

Fourth Sunday of Easter - Speak and Do Not Be Silent

April 24, 2016

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: 1 Corinthians 1: 10-18; Acts 18: 1-17

May the spoken and written word lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord.

St. Paul's initial work among the Corinthians did not look hopeful. He faced such hostility in the synagogue he shook the dust from his clothes and moved his efforts to the household of Titius Justus, who happened to live next door to the synagogue. With the help of refugees Aquila and Priscilla, co-workers Silas and Timothy and new believers, many more came to be followers of Jesus in Corinth — both Gentiles and Jews. To further encourage their efforts, Paul was given the gift of a vision in which the Lord told him: *“Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people.”*

Did you hear it? It may have been lost in the present. It may have been overlooked as “back-then-not now.” It may not qualify as a vision, but the Lord is still speaking to us. Listen. *“Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you.”* Did you hear it? When we see injustice --- *Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent. I am with you.* “When we read or hear ugly, manipulative, divisive rhetoric — *Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent. I am with you.*“ When opium is an epidemic and children do not have enough food or love — *Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent. I am with you.*“ When we see hurt or when we cause hurt ---- *Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent. I am with you.*“ When fewer and fewer people see any need to believe in God let alone be part of a faith community. *Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent. I am with you.*“

Paul had never met Jesus when he was on earth. Paul had never heard him speak with his own ears or watched him interact with people. Paul had the beginnings of a powerful conversion experience on a road to Damascus. He had heard Jesus' voice and became as blind as his heart had been. But the way Paul learned about Jesus was the same way you and I did. He was brought to a community of Jesus followers and they began to share what they knew about Jesus. They told him what Jesus said and did and what he revealed about God's ways, intentions and character. They told him about Jesus death, resurrection and ascension and how he was somehow still with them through the Holy Spirit. They told him about how everyday fishermen, tax collectors, women and men

had their lives changed by Jesus who now had the courage and strength to do what they could never have imagined they could do and who had come to know a peace and fearless generosity they thought impossible. They told Paul about their own encounters with Jesus in the other believers, in Jesus' Word, in the Meal, in a new way of seeing which effected how they engaged the world. They did not have complex theology or creeds. All they had was what they had come to know about Jesus and the ways it had come to effect their lives. The Lord working through people like us, helped Paul to become a follower of Jesus — a passionate, persistent, imperfect follower of Jesus.

Paul, who had never met Jesus and learned about him from others who had come to follow Jesus, took his newborn faith on the road, sharing it wherever he traveled. When Paul arrived in Corinth he came to a Roman city that had been built on the rubbles of a conquered Greek city. It was a very profitable center of commerce with a cosmopolitan population, many eager to shed their former low status, hoping they might achieve greater social honor and material success. There were plenty of religious options. You had your pick of temples and shrines to various Greek and Roman gods and families. People busy trying to maintain or improve their finances or status.... A multitude of faith or no-faith options.... A range of low-income to wealthy. Now, doesn't that sound familiar?

Paul would start talking about Jesus with the people with whom he had a connection — fellow Jews. They shared some common language, world views and a God. Instead of connection there was friction. Instead of discussion there was heated arguments. Paul's evangelism had to head outside the church walls. He found himself speaking to those he encountered in his tent making trade, while he was out and about, with people who were curious and in the homes where he was invited. There's a mission field that should sound familiar. At work, school, standing in store line, during a casual conversation, when someone asks us about the cross or the God's Work. Our Hands T-shirt we wear. Isn't that when we might have the opportunity to mention a love of God, the things our church is doing to help others, a "Thank you God for this beautiful day" or the importance of our church family in good and bad times? *"Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you."* We are on a mission, too.

What are we to speak? That's what scares most of us, isn't it? And when we think that may excuse us, we hear "Do not be afraid.... I am with you." The exact words for the exact time or circumstance will be a gift from the Spirit. That's a promise from

Jesus. We see it's true throughout the book of Acts when the once bumbling or persecuting disciples speak and Jesus moves into hearts. Do not underestimate the power of sincerity, compassion and love to empower what may seem like inadequate words. We who follow Jesus are not to be silent and we're not to be cynical, despairing or mean when we speak as followers of Jesus. We are not to be silent but a voice of a certain hope that arises from a trust in the goodness and power of God, a love and power that we have read about, witnessed and experienced.

But it's not just through words that we speak. It was once said, "Preach the gospel at all times and when necessary use words." We are silent or we speak our faith in how we conduct ourselves at work, school, in our families, in public, in church, in meetings. We are silent or speak our faith in how we use our money and what gets our time and attention. We are silent or speak our faith in courtesy, civility and helpfulness freely offered to all manner of people we meet. We are silent or speak our faith in ways that heal, feed, comfort, reconcile, restore. We are silent or speak our faith in doing what we can — regularly or "one and done" tasks ---- to support and further God's mission outpost called Haven. We are silent or speak our faith by making worship, prayer and daily devotions the air that fills our lungs of faith and will invite others.

Despite God's assurances, "Do not be afraid.... I am with you" we can get frightened. Paul did not work alone in Corinth. Neither do we. He had partners in faith. We have one another. He was part of a community joined together by a love of the Lord. We too have a community of faith called church. Paul was filled with the Holy Spirit. We were filled with the Holy Spirit at our baptism. Do not be afraid. Do not be silent. We bear the love and promises of God that can heal and work wonders. That is who we are. That is what we are about: *to honor God, to reach out with love to our members and the community, and to share the gospel of Jesus Christ.* "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you." Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 4/20/16