

Let Your Life Speak

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

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Texts: 1 Peter 5:1-4, Matthew 5:16

1 Peter 5:1–4

Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it, not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away.

Keep these words in your heart. The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. Thanks be to God.

When I agreed to follow Pastor Paul's sermon series while he is in Chicago for a week of training, I had no idea how difficult it would be. The word of the week is "influencing."

Difficulty #1: That word, "influence," with its obvious connection to "influencers," has left a bad taste in my mouth. It gives me the shudders. Influencers put their lives on view online in the hope of gaining followers for the sole purpose, as far as I can tell, of making a lot of money. Sordid gain, as Peter would say. And the shiny, happy lives they showcase, especially those who claim a Christian motivation, are generally staged, rigged and, in a word, fake. I could go a long way down that rabbit hole but I'm afraid I would not be setting a good example for the flock.

Difficulty #2: Setting a good example for the flock. Do you have any idea of the torture faith leaders endure, trying to set a good example, day in and day out? I remember when I lived in Japan, back in the 1980s. The only time of my life when I was a tall blond. Really. And being a tall blond in Japan meant you were also a Westerner, and that meant you were probably a Christian, and therefore under constant observation. Only 1% of the population identified as Christian, and the rest were curious to see what that looked like in practice. Well, I did self-identify as Christian then (not always the case in my chequered past). That meant, no shoving on the subway. Smile no matter what. Out-polite the Japanese people, who everyone knows are the politest people on earth. Something like being an example for the flock.

Difficulty #3: I don't believe the Bible speaks with one voice on this matter. Take the Sermon on the Mount, the actual words of Jesus. In Matthew 5:16, he says "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." That's actually a line from the Lutheran baptismal service. Maybe the Presbyterian one, too. A few

verses later, Jesus says, “Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them, for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 6:1). Don’t you love it when the Bible contradicts itself?

Difficulty #4: If I’m supposed to be an example, then whose example do I follow? Well, Jesus’, obviously. Remember those WWJD bracelets that were popular some time ago? What Would Jesus Do? Honestly, I found them sort of cringe-worthy. So I’m supposed to feed 5000 people from one kid’s lunch box? I’m supposed to perform exorcisms? Raise the dead? I’m supposed to rile the authorities and get myself killed? I suppose that one could be arranged, particularly *these days*, but I’m not sure it would do anyone any good. Sorry to disappoint, but I’m not a savior. Just a regular, garden-variety Christian who gets sidetracked a lot.

Yes, I know. That’s not what WWJD meant. We’re supposed to feed the hungry, heal the sick, welcome the stranger, devote our lives to the common good. And I want to do those things. I *believe* in those things. Maybe we can’t do it on the same grand scale as Jesus, but there are always human examples like Martin Luther King, Pope Francis, Mr. Rogers, Dolly Parton.

But there’s a problem there, too. Because I’m not any of those people, either. Parker Palmer, a Quaker writer (I won’t call him an “influencer,” though he has influenced some people) confessed that when he tried to follow the very good examples of people he admired, he found himself in deep depression. Because he was not really those people. And when he tried to imitate them, he betrayed his own true self, his own true calling. He quotes a Jewish tale about a teacher, Rabbi Zusya, who when he was an old man, said, “In the coming world, they will not ask me: ‘Why weren’t you Moses?’ They will ask me, ‘Why weren’t you Zusya?’”

One group I’m working with now, especially during this election season, is Faith in Minnesota. One of their organizational strategies is to declare everyone a leader. It’s a little disconcerting. Who really wants to be a leader? Not me! Do you? In fact, I have a deep distrust of people who proclaim too often and too loudly what great leaders they are.

Parker Palmer, again, says that a leader is someone with the power to project either light or shadow onto some part of the world—the light of heaven, or the shadow of hell. I’m sure you can call up examples of both kinds of leader.

The question is not, are you a leader—because we all set some kind of example just by existing—but what kind of leader will you be? Will you radiate light, hope, joy? Or will you cast a shadow: of fear of the stranger, dislike of the different, the shadow of greed, grabbing what you can before someone else beats you to it? Just because it’s there for the grabbing?

To be honest, *these days* there is so much that alarms and discourages me that I sometimes think I would prefer to be a Canadian polar bear on the brink of extinction than a leader in the United States. If you had to choose between being a leader or being something else, what would you choose? To be a fly on the wall, a passive observer? An ostrich in Australia, head in the sand? A cockroach in the corner, the one species guaranteed to survive total environmental collapse?

Beyond your personal leadership, what would you want the church to be? *These days*, I sometimes think, wouldn't it be wonderful to retreat to that upper room behind locked doors, where we love and tend to the needs of friends and family and people who look and act just like us and leave the fighting and fraud and fakery of the world behind?

That's these days. Then I am reminded: there will, God willing, be days beyond *these days*. The disciples, post-Resurrection, didn't know what the church would look like today, or even that there would *be* a church. Neither do we know what the church will look like in 100, 1000 years, or even if there will *be* church as we know it. But if we have faith at all, we trust that there *will be* a future. There will be a *church* of the future. We are constructing it now, with the day to day stuff of our lives. How we live right now determines what the church of the future will be. Bold or timid, elite or expansive, God-centered or government-centered.

You don't have to be Desmond Tutu, or Mahatma Gandhi, or the Dalai Lama to have an influence on the church and the world beyond these days. You just need to find the Christ living within you and let that Spirit of the living Christ be your guide.

When I, Jan, stand before the Mercy Seat of heaven, no one will say, "Why didn't you speak out like Mother Teresa or Dorothy Day?" They will ask, "Why didn't you use the words and voice God gave *you*?"

It takes a lot of reflection, a lot of trial and error, sometimes, to find your true self, your own voice, your own gift, your own purpose. But I assure you, you have one. There is in *this world*, *in these days*, a space for you that no one else is capable of filling. Never in the history of the world did and never will God create anyone with exactly the same constellation of talents and skills, the same mixture of strengths and frailties that you are. And that's a good thing. Because you can influence people most by being truly who you are. Right here. Right now.

I believe that deep down, it's the regular, ordinary people being faithful to their best and truest selves that will birth a new reign of God on earth. Search your own soul for the good God planted there, then let it blossom. And so I say, let your light shine. Let your life speak. Amen. Thanks be to God.

Indebtedness: Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*

Prayers of the people:

God our creator, shine in our hearts. Show us who you created us to be. Help each of us grow into the person you intended, perfect in your sight. Help us live out that vision in the world.

God, world maker, you made us part of this beautiful, vast, and complicated universe. Show us our rightful place within it and teach us how to live peacefully, fruitfully, here.

God of infinite imagination, give us wisdom to envision peace, well-being, and comfort for a world full of unrest and violent competition for finite resources. Then give us the courage to live out our vision.

For reasons mostly not of our own making, we live in a prosperous country and a democracy. As your people, may we exercise our right to vote and ensure the rights of others to participate in free and fair elections.

For those far removed from our awareness, and those whose lives are bound so closely with our own that we cannot imagine life without them, we pray. May all know rest and comfort.