

Joint Worship Service – First Presbyterian Church and Westminster Presbyterian Church

December 4, 2016

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Good Morning.

It is a great pleasure to be with you this morning as we celebrate the second home and home meeting between First Church and Westminster. When Tom and I chatted this past spring about getting our two congregations together, we both thought that it was high time that two churches that share a history, a denomination, a commitment to urban ministry and a zip code should start talking.

So this idea resulted in a powerful worship experience earlier this fall at First, and an equally powerful worship experience here at Westminster this morning. My hope is that these two shared worship services spark a new beginning where collaboration becomes the new norm between our two congregations.

I am excited about those prospects.

I also wanted to provide a brief explanation of why I am up here this morning and not Rev. Delgado, who is our recently retained, interim pastor. When we first envisioned these shared worship services, First was struggling with the sudden death of our pastor, Phil Gittings. As our members tried to provide continuity each Sunday, a diverse group of congregants stepped up to provide their unique perspective from the pulpit. These vastly different witnesses were illustrative of our shared history as a congregation, but also insightful about each of our own individual spiritual journeys. So out of that practice from earlier this year, you get me this morning. However, I would be remiss in not mentioning that I appreciate Rev. Delgado's grace and humility in allowing me to get my shot this morning, as originally envisioned.

I also want to mention that I share a long personal history with Westminster. I was confirmed here, I was married here, my son was baptized here and both my wife and I have had many generations of family that have been members of this church. So this morning is very gratifying for me, as I feel like two chapters in my own spiritual journey are getting a chance to fuse together - and that is very cool.

As my First friends know, my wife and I have five children, who range in age from 11 to 23, and for those of you who are parents, or grandparents, if you are like me, you constantly struggle with how to COMMUNICATE.

Communication is important and effective communication is really important.

My parents were from the greatest generation. Words were rationed, and so when they were used, you better pay attention, or words were translated to actions, and that was never a good thing. So that communication style is what I am comfortable with, and the one I fall back on when I attempt to communicate with my own kids.

When I think it, it seems so clear, but somehow when I say it, the purity of thought and clarity of word are lost. Make your bed. Clean up your room. Walk the dog. Take the trash out. Such simple concepts get all mixed up between my mouth and my children's ears, who are distracted by things I am convinced are designed to insulate them from my words – you know what I am talking about – smartphones, headphones, beats, ear buds, Apple music, Pandora, Sonos, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, facebook and Snap Chat – whatever that is - all nefarious technologies that I am convinced were designed to prevent my clear and concise instructions from making contact and having their desired effect.

All children within my sphere of influence know my frustration at this fact of modern life, as I express it often, but as Baby Boomers are learning, we are increasingly being outnumbered by the Gen Xers, Millennials, Gen Y's, and now also by iGens, Gen Z's and Centennials, so we can no longer just snicker and dismiss these differences in communication styles as youthful folly, but are increasingly realizing, that we are going to have to learn to try and bridge the gap, in some way, and find a tool that can translate perfectly clear and understandable English into a language that will be effectively heard and understood by our young charges.

So here is my challenge as I prepared for this morning.

How can I reach you young people?

So I went right to the source, and posed this question to my kids. "If I want to be able to reach you, just once, on my one Sunday in the pulpit, and give you some kind of thoughtful message - how should I do it?"

Without missing a beat, they said to me "You know Dad the Bible is really a big book, that has lots of confusing laws, and rules, and kings and all that begat stuff in it, and what you really need to do is boil it down for us. We like things stream lined, concise, short and sweet, like a text – LOL, OMG, JK, IDK– see - we can communicate very effectively without even spelling the words out completely. Kinda like a Ted Talk does. Ted Talks get down to the basics. Try something like that."

Now for those of you who do not know what a Ted Talk is, Ted Talks started in 1984 as a nonpartisan nonprofit organization devoted to spreading ideas, usually in the form of short, powerful talks. **TED** originally began focusing on where Technology, Entertainment and Design converged, but today covers almost all topics — from science to business to global issues and sermons — in more than 110 languages, all in 18 minutes or less.

Short Powerful Talks – direct, clear and concise. Just the facts, and only the facts. Perfect.

So on to Google I went, and searched for Ted Talks and soon I was visiting ted.com. After I perused the library of Ted Talks, here is what I learned.

With deference to the spiritual and theological firepower sitting behind me, TED Talks provided the recipe for giving a successful sermon, and I hate to say: it's not that difficult.

Three points and a poem. That's it. Read the Gospel, three points and wrap it up with a poem. Done.

So armed with the Betty Crocker sermon formula, my next step is to look up the Gospel lesson for today and what a lucky break. The story of the Good Samaritan. A story we all know, even me. Three points, the Good Samaritan, a poem.

This sermon is going to write itself.

So from Luke chapter 10: verses 25-37 (NIV Version) Here is:

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

²⁵ On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

²⁶ "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

²⁷ He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'^[a]; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'^[b]"

²⁸ "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

²⁹ But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

³⁰ In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.

³¹ A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. ³² So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii^[c] and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

³⁶ "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

³⁷ The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

I really think that if Jesus were here today and asked to give a TED Talk, condensing: 66 books, 1,189 chapters, 31,101 verses, and 783,137 words, into one short, powerful Ted Talk message, this Gospel passage would be it.

Love one another.

However, while these words are simple to say, and familiar to hear, they are often **very, very hard to do.**

Perhaps this year especially, the well-worn pages of this Gospel lesson are particularly pertinent, relevant and timely, coming off of a most divisive and acrimonious election season, because the kind of love and mercy that Luke is describing, **is not the easy kind of love, it is the hard kind of love.**

You see Samaritans of Jesus' day were racially mixed sect of Jews who while monotheists, had a pagan history and were not strictly adherent to the laws and beliefs of traditional Jews and therefore largely disliked and viewed with suspicion, by the larger Jewish population. So, by staging the story with a Samaritan as the honorable and holy one, helping the hurt traveler, while the Priest and Levite, the ultimate representatives of the Synagogue and the good Jew "on paper", Christ is making a powerful point.

He is advocating an uncomfortable kind of love.

Tough love.

Distasteful Love.

Hard Love.

This is the love that Christ challenges us to do in the parable.

It is a call for us to show this hard love to Elizabeth Warren, or the guy with the Repeal the Safe Act sign in his front yard, or Jill Stein, or Rush Limbaugh, or Bernie Sanders, and yes, even Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton.

Tough kind of love, hard kind of love, but perhaps the most meaningful, inspired and truest kind of love.

Since, the tougher this love is for us to do, the truer we are in rising to the challenge of living out the meaning contained in Christ's parable.

So for you under 25 my TED Talk message is short and sweet and direct – just the way you want it – but also **HARD.**

But here is the good news – the real Gospel news this morning - you do not need a theology degree, be a Biblical scholar, be an expert on the Book of Order, have a beautiful church, or wait until the Christmas season to try out this kind of love. You can start doing this loving – today, right now, right in the pew, right as you are, when you leave, in your home, in your school, in your own family, in your own life and strive to show this love to the very hardest person it is for you to show this love to.

That takes guts. That takes effort. That takes work. That takes sustained commitment. But if you have the perseverance to live out these simple but very hard words, you might be amazed at what may just happen, not only in the life of the one that is so hard to love, but also in your own life.

Now for those of you over than 25, I also have a message for you too – no extra charge.

Why did Christ actually not just tell us what to do, like a TED talk – short, sweet, direct. Why not just answer the question straight away? Why tell us a story instead? In fact why does he use stories to describe 46 of his key lessons throughout the New Testament?

Recently, one of my kids was working through the poetry portion of their English class, and they had the pleasure or pain, or perhaps a bit of both, to analyze the famous Robert Frost poem, “The Road Not Taken”. You know this poem and perhaps have heard it many times and much like the parable of the Good Samaritan – these are very familiar words to many of us.

It is especially popular around graduation time as many a valedictorian have used these words as a shameless plug to endorse and validate the great anthem to youthful individuality. As my child was working this poem over, I peeked over their shoulder and read these faintly familiar words.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there

Had worn them really about the same,
And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Funny, but as one reads these familiar words, the meaning does not strike you as it did when these words were read as a young person. When you are young the poem is about individualism, uniqueness, boldness and empowerment, but through older eyes, one has different feelings. The words are much more melancholy, perhaps even tinged with regret and missed opportunity. The thought is of what might have been not what is going to be. Because of course when you choose one road, there is another road that is not taken – if one had chosen another road, how might have life turned out? Better? Maybe, maybe not, but surely different.

The same words. Exactly the same words, but words that convey a completely different meaning, **because you are different. Points of view are not static but dynamic and constantly changing because you are not static but dynamic and constantly changing.**

Perhaps this is the shared genius of both great poets like Frost as well as the Gospel writer Luke; **Rather than conveying the answer TED talk style – short, direct, concise, but by telling it with story, the idea being conveyed becomes more about the student, and less about the teacher.** It becomes more about the lesson and less about the answer. It becomes more about nuance and less about absolutes. It becomes more about what unites us and less about what divides us. It becomes more about red, white **and** blue and less about red **or** blue. It becomes more about listening and less about talking. It becomes more about God's whisper and less about God's shout.

As responsibility shifts from speaker to listener, the message becomes more personal, more relevant and more dynamic, more timely and more applicable to wherever **you** are in your own life, **at this moment. For you, today, the only person in this room, at the only moment that really counts.**

Right now!

That is the genius of the parable: **it's a way to speak with relevance no matter where the listener is on their own spiritual journey.**

What is true for this well-known Gospel lesson this morning, may also be true for the greatest of Bible stories; the story of Christ's birth. For too many of us 25 and over, perhaps this is a tired story, a story more about Christmases past than Christmases present and future. A story that evokes loss, or sadness. A story that has gotten stale, discredited, tiresome, uninspiring.

So my challenge to you 25 and over folks this morning is to do the following this Christmas season. **Listen to the Christmas story as if for the first time. Really listen.** Listen to the Christmas story with **discernment** - about what this story means to you, now, at this moment - not shackled by the memories of yesterday or the anxiety of tomorrow, **but at this moment.**

In your listening; **Be active. Be present.** And most importantly; **Be open** to how the story of Christ's birth has the potential to present itself anew to you this year. Engage with these words in a new light, in a fresh light, this year. Listen, hard. Think, hard. Question, hard. Pray, hard, Love, hard.

And Wonder, hard.

Really Wonder Hard.

That is my wish for you this Christmas Season.

In my family, the best story I know of that depicts my wish for you, comes once again from very well-worn pages, at least in my house....a timeless tale that I think perfectly encapsulates my message of renewed wonderment for you this morning:

And the Grinch, with his Grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow,

Stood puzzling and puzzling: "How could it be so?"

"It came without ribbons! It came without tags!"

"It came without packages, boxes or bags!"

And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore.

Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!

"Maybe Christmas," he thought, "doesn't come from a store."

"Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more!"
And what happened then? Well....in Whoville they say,
That the Grinch's small heart grew three sizes that day!
And the minute his heart didn't feel quite so tight,
He whizzed with his load through the bright morning light,
And he brought back the toys! And the food for the feast!
And he, HE Himself! The Grinch, carved the roast beast!

Amen and Merry Christmas.