



## Mission: ...of Christ

Mark 8:27-37

Rev. Will Sparks

November 20, 2011

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives, be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Every week I begin the sermon with the same prayer but I don't think I have ever told you why that is. It comes from the very end of psalm 19, but with a difference. Psalm 19 goes, "may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight..." I always add, "and the actions of our lives." I first heard those scriptural words with the addition when in 1990 an Anglican minister from Lesotho came to St. Andrew's College in my second year of Seminary. This was in the conflict filled days of Apartheid in South Africa and he was working alongside Desmond Tutu and others to bring an end to the Apartheid regime and was living with the constant threat of violence. The words of his mouth and the meditations of his heart were important elements of his faith, but it was the actions of his life that bore witness to his faith in a way that put him at constant risk of injury and even death. So for him, that little addition was so very important. It was not enough to pray that his words and thoughts were in line with God's way of love and justice. No his actions in many ways were the real litmus test of faith. The words and thoughts were the easy part, the safe part. But the actions- that was really where the struggle took place.

Well, Michael spoke of the Christian witness against Apartheid and inspired us to stand with him and others for the sake of God's love and justice, and I was inspired by him. During that speaking tour through Canada he met with many church folk, and then returned home. And just like you or I would find after a time away there was his usual pile of mail to go through. Someone had been taking care of his little house in his absence and had left the mail piled on the counter. And one of those letters contained a letter bomb which exploded in his hands and nearly killed him. He was rushed to hospital where the surgeons were unable to reconstruct his hands but were able to save his life. Clearly the words of his mouth, the meditations of his heart and the actions of his life were unacceptable to those who would want to preserve racial segregation and economic injustice in South Africa to such a degree that they wanted him dead. And clearly his witness was so important that he was willing to risk his life to make that witness visible. Friends and family gathered around him and slowly he recovered.

A year and a half later, in my final year of seminary, we gathered again in the chapel and I walked Michael Lapsley, walking differently, his face showing the scars of a less than perfect recovery, and he laid his sermon on the pulpit in front of him with the hooks that he used where his hands had been less than two years previously. And he began, "May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives..."

Well ever since that day, I have begun every sermon I have preached with those words, because in my world, words come pretty easily, and meditations and thoughts are relatively safe.

Actions are what really tell the tale of our faith and are the true measure of our integrity, show the real courage of our convictions.

Today is the last Sunday in which we are exploring the mission of Northwood, "Embracing our community with the love of Christ." We have looked at embrace as the risky active ingredient of our life, and wondered who might our community be, we have talked about how very deep and ancient is the love that gives us life. Today I ask the question, what is particularly "of Christ" in what we are about here at Northwood. This is the part of our mission statement that reminds us that we are not just another service organization or a social club. We are a Christian community. And as much as our Northwood people may well be involved in Lions clubs and Rotary and Grandmothers to Grandmothers and other valuable community groups doing good things, and as much as we may be actively fostering relationships with people of other faiths and finding genuine places of common ground with them, in this place, we are a Christian community and that matters. That shapes who we are, how we live and what we do. We are people of a particular way and Jesus told us, and showed us how.

Jesus said, Anyone who wants to become my followers, let them take up their cross and follow me, for anyone who would save their life will lose it, and anyone who loses their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel will save it. For what does it profit us to gain the whole world and lose our life. What can we ever give in exchange for our life. Other translations say, what does it profit us if we gain the whole world and lose our soul. You see the particularly Christian ground of our life that inspires our mission is the conviction that we people of soul, that core identity, that thing that makes us who we are, that deep life we are given that rests not in the things we have accumulated or our reputation, or any kind of status, but that rests in God. And we can spend our whole life's energy trying to make something of ourselves- be somebody, but the gospel of Jesus, around which our mission circulates, says that we can gain the whole world, and in the process lose the most precious thing of all- our life, our soul.

There is an amazing spiritual mechanism at the core of life, and Jesus bore witness to it in his words and in his life. And that is, as you give up your life, as you pour out your life, as you let it go, give it over, that is when you really start to live it. That is when we discover that the life we are living is not just our little life but is part of a bigger life, an abundant life, and everlasting life. And we are free to risk it all, spend it all for the sake of love and justice in our world, because it is never lost when it is given in love. And that is what makes our mission, "of Christ." Life held on to in the desperate search for security and comfort is lost from the beginning. Life given over, entrusted to God and poured out for the sake of love in the world is never lost.

That is our mission: Embracing our community with the ancient love within us, a love that, in the way of Jesus, in the way of the cross, is poured out because we know in our heart that the only way to truly live it is to give it over. And as Michael Lapsley and so very many others in this great tradition have shown, that may be threatening to the keepers of Apartheid, the keepers of global security, the keepers of economic power, and at times it may cost us dearly. But we will bear the cost, we will take the risk because in Christ we know that it is never lost. Amen.