

Speak a Good Word

Micah 6:8 and Colossians 3:1, 2, 12-17

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Micah 6:8

What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Colossians 3:1,2,12 -17

¹So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth,

¹² As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Several years ago I had the privilege to deliver the homily at the memorial service for Laura Sibley. As I was preparing my meditation I remembered Frank had told me that Laura would say on some occasions "If you don't have something good to say, say nothing at all." Powerful words. I also remembered a favorite story of mine. I chose to share it at Laura's service. Today as our church is engaged in a discussion of what polarization means to all of us and

how we can confront it, I want to share it again:

It comes from a book, Beside the Bonnie Briar Bush, where the author, Ian MacLaren, tells of a young man, a recent seminary graduate, who was called to be pastor of a small Kirk in Scotland. Early Wednesday morning of his first week, the young man went to the study, locked the door and began work on the most important sermon of his career, his first sermon in his own church.

He knew much would be expected. In Seminary, he had won a preaching scholarship and he felt that people would come from miles around expecting a brilliant delivery. He would say nothing rash, but felt he owed it to the splendid training he had received to at least state the present position of theological thought and quote from several great theologians.

Two days later, he finished the last page. With great pride, he practiced it before an open window with a brilliance that even amazed him. As he finished, his only hope was that he might be kept humble and not be called to the great church in Edinburgh for at least two years.

But, suddenly he trembled with fear. The brilliant opening with its historical parallel, his cleverly written review of contemporary thought filled with all the right quotations and the trenchant criticism of old-fashioned views would not deliver. For the congregation had vanished and left one care-worn, but ever beautiful face whose gentle eyes were waiting with a yearning look.

Twice, he crushed the sermon in his hands. Twice, he repented and smoothed it out. What else could he say to the people? It was already Friday night, too late to begin anew.

Then in the stillness of the room, he heard a voice, his mother's voice. And he remembered the night he knelt by her deathbed, as she stroked his head and said: "I cannot see ye noo, Laddie, but I know ye're there, and I've just one wish.

If God calls ye to the ministry, ye'll no refuse. And the first day ye preach in ye own kirk, speak a good word for Jesus Christ. An' Ian I'll hear ye that day, tho ye'll no see me, and I'll be satisfied."

Now all he could hear were those words: "Laddie...speak a good word for Jesus Christ."

He knelt by the hearth and within a few seconds the prized sermon that was to shake the village were embers in the fire. On Sunday morning, when the benediction was pronounced, no one who could remember the exact words of the sermon. However, the subject was Jesus Christ and before the lad had spoken five minutes, the preacher had disappeared and the Master himself was present.

A wonderful story! A story that has special meaning for every graduate of a theological seminary, yet it is also a story for each of us. Each day, we speak to the world from the pulpits where we work, live, study and serve.

What kind of message do we bring to this troubled world? What kind of message do we bring to this church? Do we speak a good word for Jesus Christ?

In the world today, it seems difficult to speak a good word for anything or anyone. Values, once considered supreme, now are frequently challenged, and even worse, totally ignored; often for the sake of expediency, pleasure and profit.

Everyday, we are bombarded with images and words that often scream at us, and point at us accusingly. The newspapers, television, radio and films are loaded with negative messages that, in many ways, suggests our world has lost its center and forgotten its Creator. A statement of faith no longer shapes the decisions made by so many, rather we are being shaped, and tossed to and fro, by conditions over which we exercise no control, either by design or default.

Even for those of us who are believers, we are frequently no longer actors, but merely reactors.

Is it any wonder that home life can reflect the uncertainty of the times? Is it surprising that some people have become so hardened and cynical; critical of institutions we once valued and apathetic towards social change. Do you wonder why there are young men and women who are seeking something which they could not find in their own homes or communities and find random shootings, terrorism and jihad an attractive alternative.

In a world such as this, do you and I speak a good word for Jesus Christ?

Speech is an amazing gift. It can capture the essence of a moment; it can depict a scenic wonder; it can convey a feeling; it can express an emotion. It can comfort one who has experienced despair, or break the barrier of loneliness. Speech can assist learning, encourage confidence, and give affirmation. It can convey truth, knowledge, gratitude, beauty, peace and love. Speech can be used for so much good.

Speech, however, can also communicate hatred, greed, envy, and distrust. It can crush another person's thoughts, abilities, and gifts. It can mock and slander. Speech can destroy!

Reflect on some of the conversations you had this past week. Were they positive or negative, supportive and productive or meaningless and insignificant.

Have you ever felt that a conversation leaves something to be desired. Have you ever heard, or used, the old expression: "You just don't understand!" Have you ever experienced frustration when the person you are talking to, seems obsessed with his or her own agenda, anticipating your next remark, and proposing solutions to problems that were not raised or pertinent? Have you

ever felt anger, when in conversations, all trivial issues are discussed at great length, but consequential issues are left alone? Then ask yourself, how many of your conversations express unhappiness, anger, despair, and disappointment, rather than joy, satisfaction, pleasure and hope?

Human beings are strange animals, often more at ease discussing weaknesses rather than strengths, focusing on failures rather than successes, and looking to the past rather than to the future. At times, it is easier to express displeasure with something or someone, while to genuinely praise someone can cause a speech impediment. Criticism seems natural to our lips, but approval seems alien.

We even do this in those relationships we say we value: as spouses, as parents, as children, as friends, and yes, as church members. Too often, we talk at people, or past people, not with people. We make the assumption others know we love them and it does not need to be expressed. We fail to recognize the significance of criticism except when it is directed at ourselves, then we are truly conscious. We delight in gossip, except when we are the recipients. We divulge secrets and put aside trust, without counting the cost, until our trust has been betrayed.

Do we, from the pulpits where we work and live, speak good word for Jesus Christ?

It is against a backdrop of a disoriented world, where values have gone astray and where communication has faltered, that the words Paul wrote to the Colossians take on increased significance.

Listen again to a some of the things Paul wrote:

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

¹⁴ Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body.

¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Paul's words ring true. In Jesus Christ, we have experienced a rebirth, a new creation, and been called to a royal priesthood. Oh yes, we minister to a world that is corrupt, but we still can choose to communicate with others in love. The conditions of the world do not justify anger, hopelessness, harshness and cynicism that deny another person's humanity. When we do so, we deny Christ.

Paul, in Christ's name, offers us the invitation, not to yield to this world, not to run from this world, but to transform it. This transformation begins when we recognize our lives are to be examples by which others might chart their own lives. As Jesus said: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

No small order, but Jesus did not intend it to be. He had high expectations - of himself ... of others. Sometimes, we too easily placate ourselves when we foster the misconception that Jesus was simply laying out the ideal, knowing we would fall short of the mark. I believe He expects us to achieve the goal by surrendering ourselves to God – to God's will, love and grace. Too often, we have been happy with second best, believing it to be our very best.

What a different world we would live in if we could do as Paul writes. The world would not suddenly be transformed, but where we live would be. We

would see possibilities in every situation, conscious of the needs of others, showing forgiveness and tempering our criticism in love. We would find hope where we previously saw despair, find peace where we knew anxiety, and discover love, where once we knew only mistrust.

I have no way of knowing what you will remember from this sermon but I hope you will at least remember, as you return to the to the pulpits where you live and work to **SPEAK A GOOD WORD FOR JESUS CHRIST!**

Amen and Amen.