

February 8, 2015

## **“Practice What You Preach”**

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



*Mark 1:29-39*

*As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.' And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.*

This morning, for the third year in a row, First United Methodist Church is officially worshipping in two places. While many of us are here in the sanctuary as per usual, a great bunch of us is up on San Vicente Blvd. participating in the Home Run for Kids to benefit Upward Bound House.

If you're newer to the congregation, you may wonder: why Upward Bound House? What's that? Well, if you parked in our parking garage this morning, you parked under it. Senior Villa, home to low-income seniors, and Family Place that fronts on the other side, on 10<sup>th</sup> Street, which, thanks to the tireless work of its expert dedicated staff, has now graduated 800 families, including over 1400 children, off the streets and into permanent housing. 1400 children who tonight, will not be sleeping in cars, in cardboard boxes, on relatives' sofas, in abandoned buildings....children and families who have a bright tomorrow full of hope and promise, thanks to the safe shelter they received here, and as importantly, the supportive services and training essential to maintaining a thriving family life. To date, over 95% of our families continue in permanent housing. All this due to the tireless efforts beginning almost 30 years ago by members of this congregation in partnership with the City of Santa Monica and HUD.

So with a little well-deserved pride, we can say that we as a congregation have made a huge impact on many lives, many families, many children.

A couple years ago, I was interviewed by a student doing a paper for her religious studies class. It was on "Methodism" and she came to find out the Methodist position on a whole list of hot topics that ranged from war to suicide to divorce to euthanasia to climate change to conscientious objection to abortion to poverty to prisons to gambling to homosexuality to nuclear weapons to domestic violence...we finally got down to the last topic on her list—homelessness.

I went to the shelf and pulled off our 2012 Book of Resolutions and found our official statement on homelessness and just read it to her. It says, in part:

"The homeless are most assuredly the people of God—the people of God who call the church to both repentance and action. They are the hungry we are asked to feed, the strangers we are to welcome, and the naked that we are to clothe. They are the sick and imprisoned we are commanded to visit (Matthew 25:31-36). ...What we must seek for all people is safe, sanitary, and affordable housing. The church is called to not only seek to provide shelter but we must do more than house the homeless, we must build community. Home as a promise to the homeless must be the ongoing commitment of the church."

Now all that verbiage could sound rather generically lovely, but then I made it quite real for her. I asked her where she'd parked at the church. Across the street, she said, in that parking garage under that apartment building. She had no idea....which was my entrée to say: not only do we have a statement, we've actually done something about it! Not only do we preach the words, we've put our faith into practice. We walk the talk. We practice what we preach. And I told her a bit about Upward Bound House.

So three years ago when UBH came up with the idea of this 5K and 10K Walk/Run fund-raiser and awareness raiser, I thought "great" until they said it would be on a Sunday—when San Vicente is made available for such things. "Sunday is OUR day," I thought to myself. "We're supposed to be in church!" And then it hit me. We can reach more people with our message by being out there and part of it. And so—we're worshipping in these two places today. We start the day with communion. We have a kiosk with our name on it and our big "Together We Can Change the World" banner. Today we are practicing what we preach. We are literally walking the talk.

You know, this is so very "Methodist" of us. When John Wesley first started the Methodist movement as a student at Oxford in England in the 1700's, he emphasized worship and the sacraments and study. But early on, one of the group said—"you know, this isn't enough. We need to go to the prison up the road a ways and minister to those prisoners. They need our presence and we need to learn from them." And ever since this is a hallmark of who we are as Methodist Christians. We practice what we preach. We witness not only with our words but with and through our lives. Where we show up, how we live speaks the message of Christ and the love of God for the whole world.

The expression “practice what you preach” goes way back in Jewish tradition to a saying that can be translated as “fulfill or establish what you preach.” This is the tradition out of which Jesus comes. Fulfill or establish what you preach. We see Jesus doing exactly this in the stories we hear this morning from Mark’s Gospel.

Jesus is teaching and praying in the synagogue, and then he goes and heals a sick woman. He heals some others, and then he goes off apart to pray and then he resumes his preaching. It’s all of a whole—his teaching, praying, preaching, healing are all consistent. The one reinforces the other. People come to understand who he is and the power of his love not only through his words but through his actions. The message of his healing touch is as eloquent as the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus’ compassion for those who suffer is as evident in his care for them as it is in every word he speaks, every Scripture he quotes, every prayer he prays.

In this season of Epiphany following Christmas, we hear Bible stories that are intended to help us understand who Jesus is. They are stories that open to us the true meaning of the incarnation, the Word become flesh, God coming to live among us in Christ Jesus. For the Word become flesh, the Incarnate One, Son of God and Son of Man, Jesus the Christ, the words of teaching and preaching and the human touch that brings healing are all ways of communicating that God loves and cherishes each and every one of us, that God longs for us to have life in all its fullness.

And as we learn about who Jesus is, we discover who we are to be as his disciples. We, too, are to practice what we preach. We are to live out what we say we believe. So that a person who worships with us on Sunday and then runs into us on Wednesday will get the same message through us about God’s love.

Recently, Pope Frances put it pretty starkly to his flock. At a mass in Rome, he said to his priests: “Ordinary Catholics need to see in our actions what they hear from our lips... Inconsistency on the part of pastors and the faithful between what they say and what they do, between word and manner of life, is undermining the church’s credibility.”

I daresay this is more critical now than ever, living as we do in age when fewer come to church or see the church per se as a life-giving institution. For some people now, indeed for many people, you may be the only Jesus they ever meet.

What will your life say to them? Will they experience you as a person through whom the healing, saving love of God flows to others? Will they know you as a person committed to the least and the lost? Will they hear you speak up for the outcast and the misunderstood? Will they observe holiness through the ways you prioritize your time, your money, your gifts? Will your life preach your faith? You may be the only Jesus they ever meet.

Let me close this morning with this prayer from the 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish teacher and mystic, Teresa of Avila:

Christ has no body but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
Compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.  
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,  
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.  
Christ has no body now but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
compassion on this world.  
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.  
May we practice what we preach-- that in us, through us, others may indeed see and know the love of God in Christ Jesus.  
Amen.

Notes:  
P. C. Ennis Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany. Feasting on the Word, Year B Vol. 1; Bartlett and Taylor, eds. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008..

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