

June 11, 2017 - Trinity Sunday
Matthew 28:16-20
Practicing What We Preach
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Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

The Words of God for the People of God. Let us pray – let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in you your sight, Oh Lord, Our Rock and Our Redeemer,, Amen.

Do you brush your teeth? If so, you could have taken part in a lawsuit. A few years ago a class action lawsuit began to make its way through the court system, where a group of people were suing the makers of toothbrushes, claiming that toothbrushes are unsafe. They alleged that they had suffered toothbrush abrasion to their gums and therefore deserved to be compensated for their injuries. In the legal papers that the group filed, they said that toothbrush manufacturers have known since 1949 that their products were dangerous, and they pointed to the fact that toothbrushes are sold without any warning labels or instructions.

It sort of makes you wonder what kind of instructions those people would want – doesn't it? Something like: Hold toothbrush in your hand; put the end with the bristles in your mouth; move brush up and down on teeth; stop before you injure yourself? Apparently no one ever taught those people how to brush their teeth, and now they wanted someone to pay for it.

Of course, the case was tossed. The Judge stated that it was reasonable to assume that people should just know certain things – like how to brush their teeth.

Likewise, we usually assume everyone knows what it means to be a Christian. But if there are people out there who don't know how to operate a toothbrush, you better believe there are a lot more – even among those who go to church regularly – who don't know what it means to follow Jesus Christ. (pause)

When those of us who have been in the church all of our lives think about teaching the Christian faith to people, what usually comes to mind? Sunday School. We figure: ship the kids off to an hour of Sunday School each week, and they'll be just fine. But think about it. Even if a child attends Sunday School every week all year round from the time he or she is in first grade, right on through twelfth grade, that would mean that the child would have spent 624 hours in Sunday School. Now, that sounds like a lot of time; but in public schools, 624 hours is the amount of time a child spends in class just to get a little over halfway through the first grade. If we were depending on Sunday School alone to get the job done, then we inadvertently have produced adults with a first grade religious education. (Lecture Aid 2002)

In contrast, think of what Jesus did with those first twelve disciples. Did he sit down with them just once a week, tell them a parable, and then have them come back the following week to discuss it? No, what Jesus did was invite those disciples to take up residence with him. And so, as those disciples not only *listened* to what Jesus had to say but also *saw* what he *did*, day in and day out, they came to understand what he was all about.

If we're serious today about teaching people to become Christians, then sharing some words and stories with them for one hour a week is just not enough. If we are not also coming along side of them showing them how to live those ideas throughout the week, it's practically all for nothing.

It is not easy. Much like the disciples of 1st century Palestine, we live in a brutal world. Ours is therefore a pragmatic culture of perceived scarcity. There is only so much to go around. Greed is king; efficiency, celebrated. To the victors only go the spoils. It's a dog-eat-dog world in which trust is just not practical.

But along comes Jesus who teaches – not just by what he says but by what he does and who he is – that the culture of God's kingdom is altogether different. God's world is a world of abundance. God's world is a world of fidelity, God's world is a world of unconditional love, of gratitude and magnanimity, even in the face of intense suffering – God's world is a world of peace and of joy – of laughter in the face of pain. By what we say *and* what we do, that's the world that we're supposed to be creating and getting ready for, and that's the world we are supposed to be helping other disciples of Jesus create and get ready for as well.

You may say that is a pie in the sky attitude – one that is fine for a minister to have but I live in the “real world” – the world of jobs and taxes and sickness and sadness. But Jesus tells us that is *not* the real world. In point of fact, Jesus tells us there are actually two worlds – the brutal world we are taught to see exclusively, and the world he would show us, if we would but let him. In essence, Jesus tells us that we live in the world of our own choosing. It is a world based entirely on the habitual ways we have come to think about ourselves and our place in it. In other words, our world is based on a set of habits we have learned. But Jesus would say that they are habits that can be unlearned. Change your habits based on your faith in Him and his teachings about God's Kingdom and God will completely transform your world.

In his book, “The Power of Habit” Charles Duhigg shares some fascinating facts about habits. He begins by telling us that our ability to focus fully on a task from beginning to end by will power is a relatively new development in the evolution of human consciousness. He says, unless we become quite ill, we don't realize just how much energy goes into willing ourselves to focus on what we have to do each morning to get the things done we have to do. Willing ourselves in a particular direction requires the executive functioning of the brain to exert itself in a way that is often not all that pleasant. In fact, “Willpower, says Duhigg isn't a skill. It's a cerebral muscle, like the muscles in your arms or legs, and it gets tired as it works harder, so there's less energy left over for other things.”

Thoughtful decision making therefore requires a tremendous amount of emotional and physical energy. That, says Duhigg is how and why we develop habits. “When a habit emerges,” writes Duhigg, “the brain stops fully participating in decision making. It stops working so hard,” so that

it can divert focus to other tasks. Habits are routines that allow us to go on auto-pilot. “So,” he says, “unless you deliberately fight a habit—unless you find new routines—the old often, unconscious pattern will unfold automatically.”

He goes on. “Changing our habits requires us to intentionally flex our will power muscles in ways we may not have in a long time.” However, as people strengthen their willpower muscles to develop new habits, new strength and new energy is created and made available, such that strengthening the will power around a set of habits in *one* part of our lives—in the gym, or a money management program—then spills over into what we eat or how hard we work. Once willpower becomes stronger around a new habit, it touches everything.”

And here is the truly interesting thing: To change an old habit, says Duhigg, we must address an old craving. You have to keep the same cues and rewards as before, but feed the craving by inserting a new routine based on faith that there is something better and more wholesome that will fill that craving.

In other words, it’s not just faith and it is not just action, but a marriage of the two that will be ultimately fulfill our deeper cravings.

It is why twelve step programs work. At bottom addiction is the feeding of a spiritual craving with some *thing* that is not spiritual at all. One longs to have one’s soul, one’s truth, one’s existence validated by being valued in an ultimate sense. But meanwhile, one’s experience in the brutal, dog-eat-dog world one lives in tells one this is not possible. Yet the longing remains, creating all sorts of problems, not the least of which is a kind of free-floating anxiety. This pain of longing is almost worse than the felt sense that the ache cannot be filled. To lower the anxiety the longing seeks fulfilment in a habit around something – anything that will lower the anxiety, if only temporarily – whether it is excessive TV watching, checking facebook, or drinking.

Twelve step programs centered in community put one in touch with the real source of the longing – a higher spiritual power and an authentic community of people who fully show up and share from the tenderest part of who they are. Twelve steps thus invite addicts to the possibility of having their longings, their cravings filled with something deeper, more real and lasting and actually offer a new set of habits to replace the old ones.

Addiction is, after all, an ingrained habit – one that simply misses the mark. Sobriety thus begins essentially with a shift in habit around a familiar process – but one that is wholesome because it is done on the right level – the level of emotional and spiritual satisfaction and joy rather than on the level of sensate pleasure. Twelve step communities essentially invite addicts to exchange their habits around an addiction to a substance, with habits around meetings and the twelve steps. And those who do are completely transformed.

And I am here to tell you that what is true for alcoholics, drug and sex addicts, is also true for everyone else. Sobriety happens not by an acquiescence to a set of ideas about sobriety alone. Sobriety happens through a surrender and a commitment to a whole new way of living. Likewise, real discipleship is not simply acquiescence to a set of ideas *about* God – it too is a surrender to a focused new way of living – a new set of habits.

One of the greatest obstacles in teaching Christ's way – particularly to us long time church men and women is that we feel like we already know the entire truth about something, when in fact we have only a partial understanding. So many of us are thus actually heretics and don't know it. Robert Farrar Capon, in *The Fingerprints of God*, tells us what heresy really is. He reminds us that the word for heresy is from the Greek *haireisthai* which means "to select". Heresy is the selection of one aspect of a truth over the actual wholeness of that truth.

Addiction is a kind of heresy – a selecting of a partial truth and the elevation of that truth to the level of the whole. There are things in this life that God has given us to be enjoyed – alcohol, good acting and writing for television, good food lovingly prepared, money to buy niceties. The problem is when we elevate these *things* to the level of lasting spiritual fulfillment. To stop one's own addictive behavior, whether it is to the TV or to alcohol, one must be able to connect one's partial truth with the whole.

Not just the blatant addict, but all of us must be able to see the deeper rewards of adopting a new set of habits, centered in Christ's wholesomeness, as clearly as we were once able to see the partial rewards of the old habits centered only in a temporary pleasure. Each of us must find, not just a *general* religious truth that is easily usurped by an addiction, but a Personal Spiritual Truth – one worthy of putting the same kind of energy into developing new habits around, than the one to which one has heretofore formed an unhelpful, if not destructive set of bad habits.

It is why stopping an addictive behavior cold turkey is always short-lived. One must find something more wholesome, more meaningful, more fulfilling and more life-giving – something around which one can develop at least as much passion as was involved in the addiction.

And make no mistake about it – most of us in the culture we live in *are* addicted to something – whether it is food, or electronic devices, or excessive TV watching or shopping, no less than internet porn, alcohol or opioids. We are all taught how to numb in order to succeed in the insane culture in which we live from a very young age.

But, again, Jesus reminds us that the world as we presently know it is not the real world. We might want to pretend that this is the real world and that it's going to continue forever. But look at what that gets us – addictive habits that numb us to the world of God's kingdom.

Our mission, as followers of Jesus, is to prepare the people of this world for what's coming—to teach them about Jesus and the world that he has in mind, the real world. But as we go forth to do that teaching, we need to remember that our words alone are not going to be enough. Our actions, our habits reflecting who we are, are going to speak even more loudly; people aren't going to be able to hear what we're saying if it in no measure matches what we are doing – how we are living.

The Great Commission of Jesus therefore requires us to develop some different habits – habits that are more wholesome. Such a shift could completely change the way we are and what we have to offer others. For instance, Duhigg says "Typically, people who begin the habit of regular exercise also start eating better and become more productive at work. They smoke less and show more patience with colleagues and family. They also use their credit cards less frequently and

say they feel less stressed. Exercise,” he says “is one keystone habit that triggers widespread change.”

And if that is true, physically, it is also true spiritually. Just think what change might be wrought, if each of us added the daily habit of just a half hour of meditation and prayer to our routine.

“The Book of Joy” was just released last year. Paul Johnson recommended it to me. I now highly recommend it to you. It is a series of dialogues between the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu on the occasion of the Dalai Lama’s 80th birthday. Both the *Christian* Archbishop and the *Buddhist* Dalai Lama, make the case for spiritual practices being essential to a life of joy. What we focus our attention upon becomes the essence of the life we live. Therefore, spending daily time contemplating on love, compassion, gratitude and generosity is part of cultivating a *life* that is also filled with love, compassion, gratitude and generosity.

Duhigg reminds us after all that, “Champions don’t do extraordinary things. They do ordinary things, but they do them without thinking, too fast for the other team to react. They follow the deeply ingrained good habits they’ve learned.” Similarly, the Dalai Lama and the Archbishop both say that “Holy” men and women, so called, do not do extraordinary things either. They actually do very ordinary, human things that anyone is capable of doing without thinking because they are following the habits they have developed in their daily practices.

Make no mistake: developing such habits takes a long time of focused energy and we should not begin by trying to do too much too fast. Remember the watchword for those in AA. It is working the steps as best as one can simply, “one day at a time.” One begins by recognizing that one’s life is unmanageable and that one is powerless to change without surrender to a personal higher power. But if one does that, surrendering to God, and puts the steps into practice, one ends up making amends and dedicating one’s life to helping other desperate souls.

Imagine the best world one can imagine. God’s future is better. Imagine a land with no night, no cold, no pain, no more tears, and no more death. God has done one better: God has created this world with that possibility at its root. We need to proclaim it! And if we can’t, then maybe it’s time to develop some habits that will help. I commend to you “The Book of Joy” as one possibility to help you get started. You may know of others. The point is: God has good news for a cold inhospitable world. Who has heard? Who has believed? Who is prepared? Who will go teaching in the name of the father, son and Holy Spirit?

Let us pray. Gracious God, we thank you for the redeeming knowledge of Christ’s death and resurrection. Help us to put that knowledge into practice. And now bless these gifts and tithes that they may invite others to become willing disciples. Amen.

References:

LectionAid 2002

Charles Duhigg, “The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business”, Random House, New, York, New New York, 2012.

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