



Sermons from Northwood United Church

'Jesus consults Ipsos Reid'

Mark 8:27-37

Will Sparks

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May the words of our mouths, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives, be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

After the church service one Sunday morning a young boy suddenly announced to his mother, "mom. I've decided to become a minister when I grow up."

"That's ok with us, but what made you decide this?"

"Well," said the little boy, "if I have to go to church on Sunday anyway, I figure it will be more fun to stand up and yell than to sit down and listen."

So are you ready folks? This is my time of the week to stand up and yell. Actually I would be surprised if many folks had that impression of my style of speaking, however, it does continually amaze me what people take from the words I offer on Sunday mornings. People will pick up on certain elements or stories within a sermon and it will connect with their lives in ways I never could have predicted, and I stand and wonder. Most of the time I think, wow. God can really be at work and make words mean something.

Truth is, the same can be said of everything else we day and do. What any of us says creates something outside of ourselves that we may or may not intend. Talk to the recent ex-candidates in the election. What you tweet as a 16 year old, or how you treat a clients kitchen coffee cup can take on a life of its own down the road.

Jesus knew this when he said, "it is not what goes into your mouth that defiles but what comes out." And he knew it as he travelled the unfamiliar communities of Caesarea Philippi. He knew that what he said and what he did was creating impressions, was forming a message, and he wanted to know what message had formed in people's minds and hearts based on what he had said and done.

We are in a messaging time right now, with political parties, leaders, pollsters, and strategists trying to get it just right. The world is awash with messaging. Until this week, I didn't know there was a "Wizard of Oz" out there for hire, but apparently there is and apparently he's going to re-message the Conservative campaign over in the final weeks of the campaign. And it can be tempting to get cynical about it, and conclude that the whole messaging task is manipulative. But messaging matters not only in politics but in every public endeavour. In what we are trying to do here at Northwood. And there are three things that matter about it: First, does the message ring true to the intentions of the sender, second, do the core keepers of the message really get it, own it, understand it in their heart and soul and lives, and third, is the heart of the message getting out.

Let's see how Jesus dealt with messaging.

First of all, he is in Caesarea Philippi, major Roman Imperial centre with a huge temple to Caesar. But it is foreign territory for Jesus and his disciples. It is not his usual stomping grounds. So he asks, who do people say that I am. This is a bit of a public relations situation for Jesus. He's not in an election campaign but he is developing a following and it matters what they think they are following. He doesn't want people to get the wrong idea about him. So he asks the polling question: who do people say that I am. Ask around. The question matters. What message is on the street?

The answer? Well, there is a lack of clarity. Some say John the Baptist. Some say Elijah or one of the other prophets. They think he might be a re-incarnation of one of the great ones. Hm. Puzzling expectation of magic.

Who do you say that I am? Another important question. What is the message are you giving out?

The answer? The messiah. Hm. That is a potent title that is wide open for interpretation. A dangerous title to claim for oneself, especially in Caesarea Philippi. His response? Just don't go there.

Clearly Jesus has perhaps even a worse messaging problem than Stephen Harper. And he doesn't call out the wizards of messaging. No he sits down with his core people in an attempt to get really clear about the core of the message. What does the gospel of love actually mean and what will be the consequences of standing up for the gospel. And he says it openly. There will be suffering. There will be death, but God will be faithful. Peter tries to shush him. Even if that is true, you don't want that to be the message. How is that going to win anyone over?

Jesus calls him out. Don't soft peddle the cost of discipleship. Be honest from the beginning. Otherwise you are setting your sights, setting the bar based on likeability, winability, but losing the heart of the gospel in the process. Be honest. Be real. So that people know what they have signed up for. Set the ideals and consequences clear at the outset. There's no bate and switch here. This is honesty in messaging.

And then he lays out the crux of the matter. You can live for a win, change your message in the hopes of making the message more likeable. But your life, your soul will be traded away in the process. What you need to do is decide to pour out your life for the sake of the gospel of radical love. It's not about coming the the end of your life having been liked. It is about standing for something in the midst of your life. And this gospel of radical love will claim your life. And you have to be willing to let that happen. You can go ahead and trade that off in order to win, survive, but what you lose in the process is soul and there is nothing more precious than that.

That is messaging, Jesus style.

We are beginning a new season in our life here at Northwood. Welcome back everyone, and welcome if you are new here. As we head into the busyness of fall fair preparations and children's church start up, as the choir casts out its first harmonious notes of the year, as we welcome newcomers and re-form in small groups, it is good to as ourselves the three messaging questions, and to do it Jesus style. This message of radical love and costly discipleship, the task of giving your life over to these radical ways of Jesus, pouring your life out for the sake of love: are you in? Because that is our holy purpose here. Does it ring with authenticity in your heart and mind. Secondly, are there things about it you wonder, question, want to know more about? Are there things about the way we live it here at Northwood that jangle, stick in your craw, wish were different. It is important the the keepers of the message, Northwoodians, own this message, make sure it really is yours. And finally, when people walk through our door, hear about us, check us out on the internet, see us on facebook, do they get a snapshot of radical love and costly discipleship.

It is about being authentic, having integrity, being true. So I want to conclude with a contemporary casting of the words of the 19th century Scottish minister Horatius Bonar:

You must be true yourself, If you the truth would teach;
Your soul must overflow, if you, another's soul would reach!
It needs the overflow of heart to give the lips full speech.

Think truly, and your thoughts shall the world's famine feed;
Speak truly, and each word of yours shall be a fruitful seed;
Live truly, and your life shall be a great and noble creed.

Amen.