent that from happening.

The Good News that we will get through this day and enter tomorrow standing firmly on the Rock, ready for whatever comes our way, not as victims but as victors because we put our trust in the Lord.

This is Word of God that I am called to preach. This is the Word of God you and I are called to live.

Let us all join together with Jesus Christ at our center to live the Good News and in our living proclaim that Good News to a world so in need of hearing it.

Lets Get Out the Word!

Amen.