

SERMON: “Sharing the Vision: Using God’s Gifts to Bring Others to Christ.”

Rev. Geoff Ross. Sunday, Jan., 29, 2017. St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, Brampton.

In the midst of the shock and awe of the past week a voice called out saying; *“You cannot be a Christian without living like a Christian.”* Pope Francis, speaking to an audience of Lutheran and Catholic pilgrims from Germany – but clearly speaking to a wider world – went on to say; *“You cannot be a Christian without practicing the Beatitudes. You cannot be a Christian without doing what Jesus teaches us in Matthew 25.”* (A reference to Christ’s command that those who seek to follow Him must put their faith into action by offering mercy, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and welcoming the stranger.) But he didn’t stop there; Pope Francis then called out anyone who thinks faith is just words by saying our actions/works reveal our faith’s true nature; *“It’s hypocrisy to call yourself a Christian and chase away a refugee or someone seeking help, someone who is hungry or thirsty, or toss out someone in need of help.”*

Now it would be easy to dismiss this statement as a reference to the latest actions coming out of the White House, but I think that that would be too convenient; *“He’s talking about someone else, not me,”* we say, ducking for cover. But, even if he was the truth is this; Jesus spelled out clearly that faith isn’t simply something we profess – profession that *“Jesus is our Lord and Saviour”* is essential and the starting point of our life-long journey as pilgrims/disciples/people of faith – but it is also what we live out by putting our words/faith into action. Interestingly, Matthew 25 includes two other parables that warn/encourage us to be both ready/prepared, attentive/watchful for the ‘Bridegroom’s’ return and to make faithful/good use of the ‘Talents’ we have been given since we will be held to account for what we did/didn’t do with them.

Today we’re wrapping up our Epiphany series on the new vision/mission statement entitled *“Sharing the Vision”* by looking at the 3rd ‘Mission’ clause; *“using God’s gifts to go forth to bring others to Christ.”* In our 2nd reading Paul tells us that best way to serve God is by offering our bodies to God *“as a living sacrifice”* by doing *“everything that is good and pleasing to Him”* – and then he lists of a litany of ways we can do this. In Ephesians chapter 2, one of the most powerful passages in all of Paul’s writing, Paul expands on this by saying; *“For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.”* (Eph 2:10) With this Paul reveals a deeper, eternal, truth: our salvation is part of God’s plan/purpose for us. What this means is that the God who created the universe also created us – He shaped and saved you/me – to do the ‘good works’ He had prepared us to do/has enabled us to do through Jesus Christ. In other words – to paraphrase Rick Warren (**Purpose Driven Life**) – we were created to serve God, gifted to serve God, shaped/saved to serve God; God put you/me/us here to make a difference. The question is: do/are you/we?

The Bible tells us that God *“fashioned and made”* us. (Job 10:8) Scripture tells us how God created us with unique gifts for a specific and special task – a part/role that no one else was born to play. He made you to make a contribution, He shaped you to serve Him

with your life; it was given to you so that you would love/serve God by loving/serving the people of God. Just as Peter writes, we are to “*serve on another with whatever gift [we have] received.*” (1 Peter 4:10) It seems we all have a job. Everyone/every Christian is called “*not to be served but to serve*” (Matthew 20:28), to live a life modeled by the One we follow. This is what Jesus showed us when He came to us in the form of a man, not just to die for your sins, but also to show you and me how live by serving God.

Faith is about how you live your life; it’s not just what you believe. Let me explain: yes, faith is what we believe, but “*by itself, if it has no works*” (if it is only belief without actions that make faith manifest/real – tangible just as Jesus, God’s love and grace, became flesh and bone) it “*is dead.*” (James 2:14-17) Let me be clear: Jesus didn’t have to show up for us – but He did. Jesus didn’t have to reveal God’s love or kingdom; He didn’t have to heal, reach out to the lost, alone, and afraid, to teach – but He did. Jesus didn’t have to carry a cross and die for us – but He did. Friends, Jesus stretched out His arms on the cross – the least we could do is show up, roll up our sleeves, and get to work. The Good News is that serving comes in many forms [ad lib Serving] – giving/serving in terms of our time, talents, as well as our givings/offerings – and every one, says Paul, counts toward the building up of the kingdom and is blessed by God!

Finally, let me bring this series to a close by stating that while we are committing anew to “*using God’s gifts to go forth to bring others to Christ,*” this commitment isn’t a new thing. This passage from John was read at the commissioning service for St. Andrew's as a congregation (before it was even called St. Andrew's!) – and is why we’re called St. Andrew's; our commission then/now as a congregation was/is that we’re to emulate/live up to that 1st Andrew by “*bringing others to Christ*” just as he did with his brother Peter. The future for us is clear; be true to our calling to live the ‘New Life’ given to us by God by living a life of service/to be of use, and we can do this by being ourselves (named after Andrew) and by putting our faith into action so that, together, we can build up the kingdom. This is what Christians have done since the Acts 2 Church in Jerusalem, it’s what God wants us to do here. Amen.