

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
28th Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 11th, 2009

Living Within Our Means: Choosing Order Amidst Chaos
Choosing God's Word

Isaiah 55:1-3a, 6-11

The Lord asks his people

*Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good...
Incline your ear to me ... listen, so that you may live.*

We are now in our third week of this series,
considering how we might live within our means,
how to choose order in the midst of a chaotic world.

The choice before us is not a new one.

It is precisely this choice that God places before the people of Israel
in the time of the prophet Isaiah.

We can spend our labor and our money on things that do not satisfy
or we can *eat what is good*,
namely, we can be nourished by listening to the Word of God.
By listening, we may live.

Words are a funny thing.

If words are full, they can have the most profound and powerful impact.
But we know that words can also be empty, and therefore meaningless.

There are the words we find on the front of food packaging, for instance,
telling us how healthy something is:

"Low Fat" or "Less Sodium".

The other day Mary Ellen put Low Sodium Soy Sauce on the shopping list.

The bottles say Low Sodium on the front alright.

But when you turn them around to the back,
you see that one tablespoon equals about
45% of your daily allowance.

Words can be full, or they can be empty.

Just consider the promises that are made in an election year:

only time will tell whether they are full or empty,
but most of us have heard enough of these promises
to know what to expect.

Yesterday, right here on this chancel,

a beautiful young couple spoke words to each other,
promises, vows of marriage,
words that are full of promise and potential.
It is one of the particular privileges of my calling
to have the very best view of a bride and groom's faces
as they speak their promises to each other.
Looking into the faces of Art Simeone and Kate Wiley yesterday,
as they spoke to each other,
I saw full words being uttered,
words that we pray will grow fuller over the years
as Art and Kate grow in love and faithfulness.
The covenant of marriage
calls a man and a woman to the great lifelong task
of keeping their words of promise full and growing fuller
and never let them become empty.

Words in the Old Testament times were considered a potent force.
The Hebrew word *dabar* can mean "word, thing, matter or event."
For the ancients, a word was not simply a sound, either full or empty;
a word carried intrinsic power; it was the thing itself.

Thus blessings and curses, once spoken, were irrevocable.
Remember Jacob and Esau.
Their mother Rebecca tricked their blind father Isaac
into bestowing the blessing of the firstborn son
onto Jacob, the second-born son.
Even when Isaac realized what had been done,
the words had been spoken and could not be changed.

The spoken word in those days
had the effect of what we mean when we say,
"Put it in writing," and "sign on the dotted line."
And today, just now we have heard and spoken words of promise.
Rob and Colleen have professed their faith in Christ,
and their intention to follow him,
and we have done the same.

They have confirmed that they will raise Jackson in the Christian faith,
the same promise they made for Lillian.
And you, the congregation, have spoken words of affirmation
that you will work and pray to nurture little Jackson
in his baptismal faith
so that he will profess the faith as his own.

And let me just take this moment to say
not only to Rob and Colleen
but to all of you:
your promises this day are made

in the presence of the Almighty God of Heaven and Earth
before whom you now stand
and will stand on the last day.
Do not let your words be empty.
Do not let your Sunday absences put the lie to your words.
Do not let Katie's struggle to fill the teaching roster
show your words to be empty.

* * * * *

Now why do I harp so much on your presence here on Sundays?
Is it just that I need lots of little warm bodies sitting in the pews
to make me feel better about all the hard work of
preparing and preaching a sermon?
Well, it does sometimes irk me that I work hard on preaching the Word,
and some folks can't even manage to get out of bed on Sunday.
I go out on Saturday night, too, and it's not always easy to get up.
You may say I get paid to be here –
well, I could get paid a lot more doing something else.
We have kids at home to,
and when they were smaller my dear wife had to get them ready
every Sunday on her own –
and she did it, and she does it still.
Why should we care so much about gathering in the Lord's house
on the Lord's day?
Because we want to live within our means: the means of God's grace.

Traditionally, in the Presbyterian church,
that is, in the Reformed Tradition,
the reading and preaching and teaching of the scriptures,
are a primary means of grace.
Listen – if the Christian life is about being in relationship with Jesus Christ
as I preached last Sunday,
and the scriptures are the way we come to know Jesus Christ,
then we cannot live a Christian life
without being regularly in the scriptures.
Now there are a number of excuses I hear people make
for not spending time reading the Word of God:
Some lament, "I don't understand the Bible when I read it. I'm totally lost."
Well aside from the fact that we have a remedy for that utter bewilderment
in that WE OFFER HELP WITH READING THE BIBLE
EVERY SUNDAY MORNING
IN OUR GATHERINGS FOR ADULT SPIRITUAL FORMATION
WHICH SHOULD RENDER THIS EXCUSES INVALID!

...aside from this, remember that the Christian life is about
being in relationship with God in Christ, and with others in Christ,
not simply about understanding.

Consider this:

Do you who are married always understand your spouse?

Do you always understand your children?

what's going on in their minds and hearts?

As a pastor, I certainly don't always understand

what's going on inside of you, my congregation.

But if I use this as an excuse to simply ignore you,

then we would have no relationship.

We have an amazing gift in our midst – the living and active Word of God.

Will we ignore this precious gift of our loving God,

who beckons us into relationship?

Now another excuse I hear,

not as often, but enough to tell me that a number of you think it,

is that you already know what's in the Bible –

you know what Jesus would said, did and thought,

you know what Jesus would say, do and think.

Friend, are you really suggesting

that you have plumbed the depths of the mind of God?

Or that you are so united with Christ in heart and mind and will,

that you can follow him with so little effort at the relationship?

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, says the Lord;

nor are my ways your ways.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth,

so are my ways higher than your ways

and my thoughts than your thoughts.

I've been studying these words all my life,

and for almost 18 years now with great intensity,

and I still have to go to the scriptures and search them every day

to stay in touch with the God of my life.

* * * * *

Finally, consider this:

We have heard a promise today about the power of God's Word

in our lives, and in this crazy world.

God says this to you,

God speaks this promise into *your* life, and mine...

*For as the rain and snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

Trust this Promise.

Trust this Word, for it is a Full Word, a Pregnant Word,
waiting to give birth to something new and holy in your life.

God has given us an amazing gift of grace.

But living within this means of grace requires a choice on our part,
a daily, weekly choice.

if we are not living within this means of grace,
we are not living in Christ.

If we neglect the Word of God, we neglect our relationship Christ.

But if we actively choose to open ourselves
and to live our lives in the light of the scripture
that we may receive God's word, full of power and grace,
God will do great things inside of us, and through us.

Let those who have ears,
hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.