

FUMC Mission Statement Revisited, 6 The Power of Words

Ephesians 4: 17 - 32

This is the final week in a series of messages in which we've been revisiting our Church's mission statement. I explained this in more detail last week than I will today (so, if you weren't here last week, please check that message out on our website), but in a nutshell, I said that the point of *all* these messages is to help us all take a step back and look at the 'bigger picture' of who we are as a Church, and as individual followers of Jesus Christ. This is all leading up to the writing and Consecration of our *Personal Covenants with God*, a way that we lay out our own Plan for Spiritual Growth in the coming year.

If you haven't already, you should be receiving a blank copy of a Covenant in the mail very soon. It's pretty self-explanatory, you keep one copy and we're asking you to bring the other in a self-addressed sealed envelope to any service next week. At that time will give you the opportunity to place it here at the communion rail - a symbolic way of giving our plans to God - and we'll consecrate them together in prayer.

Again... it's important for you to know, **we do not open or read these covenants**, they are meant to be between you and God. This is your way to say to God, "This is how serious I am about our relationship. Here's how I intend to live out my discipleship in the coming year in these areas that *you* have said are important."

The questions in the covenant have to do with your connection to the community (who are you accountable to, who is walking with you in this journey - small groups, partners in faith, classes, etc), your self-care (i.e., how do you feed yourself spiritually, which we'll be talking about today), your stewardship (your giving), and your service (which was last week's message) ... These are *the basics* of the life of any disciple of Christ. We should have a fairly clear idea of how we are going to live these out in the near future. So, we're writing it down.

There is also a line for you to write about anything that God is particularly laying on your heart to deal with in the coming year. And in 6 months we'll mail that copy back to you, and you can check yourself, check your progress.

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I'm looking forward to a powerful time in our worship next week as we Give Thanks on that weekend before Thanksgiving in song and word, and also by responding to his call in our lives by presenting our Covenants.

If you're not sure if you are on our mailing list, and you would like to participate in these covenants, some forms are available on the Welcome Table right now, out in the Narthex. Please help yourself... and we hope to see you all next week!

** The last aspect of our discipleship that I want to think about with you in this series comes from the last two words of our mission statement: *we are a community of faith committed to sharing the love of Jesus Christ with a hurting world through **words** and **actions**.*

Last week we introduced the term 'social holiness'. I shared with you that this is part of our tradition, our heritage, as people called Methodists, coming from John Wesley himself, who insisted that a holy life is not just about being people who worship, pray, give alms, study Scripture and such (that's an important part of it for sure); but it also means that we are people who are making a positive impact on the world around us, by rolling up our sleeves, and getting involved in ministry to the hurting world.

I don't know if you know this, but the United Methodist Church as a whole- worldwide - has a mission statement, too. It's not that different from ours, other than being a little shorter. (But you might be interested to know that *our* statement predates the General Church's statement by at least five years! Anyway, the UM General Conference of 2008 adopted this statement:

** **"Making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world"**

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You can see that the aspect of 'social holiness' is included in this statement, as well it should be. Both of these statements ultimately point to the same thing: when we follow Jesus Christ, it changes us, and it changes the world.

Last week, as I just mentioned, we looked at the part of our statement that addresses how we impact the world through our actions; and if you were here you'll remember that we used one example of how that is working here, our ongoing response to the Superstorm Sandy recovery effort. We heard from Max Fisher regarding some recovery teams we trained and deployed, and you see his contact information in the bulletin this week. If you want to get involved in a recovery work team you can talk to him (that might be something you could put on your Covenant - i.e. to go out with a work team!).

I also shared with you that we're going to be receiving a special offering (our Communion offering) in two weeks, Saturday/ Sunday, as this is the first week of Advent. This will go to the "Future With Hope" fund from our Annual Conference, to assist the hundreds of people who are still out of their homes in the effort to rebuild their lives. I'm going to share another video next weekend of some testimonies from people who have already been helped, and you'll see that this is good work.

The point of all that was that when we're talking about 'who we are' as modern day Disciples of Jesus, one of the 'answers' to that question is that we are people who *do things*, people who see needs in the world, see the hurt, see the brokenness of our world, and we get involved. By *doing*.

Today I want to talk about another way that we get involved in the world, which is also part of our great heritage of faith, just as much a part of our "Spiritual DNA" as ministering to the world with our actions, and that is ministering the love of Jesus Christ to a hurting world... through our **words**.

In last week's message I said this:

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*** The world hurts because it is lost. The world generally does not know why we are here, doesn't know that we're loved, doesn't know about Grace, about God's compassion and forgiveness. That hurt - which is probably the worst kind - is largely responded to by our words, as we declare the truth that can set a captive free.*

** The ministry of **words** is an incredibly powerful part of who we are as God's people. If all we ever do to share God's love are things like feeding the hungry, and caring for physical needs of hurting people, we would - obviously - be doing some good (and this would be far better than doing nothing!), but we would also be depriving people of the *greatest* treasure that we have, and the greatest gift that they could ever receive.

(Now, on the other hand, if all we ever did was talk... preach... share words... even if the words are *true*, if we have any impact at all on the world, we will not be accomplishing everything that God has given us to do. We need both.)

But Spiritual darkness, being lost, is a condition that makes our physical sufferings much worse. Listen, you all have seen people who have endured some of the most devastating traumas that life can dish out - personal losses , illnesses, setbacks, betrayals - you know what I mean, and yet, their countenance is peaceful. Their spirits are at rest, and they're still pouring out love - why? - because they know the truth of God which has set them free from the bondage of circumstances, and temporary things.

Now, most of you have been listening to me for long enough to not misunderstand what I'm saying here! I'm obviously not saying that the physical needs don't matter, that the spiritual is the only really important thing. I'm am saying that we humans are a miraculous combination of the physical and the spiritual - and the health of one part directly effects the health of the other. But, one truth we can't escape in all this is that the Spiritual addresses the *eternal* aspect of who we are. It is forever.

**We can give a person Hope by helping them get through a problem in their lives - a lack of food, a broken house, help to pay an electric bill when there's threats of a cut-off. But when we share the Hope of Jesus Christ with them (something that may be possible

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because of those other acts of love!) we are changing not only this world, but we are changing eternity.

And friends, this ministry of hope is largely a ministry of words. Powerful, healing, true words. I want to talk a little bit about words with you today. We already (in our Call to Worship) heard some ancient words *about* words (from the book of Proverbs), let's continue along that line by listening to some more ancient words... about words.

Ephesians 4: 17 - 32

*** So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. 18 They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. 19 Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.*

*** That, however, is not the way of life you learned 21 when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. 22 You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; 23 to be made new in the attitude of your minds; 24 and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*

*** Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. 26 "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, 27 and do not give the devil a foothold. 28 Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.*

*** Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. 30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31 Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. 32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.*

*** As we hear this passage, what is clear is that what Paul is sharing with the people (the saints!) in the Ephesian church, starts with *words*. It is about putting the *teaching* of the Apostles about Jesus into action in their lives. He lays it out - make sure your actions demonstrate who you are (i.e., get rid of the bitterness, and anger, etc.), *show by your actions what is in your heart* ('do something useful with your hands so you may have something to share with those in need'), be ever mindful of your *words*:*

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*** "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."*

There are two thoughts I'd like to share with you in kind of summing up the importance of our words with regard to our mission statement. If we truly are *committed* to sharing God's love with a hurting world through our *words*, there are two things that simply *have to happen* on an ongoing basis in order for that to be possible:

- **1. We need to know the words
- 2. We need to be actively seeking/ open to opportunities to share the words.

** We need to know the words. What I think of when I say that is much more than being able to rattle off a few basic doctrines. What I mean is that we *know what we believe* to the extent that we can work a clear, loving, verbal witness to God into a conversation *when that is the appropriate thing to do*. I'm not talking about stopping people on the street and cornering them in an intellectual/ spiritual ambush, or being the spiritual 'know it all' who is constantly judging other peoples actions, and quoting scripture to the extent that no one wants to be with you (especially relatives and family members!); I'm talking about sitting in the break room at work with a co-worker who has come to trust you because they've seen love in action through you. And, maybe in a moment of vulnerability they share some personal hurt, or doubt, or confusion - and suddenly, the spotlight is on you, and it's time to step up. And you know what to say - how?

Because you have actively been interacting with God's word and God's people. You are prepared. You've been studying, you've been talking with other believers in an in-depth way like in a small group or study class... you've been listening to people share stories from their own experiences about how they responded to people in similar circumstances. In other words: you are ready.

We've been saying all throughout this series that faith is a *dynamic* relationship with God. That dynamic relationship grows through our personal acts of piety - like prayer, private Bible study, worship - but also through our ongoing interactions with the Body of

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Christ - Cooperate worship, small groups, one-on-one conversations, and the like. That's where our ability to verbalize our faith is honed. We become comfortable talking about what we believe by doing that, so that when the time comes, we're able to do it with others, and obey what Peter tells us:

** (I Peter 3:15)

"But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. **Always** be prepared to give an answer to **everyone** who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect..."

There is a line in your Personal Covenant that asks "What is my plan to grow in faith in the coming year? How will I be fed?" As always, we (the staff and our ministry committees) will be doing our very best to provide you with quality opportunities to grow in your faith - you can start with our Advent Study series "Finding Bethlehem in the Midst of Bedlam." This is a multi-layered opportunity from sermons to a daily devotional guide, to small group discussion. The best time to decide whether you're going to participate in something like this? It's NOW! Not December 2nd, when everything else manages to get in the way, and you decide you have too much going on.

** Going forward, we're going to add Wednesday night discussion groups to our January at the Movies series - the whole point of that series is to help us become 'practical theologians', to become skilled at discerning how Gods Word actually applies to real life, and not just something we talk about in church. That series is intended to help us prepare to talk/ interact with our own culture about things that are important to us. Generally speaking, the world is not going to come to us, we need to go to them - do you know what to say?

We'll do an all church study series for Lent as well, another opportunity to grow. And there are numerous Sunday School classes, ongoing small groups, Wednesday Soup and Study sessions - or, maybe you want to *start* a group yourself? We'll help you! Again, if we don't plan ahead, we won't get *anywhere*! That's the point of the covenants.

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One more thing... I said that sharing God's love in words requires **two** things from us. One is to actively cultivate the word of God in our hearts and minds, which I just talked about.

******The other is this (and without this, the first point becomes self-indulgent and moot): We need to be actively seeking, actively open to opportunities to share the words of faith.

It grieves me when I see how people have so misunderstood Paul's instructions to 'be separate' from the world. He was clearly referring to not allowing the world to set our table - i.e., not to take our values and priorities from the world. In those kinds of things, we are at odds with the culture. We have the mind of Christ, and that changes everything.

But so many Christians interpret that to mean that we cut ourselves off from **any** interaction with the world - so, they only do business with Christians, and only socialize with other Christians, don't get involved in civic organizations, school functions, etc. You know what I mean. Simple logic tells us that this is wrong!

Did Jesus say, "Go into all the world and huddle up, and build protective societies to keep you from having to rub elbows with 'the sinners'?" Not in my Bible! He said, "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel..."

******The word 'preach' means to 'tell'. We live in a world where the telling often first requires rebuilding trust, as the Name of Christ has been discredited by thoughtless and selfish and angry people who claim the Name. But, the message of Hope is just as relevant, just as important, just as much needed today as it ever was. And the means of its dissemination into the hurting world is the same as always... it is you. And me. Sharing the love through our words.

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**Is one of your constant prayers to ask God that you would be ever open to the leading of the Holy Spirit so that when a conversational door is opened, you are willing and ready to step up? God will provide the words - he's promised that. But we need to cultivate the awareness and our readiness. That's a bold prayer, and one that not only will God honor, but one that could just change someone forever.

Write it down!

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