

"THE WHOLE COUNSEL OF GOD'S WORD."

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden

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Texts for the Sermon: Acts 20:17-32, esp. 27; II Timothy 3:15 – 4:2

Introduction

By now all the members of our church should have received The Woodyard Easter letter. When you got it how did you read it? Did you begin at the beginning or did you skip to the end to see how it turns out? Did you read the third paragraph first and then skip to the seventh paragraph? Did you just read about the boys you liked and skipped over the boys you don't like so much? Did you read a little bit in the middle and then put it down and pick up another letter you got and read a little bit of it and then bounce off to yet a third letter before coming back to another part of our letter?

That's not how we read letters is it? Yet sometimes that's how we approach reading and studying the Bible. We can be rather scattered, bouncing from one place to another. Last May I started preaching through the Gospel of Mark and then took a break for Advent and Lent. As we return to systematically going through Mark by the means of expository preaching I decided to take a Sunday to remind us of the purpose and benefit of preaching in general and of *systematic expository* preaching in particular.

Why do I preach the way I do especially when some emergent churches and mega-churches in America are going away from it to stories, videos, drama, dialogues? Images are taking over and pushing aside words. TV has made it harder for us to focus and listen for longer stretches of time. Ten minutes is about the max before taking a commercial break. We prefer style over substance.

Today there's an impatience with anything that can't be said in a nutshell. And as I am fond of quoting "anything that can be said in a nutshell belongs there" (Sydney J. Harris).

Today we oppose dogmatism, we think every opinion is as good as another and every interpretation is as valid as the next. We live in a relativistic and subjective culture and have lost our ability to discern and make judgments. We live in a day when everyone says as Pontius Pilot did, "What is truth?" Who says the Bible is authoritative?

There's a growing famine for the Word of God in our culture and an increasing crisis of confidence in the pure and plain preaching of the Word of God. So why do so many of you keep showing up week after week to do something that's increasingly out of fashion, and so counter cultural?

Let me ask and answer three questions about preaching in general and the systematic exposition of Scripture in particular.

Why do I preach and teach from the Bible? Why is the Bible my only text when there are lots of great books written by lots of great writers with lots of wisdom?

Because only the Bible is the Word of God. When we preach and teach from the Bible we are preaching and teaching the very words of God. There is no authority outside of this authority.

2 Timothy 3:16 All Scripture is breathed out by God.

John 17:14, 17 I have given them your word ... [17] ... your word is truth. (ESV)

2 Peter 1:20-21 ... no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. [21] For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (ESV)

Expository preaching that systematically goes through the books of the Bible begins with this firm foundation that the Bible and only the Bible is the true and trustworthy and authoritative Word of God.

Expository preaching seeks to exposit what's in the text. To exposit is to expose what's there and to make it more plain or more clear. The opposite would be imposition, imposing something on the text that's not there. Expository preaching is like what Len Honcoop does for a living. He goes out in his gravel pit and digs up good gravel that can be used to lay a good foundation for a road or a building, a foundation that will be stable and hold up under pressure.

An expositor goes to a text of Scripture to dig out the good meaning and lay a firm foundation for our lives and our understanding. The goal of studying and preaching and teaching is to dig out the truth, to mine the gold, to lay hold of the treasures buried there.

Why preach straight through books of the Bible rather than just pick and choose the most interesting or most relevant passages?

If God's Word is the bread of heaven and the whole counsel of God's Word is spiritual food and drink, then preaching and teaching through whole books of the Bible ensures that we are getting a balanced diet. It keeps a preacher from just picking out the fruits and the particular vegetables that he likes. I can't skip over the beets and okra and lima beans.

Systematic expository preaching forces a pastor to preach the hard passages that he might want to skip. When we get to Mark chapter 10, if I just skip over Jesus' teaching on divorce you will know that I'm a big chicken or I just want to preach what's nice and pleasant. On the other side of the coin preaching in this way lets a pastor treat some hard topics without being second-guessed as to what his motive is or who he's trying to preach to.

When I preach through a book in a real sense I am not picking the texts, the texts are picking me. And by preaching expository sermons in a systematic way it reminds us that this whole book has authority, all that it says is true from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21.

Finally, preaching systematically through books honors the importance of always reading Scripture in its context, noticing what comes before and what comes after. Preaching through Mark helps us see the flow of the Gospel and the progress of Jesus' ministry as He moves toward Jerusalem. We feel the growing urgency and the building tension.

Preaching through whole books honors the way the Holy Spirit inspired and wrote each book. Can you imagine if you got five letters in the mail, reading a few sentences then skipping down

and reading some more sentences and then jumping over to another letter and starting it in the middle somewhere randomly? The best way to get the full meaning and spirit of a letter is to begin at the beginning and read through to the end. The Bible is not a collection of quotable quotes or just a collection of verses but a collection of books.

History bears me out on this way of preaching. Early church fathers like John Chrysostom preached through books, as did many of the great reformers, John Calvin in particular. In our own lifetime, look at the ministries of preachers like Warren Wiersbe, Charles Swindoll, John Stott, John Piper, and perhaps most notably John MacArthur who after 40 years at Grace Community Church has recently finished preaching through the entire Bible verse by verse.

Now obviously I am not completely opposed to topical sermons. I preached the four songs of Christmas during advent, and I preached on several different topics before and during Lent. I'm preaching a topical sermon this morning.

One must be careful preaching systematically book after book not to quench the Spirit. I want to be open the where the Holy Spirit leads. I feel free to break any series at any time or go away and come back. Of the four churches I have served in my ministry I have felt the most freedom here and as a result preaching the Word of God here at First CRC has been the most fulfilling and gratifying.

I am also sensitive to the differences in this church family. Some of you love a long series on a book, others of you weary of that after a while. So I try to mix it up. I think the two lengthy series on the Heidelberg and the Canons of Dort were a bit much for some folks. So I am doing the Minor Prophets. But even that I am doing differently, just doing one sermon per book.

Paul declares that while he was in Ephesus he preached the whole counsel of God. Paul preached in Ephesus for two and a half years, one of his longer stays in a church. I don't think he preached through the entire OT in that time, but he did preach in such a way as to lay before them the whole counsel of God. Listen to the context of that text:

Acts 20:17-32

“You yourselves know how I lived among you ... [19] serving the Lord with all humility and with tears ... [20] *how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, [21] testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.* ... [26] Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, [27] for *I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.* ... [29] I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; [30] and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. [31] Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. [32] And *now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.* (ESV)

Being innocent of their blood means that Paul preached the whole counsel of God's Word in such a way that it included the hard texts, the texts that exposed sin and warned of God's judgment, texts that brought tears (Ezekiel 33:1-6).

As a result there was a very close bond between Paul and the church in Ephesus. That bond grew from the shared experience of going through God's Word together. Their community life

was built around the truth, truth that brought repentance, truth that produced tears, truth that built faith and left behind a great inheritance among those who believed and were being sanctified.

The strength of our bond here is not just our shared experiences in history, but our shared experiences in the Word of God. The Holy Spirit is working in and through us drawing us closer to God and each other, convicting us of our sin and deepening our faith. A foundation is continually being laid in the Word of God. We can look back and remember how God spoke to us through something in the Sermon on the Mount or the book of Ruth or Jonah or in the Gospel of Mark.

Faith comes from hearing and hearing by the Word of God. Some Sundays it's specific, some Sundays it's general, but always the Word of God building our faith. I preach to glorify God and lift up the power and truth of His Word, I preach to help you, to profit you, to edify you, and when necessary to correct, rebuke, and admonish you.

The means God uses to dispel the darkness in our souls is the setting forth of the truth in the preaching of His Word. By this we are saved and by this we are sanctified. Let he who has ears to hear, hear.

Paul preached the whole counsel of God's Word and he taught and trained other young pastors to do the same. His words to Timothy are also God's Word to me and to us today. Just as relevant in this flock as they were in Ephesus when Paul preached there and in Ephesus when Timothy stayed there to preach.

2 Timothy 3:14-4:4 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it [15] and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. [16] All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, [17] that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

[4:1] I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: [2] preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. [3] For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, [4] and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. (ESV)

Finally, how can we better listen to a sermon and how can we get more out of a sermon?

Why do some people leave feeling blessed and others leave feeling bored?

What do you do when you have a crisis in your life and you come to church and the sermon is on Jesus healing a demon-possessed man or on the prophecy of Joel?

Every sermon isn't on marriage or dealing with kids or overcoming depression or facing cancer. But every sermon grounded in the Word of God reminds us of where the truth lies and who God is and what He's like. Every sermon reminds us that there's a God who is much bigger than us and our problems and there is truth that is more trustworthy and reliable than the lies Satan whispers to us every day. Every sermon is spiritual food for our souls.

Come asking the Holy Spirit to open your eyes to see and open your ears to hear and open your heart to receive and open your will to obey. Don't come dull, don't come resistant, don't come with an attitude of "tell me something I don't know."

If this is the Word of God, if this is the very truth of God, if this is breathed out by the Spirit of God then come asking God to breathe on you.

Pray yourself hungry, pray yourself famished for the Word of God, pray yourself open to whatever God wants to say to you today. If you leave empty, ask yourself how you came.

We have not because we ask not. Remember the man who came to his friend at midnight to ask for bread and he didn't stop asking until he got it? Ask God for bread, ask Him to feed your hungry souls and then come with the mouths of your heart open to Him.

And pray for me. More than about anything I want to be a better preacher. And as I have said before, the best way I know for this church to get a better preacher is to pray for the one you already have. Pray, "Lord, help the man, he surly needs it."

Pray that my preaching not be a display of my study or intelligence but a demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit so that our "faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (I Corinthians 2:4-5).

Have any of you ever heard of John Wilbur Chapman? In 1888 he became the pastor of Bethany Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia.

Soon after he arrived a church member went up to Rev. Chapman and said, "You are not a very strong preacher, but a few of us have decided to gather and pray every Sunday for you." Instead of criticizing they prayed. "That Sunday prayer meeting for the pastor and his ministry at Bethany, grew to over a thousand individuals praying for the effectiveness of the Word of God through J. Wilbur Chapman. Soon a revival started in the church in which 400 were added to the church rolls." He died one of the most effective evangelists of the nineteenth century and it wasn't because he has a great preacher, it was because of the power of the Holy Spirit working through prayer. <http://www.thisday.pcahistory.org/?p=294>

Pray for the glory of God to fall on us, pray for the Holy Spirit to be poured out among us, prayer for a revival to break out in our midst.

The ultimate fruitfulness of preaching is not the skill or creativity or zeal or brilliance of the speaker, but the result of what God does in our hearts, how we respond. Does the seed of the Word find good soil to take root in our hearts? (Luke 8:15-18).

Come next week prepared, hungry, ready to hear and receive the Word. Come expectant. Come asking and seeking. Blessed are those who delight in the Word of God and have ears to hear.

Join me in this journey through the gospel of John Mark, read it with me, pray over it with me, apply its truth with me. "The kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15).

My hope and prayer is that we will get to know Jesus. Like the Greeks who came to Philip and asked him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus" (John 12:20).

May God be pleased to use our study of Mark's gospel to His glory, to the exaltation of His Son and to our edification and benefit. May this and all our study of God's Word, draw us closer to Jesus, quicken our repentance, deepen our faith, increase our holiness and prepare us for the day of His coming.