

July 13, 2014
Youth Mission Sunday

Sermons

from a church with a conscience



“Use Words If Necessary”

by

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What would it mean at this critical moment in human affairs did we in the churches show growing graces and services! A church with a conscience out in front of its age and outdistancing its own best past, in a sense of responsibility for an entire world, in its stand for economic justice, in its demand for, and illustration of, mutual honor and fellowship among races – a church with members whose convictions and characters were ahead of their contemporaries, so that it pulled them forward and lifted them Godward! Then both we on the inside and those on the outside would be in no doubt that Christ is alive and in the midst of His churches and is using them to guide and inspire the world.

Henry Sloane Coffin,
Preaching at the Church of the Covenant,
June 11, 1944

Youth Mission Sunday
“Use Words If Necessary”
Micah 6:8
Romans 12:9–18

When I was asked to do the sermon this week, I had to think long and hard on what I would speak about. I had learned over the years that all sermons have a point to them, a reason for being preached. A sermon is a reflection of the issues of the time and how we can react to these issues based on the Word of God. I knew I wanted my sermon to have a direction and I wanted it to mean something by trying to address a problem. I thought about a lot of the issues in the world today, from civil war in Syria to unspeakable crimes against women in India. I tried to find something that I could address but then it hit me; I didn't have to look on the other side of the globe to find struggles, I only had to look down the street.

We live in a world where there are certain topics people try to avoid: politics, religion and sexual orientation are just some of the more common taboo topics to avoid. What about the topics we avoid without even realizing it, the issues that we see every day that we do nothing about? One of the most avoided issues in this country is the one that has the most impact on more people's everyday life: poverty. Poverty is not a new problem, throughout history there have been those who have had less, those who were without and it certainly is true still today. One of the major difficulties with poverty is not the fact that people are poor but the fact that the distribution of wealth is so disproportionate that someone who is not well off financially has almost no chance of climbing the economic ladder in our capitalistic society.

No matter our stance on the issue, humanity has seen fit for the most part to separate the poor into certain areas, isolated not by walls or distance but by social class. This isolation turns into division, division leads to ignorance, ignorance leads to fear and fear leads to hate. People begin to think that because a person lives in an impoverished neighborhood that they instantly are a character to avoid. People seek to find any differences to use to create something that makes them better than the impoverished person and all too often race is that characteristic used by people of privilege. After all here we are in one of the fastest growing neighborhoods in Cleveland, filled with

diversity, yet only ten blocks east of here you are suddenly in the so called “ghetto”, that “unsafe” neighborhood. I ask all of you, where is this magical line that separates a safe neighborhood from the hood?

A teacher of mine once told me that the ghetto is not a place but a mindset. It is when you get to the mental state that you no longer have the hope or the ambition or the drive to succeed and when you become set on the idea that your situation cannot get better. The sad fact is that for some people this is the truth of their situation. We’d rather not admit it but it is a fact for some. We can all say how horrible it is to live in chronic poverty, but when we really look at it there are few of us who can speak from experience.

When I was young I attended a Cleveland Public School for nine years, Oliver Hazard Perry. It was a public school in Collinwood where my graduating class had only three white kids. I never considered myself exceedingly wealthy but every time I invited my friends over to play video games they would tell my house was like a mansion. Or they would tell me how I was the richest kid at the school. My family would probably be considered middle class but to a lot of my friends I was one of the wealthiest people they had ever met. Compare that to my high school where there is a seventy to thirty percent ratio of white students to African Americans. Here I am in the bottom half of the economic formation of students.

The truth is no one who has not lived in poverty can claim to know poverty or has the right to say that with some hard work anyone can change their situation. Study after study has proven the direct correlation between a stable home and academic success. What are the chances of a young African American male living in a broken home without real parental support to achieve success without help? For this kid who has so much going against him, whether it is a lack of a real family or a society so engrained with institutional racism, there isn’t much hope.

These are all facts about today’s world and facts about the very city we live in. But what we must ask ourselves, as Christians, is how can we try to change this? Our church has a long history of civil rights activism and we have quite a past to be proud of. Yet I say to you: why should we only be proud of our past? If anything our proud past should encourage us to make just as proud a future here in our own neighborhood and in this city at large.

We heard in the scripture today Paul teaching us directly the words of our Lord: "Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly". If this is not a call to service I don't know what is.

Our youth group recently took one of our mission trips to eastern Kentucky and despite the theological differences we learned about between our thinking and the people we served we were still able to help those in need. One quote in particular remained with me from this trip. It was a quote they kept in their dining hall that said "Preach the gospel every day, use words if necessary."

Now as Presbyterians we believe in the ministry of all believers and as ministers we are all called to preach to the world around us. But preaching is less about giving sermons or having theological talks and more about the actions we engage in as a faith community. A quote I have heard in this very sanctuary that has stuck with me is "A community should know there is a church nearby not because of signs posted out front or flyers distributed but because of the actions of its members." This speaks volumes to how we as Christians and as overall human beings should live our lives: we are called to live every day as if we were giving a sermon to a hundred people, perhaps without some of the flare and bluster yet with the same message. Love every person as yourself.

We see in Micah 6:8 that what God truly wants from us is "to do Justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God". We are not called to physically preach to each person we meet but to show the same love and compassion to our neighbor that God shows us. When we think about how our actions of simply being kind can affect those around us and how important a simple interaction with a stranger can be my mind always goes to a quote that my Aunt had in her house that many of us have probably heard "Your life may be the only bible someone reads". It is not enough to simply talk about your religion; we must show people our love for the Lord through our actions.

As many of you know I attended a Catholic high school in Cleveland called Benedictine. Being a non-Catholic in a Catholic school always made any discussion of religious practice and belief awkward. I cannot tell you how

many times during my freshman year when someone asked what religion I was and I said Presbyterian; they would ask if that was a fancy term for atheism. People thought my not being Catholic was strange and that as a result I was strange, I tried to explain to many of them that I went to church same as them, that I believed in the same God as them, and that I believed in Jesus same as them. I just had different interpretations on a few things. Yet for many of them who truly hadn't gone to school with a non-Catholic this was almost impossible.

Some people didn't believe I could be Christian if I didn't believe the same way they did, so I knew I would have to show them. I made it a priority to work with our school's Kiwanis club and went to every one of our school's service opportunities at St. Augustine's hunger center. I just volunteered in any way I could with things around the school. This was how I showed them I was Christian; not by talking about God, which can be an overwhelming topic that is incredibly personal, but by trying my best to imitate the love of Jesus Christ.

No person has the cure to poverty or racism. If they did the problem would be solved. But we all have a small part of the key to stopping it by remembering that no matter where you are, no matter who you meet, that every person is a child of God and every person, no matter how different they are from you, is made in God's image. Every small difference counts and as the old saying goes; even the smallest ripple can create a wave. By showing each person we come across the dignity they deserve as human beings we are helping to bring God's kingdom to this earth.

Can we physically change people's thoughts on issues such as discrimination? No, but we can make them question these ideas when we show them through example that every person is just that, a person. And a person can do incredible things no matter their background when they have support and love; this is how we can make change in the world. By encouraging a culture that supports loving families, however they are constituted, we can try and instill hope for a better future. Remember those friends who used to come over and play video games? Two of them, William and Fadae, who were raised in single parent homes by loving parents, were

top students at John Hay and STEM school and earned themselves full scholarships to Ohio State University.

This is the power that a loving environment can have. And for those of us who feel too young or powerless to make a change I will tell you a passage I found while looking through the Bible while writing this sermon. It is found in 1 Timothy 4: 12 and it goes like this. "Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity." We are challenged in this passage as in Romans which says "outdo one another in showing honor" to be competitive in our virtues. As the insurance commercial goes that shoes one person holding the door for another and a spiraling effect starting of people helping one another, so can we create a spiraling effect of love if we learn to do random acts of kindness with the intention of trying to make a difference.

Please join me as I close in prayer: "Lord God we often become so obsessed with our words, and we become so focused on what we are saying that all too often we cloud our own vision, and our words go from passionate, inspired dreams, to hollow words that become nothings. Help us to realize that just as a picture is worth a thousand words so is an action worth as much as we put into it. Lord help us write sermons and essays dedicated to your love and kindness, speeches praising your name and embracing all people. But mostly help us to remember to only use words if necessary."

Collin Denbow, son of Tom Denbow and Barbara Clint, graduated from Benedictine High School in June, 2014, and will be a freshman at Seton Hall University in South Orange, New Jersey, this fall. Collin grew up in the Church of the Covenant and became a member in May, 2012.



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