

Sept 19-20, 2009: The Word

Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Psalm 119:57-72; Colossians 3:16-17

Luke 24:25-27

We are in a series on worship. Here is our working definition of worship: “The Spirit gathers the body of Christ into the presence of God; and being nurtured and formed through God’s gifts, we are sent to live as the people of God in the world.” Each week we’re focusing on one of the four main parts of the worship service: Gathering -Word-Meal- Sending. Today: the Word.

And we’re using the story from Luke 24 for our text. We read the first part of the story last weekend. Two followers of Jesus are walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus on the day of the resurrection. They are sad and dejected, telling a third person who joins them about their shattered hopes: The one they hoped to be the Messiah, had been crucified. But this third person begins to teach them from the scriptures.

**Luke 24:25-27** “Then he said to them, ‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.” (And then drop down to verse 32. <sup>31</sup> Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.) <sup>32</sup> They said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?’”

That’s what we’re talking about today. How the Word of God gives us heartburn. Whenever we talk about the Word of God, some definitions are needed. The Word of God...what is it? In John 1, we read that Jesus Christ was the Word of God who become human to reveal God’s own self to humanity. (incarnation) When we use the term, “Word of God” today we are referring to the living Word of God that breaks into our lives, shattering old ways (of selfishness and illusion) and creating in us a new way of obedient trust, a new life. (Erlander, *Baptized We Live*, 13)

(Daniel Erlander writes that through the life, suffering, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Word of God breaks into our lives, pleading with us to give up our false gods, illusions, excuses, our attempts to find our wholeness in our

own works or identity, and to trust in Jesus Christ who loves and forgives us and invites us into the joy of his kingdom.)

The Holy Spirit opens our ears to hear the Living Word of God. And when that happens we get heartburn. (Our hearts burn; our souls are fed.)

The Holy Spirit uses a variety of means to address us with the Word of God.

1. One obvious way is through the **word read and proclaimed in worship**. Let me give you an example from my own life this summer. I was worshiping at Lutheran Church of Hope, in West Des Moines, a Lutheran mega-church. (Five large screens, 3 for video. Font had 32 foot wall of water flowing into it. Raised auditorium seating for 2000. Comfortable seats with drink-holders. State of the art sound & lighting.)

The preacher delivered a fine message, accompanied by two video clips, based on Psalm 73. It was about envy (which I no doubt had looking at their beautifully-appointed mega-church facilities. Later that night, the David Crowder band was going to be presenting a concert in that facility).

As I said, the sermon was about envy... and here is where the Word of God addressed me in a challenging way. Is one of the reasons that I envy their “success” because I desire the enhancement of my own reputation? Does one reason I want PLC to be a great congregation have to do with how I want my own ministry and leadership to be perceived? Don’t I want to be seen as a successful pastor and an effective leader? In other words, am I content to do this just for the glory of God, or am I also hoping for a little credit myself?

This is where the word of God addressed me and questioned me. I would have rather dealt with the other questions that were in my mind: Is the (millions of dollars of) expense of their church facility justified? Is it justified if they are reaching people for Jesus? Is that kind of building investment right for that congregation but wrong for another? What makes a church *successful*? And should that word, *successful*, even be used in the same sentence with the word, *church*? Those are the safer questions to deal with...much less intrusive. Less challenging and threatening of me personally.

And then the darker questions arise when I begin to compare that church with the church I serve. They have a whole bookstore and we have just this little rolling cart. They have something like a Starbucks coffee shop and food court area; we have this little table with snacks on it. They have thousands in worship each weekend, we only a couple of hundred. Compared to that church, my ministry looks rather ineffective.

Often when the Word of God addresses us, we hear a call for repentance. For a redirection of our lives. It's the way the word turns us away from ourselves to Jesus. (He must increase; we must decrease, said John the Baptist.) I wrote this in my journal as I continued to reflect: "I so need to get out of the way, to die to my own expectations, and just do the ministry God gives me."

The Word of God may come to us and challenge us. The Word of God may also comfort us and encourage us.

2. The Word of God comes to us in various ways, often unexpected. There I was sitting alone in silence and solitude in a small chapel (Chapel of the Good Shepherd) at the Chautauqua Institute one morning, July 1, this summer. Walking into the chapel with a whirlwind of thoughts and questions running through my mind. Thoughts about the books I had recently read, calling me to a more radical discipleship. Thinking about my ministry at Peace, my struggles, and questions about how to be about justice while living in the suburbs. Questions about my own consumeristic, materialistic lifestyle. And I was also thinking about the two sentences I had recently read in David Augsburger's book (*Dissident Discipleship*, 167), that I thought crystallized the reason for my sabbatical: "All action and no reflection makes the disciple an empty vessel. All work and no withdrawal exhausts resources and depletes the soul."

So I was there to pray. I had to acknowledge that this was the real issue in my life: prayer and submission to God. Relying on God and not on myself and my own ideas. Working out of God's strength and wisdom. So I was sitting there, with these hosts of thoughts, and I began to look at the stained glass window. It was the common picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Jesus carrying one little sheep in his arm, and looking tenderly at this sheep.

As I stared at the window, I began to imagine myself in that picture. I began to see myself as the little lamb in sheep in his arms. The little sheep looking back up into Jesus' eyes. Being carried in the arms of the Good Shepherd as he looks into my eyes with love. I had my journal open, so I started to write what came to my mind. Here is what I wrote:

“Am I worth the trouble? Am I worth the effort? Am I worth the time? Am I getting heavy to carry? Are you becoming weary of always having to look for me? To wait for me? Are you becoming impatient with me, with my slow growth? With my headstrong ways?”

Sitting alone in the chapel, staring at the window, it felt to me as if the shepherd was talking to the sheep. “I will always seek you out...And I will always carry you back to the fold. You belong to me. You belong with me. You know my voice...will you listen?”

Maybe I just imagined that give-and-take in my own psyche. On the other hand, maybe the Word of God broke through my jumble of thoughts, when I became quiet, and spoke encouraging words to my soul at a time when I needed encouragement. Either way, I walked out of that chapel 30 minutes later feeling as if I had laid down a burden I had been carrying.

The Word of God may challenge; the Word of God may encourage; the Word of God may teach and guide us.

3. Sometimes the Word of God addresses us through books that we read. This often happens to me, as it seems that God places just the right book with just the right message into my hands at just the right time. And sometimes the Word of God addresses us through other people. For example, Nancy Schmidt gave me a gift to begin my sabbatical: she sent me an email that set the theme for my sabbatical, centering on Ephesians 3:16-19 and Colossians 3:15-17, to which I returned several times during the summer.

**Ephesians 3:16-19** I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and

depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

**Colossians 3:15-17** And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. 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. 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.

Through the words of Nancy's email and through these words from the New Testament letters, I had a similar experience to the two disciples walking toward Emmaus, "Did our hearts not burn as he spoke to us from the scriptures...?"

Burning hearts...those are the times when we hear God speaking to us, when the Living Word opens the scriptures, and we are changed. It is always remarkable, always amazing to me how the Spirit speaks to us just what we need to hear.