

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

"Everyone Can Be a Preacher!"

Minister and author John Ortberg reveals in his book The Life You've Always Wanted that his childhood hero was none other than Popeye the Sailor man. And, looking back, as an adult, he realizes that one of the most profound statements about the human condition that he ever heard was spoken by Popeye. Whenever he was frustrated or unsure of himself or feeling inadequate he would simply say, "I YAM WHAT I YAM."

He writes: "Popeye was not a sophisticated guy. He had never been in therapy and was woefully out of touch with his inner child. He did not have much education as far as we know. He was a simple, sea-faring, pipe smoking, Olive Oyl loving sailor man and he wouldn't pretend to be anything else" So he simply said, "I YAM WHAT I YAM."

Well almost two thousand years earlier, the Apostle Paul said the same thing to the church at Corinth, but it was in a completely different context. Paul did not offer the words "I am what I am" as an explanation of his shortcomings but rather as a testimony to the grace of God. And this passage that we just heard also reminds us of the responsibility that accompanies God's grace.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians to contest some of the false beliefs that had already started arising in the congregation there. One of these ideas was that the resurrection of the dead was neither a reality nor a possibility. His argument is as direct and emphatic as good ole' Popeye's when he lays out four simple but basic points. ONE – Jesus was crucified. TWO – He was buried. THREE – he was raised. FOUR – He appeared to many in his resurrected state.

For matters of clarity, he lists the "many" as Cephas, the twelve, then more than five hundred followers. And just in case anyone misses the point he adds his final piece of evidence for the jury. Paul says, "He then appeared to me!"

But there is actually more to his words than simply evidence of his beliefs. When read in the context of the whole passage it is clear that Paul is proclaiming a theological call to action. To live in a way so that people know, not just that Christ died, but that Christ died for your sins. St. Francis of Assisi is credited for stating this another way: "Preach the Gospel every day; use words when necessary." Or, in other words, "EVERYONE CAN BE A PREACHER!" So let's flesh out what that means for us here at Nazareth Presbyterian.

In Paul's day, one of the problems was that people were afraid to stand up for what they REALLY believed because they were always measuring their worth against society's preoccupation with performance. Well, friends, we haven't come very far have we? We still seem to find ourselves trying to live up to the expectations of the world. And of course these expectations are merit based.

Paul is reminding us that, because God loved us enough to send his son to die for our sins, we do not have to try to measure up to the conventional wisdom of the world. We are free to live for and in God's wisdom, which is based on grace. As I wrote this, I thought of an experience that I had in a theology class at Seminary.

I was feeling a little overwhelmed because this particular class was taught by the new Dean at Erskine Seminary. I had heard that he was a tough nut to crack and not particularly fond

of women in the ministry – both of which proved not to be true. But in my ignorance, I was hoping to make it through the first class unnoticed until I could size up the situation.

Dr. Gore began the class with a question. “If Jesus Christ himself were to walk down the center aisle of your church today and point his finger at you and ask ‘What have you done to deserve to be let into my kingdom?’ how would you answer him?” I remember thinking, “Well, this isn’t going to be too hard. I know the answer to that question. I would hop up and say, “Oh Christ, I led the children’s choir for EIGHT years and taught Sunday School and led the old ladies’ circle before I was even OLD. I read the Bible and pray almost every day.” The list went on in my head but THANKFULLY I never opened my mouth because the professor interrupted my thoughts with the CORRECT answer.

“NOTHING”. That’s right. That’s what the man said – nothing. There is nothing that you or I could ever do to deserve coming into the kingdom of God. We can never be good enough, smart enough, kind enough, noble enough. NEVER.

You see, while the conventional wisdom of the world tries to force us to measure up, God's grace KNOWS we CANNOT measure up. God knows that I am what I am and you are what you are. That we do not honor God but seek our own ways. That we are unjust, evil, bitter and cursed and completely unable to choose to do anything right, left to our own devices. And yet God saved us. That is what Paul is saying in these words to the Corinthians.

Paul is reminding them and us that the conventional wisdom of the world punished Jesus for healing on the Sabbath and befriending the outcasts and speaking to women in public and choosing love over legalism. And the way that they punished him was by execution on a cross.

God's grace reversed the wisdom of society and turned their judgment into our resurrection. So *because* of the way that Christ died, we are allowed to live as Easter people

who defy the beliefs of society and live instead by God's grace. And this means that each of us is called to preach with our lives, even though we are what we are. And he even tells us how.

Because Paul's world and ours is so much alike, this passage is a model on how to write the sermon that we will live for others. Today, as in Paul's day, we all walk the tightrope between the expectations of the world and the grace of God. Paul's advice for surviving this delicate dance is to "hold firmly" to the message of the Gospel. He opens this passage by saying, "I remind you all of the good news that I proclaimed, in which you stand, through which you are being saved if you hold firmly to the message that I have proclaimed".

Of course, the obvious requirement for preaching with our lives is to be sure that the ground we are standing on is the right message. THE GOOD NEWS. Jesus Christ lived for me, died for me, conquered death for me and rose for me. And when we KNOW the Good News, then we won't get hung up on the inconsequential things about life. We won't sweat the small stuff, so to speak.

What I mean is that whether a person enjoys praise songs or listening to Handel being played on the organ, whether one reads from the King James Version or The Message, whether one crosses himself when he prays or drinks beer with his pizza does not really matter. As long as we worship the same God. As long as we hang our hat on the resurrection of Christ. As long as the sermon that we preach with our lives is based on the grace of the cross.

But one translation of Paul's words reads: "you are being saved if you *keep in memory* the message that I have proclaimed." I think I like that one better. Because when we have in the forefront of our minds the message of the grace of God, we are more likely to preach that grace with our lives. And it does not take one Seminary class to be that kind of preacher. It doesn't

mean you have to be a certain age or even have a special skill set. It only takes remembering the goodness, kindness, patience, love and care that those who have taught you the faith have emulated in their lives and then doing the same. It means living in a way so that those around us who do not know Christ will, IN THE VERY LEAST, know that we are different.

I had the opportunity to hear Genie Gamble, a minister that I have always admired, preach once at Montreat. Her sermon was about how we can be a witness for Christ. She said that, once someone knows you are a Christian, you become a witness for Christ whether you want to or not. And it is up to each of us to determine whether we will be CREDIBLE witnesses or INCREDIBLE ones. This is both a blessing and a huge responsibility.

So when we know the Gospel and keep it in the forefront of our minds we can all become preachers. Then the whole world will know that I am what I am and you are what you are by the grace of Jesus Christ: beautiful children created in the image of God. And even though we went on from there to pretty much mess up everything that God had done, "the fact remains that we are made of good stuff, from a unique and exquisite pattern." (1)

And because of our Maker, and our making, our lives will tell the story that God wants others to know when we preach the gospel in our living.

I think Allison Kraus says it best in her song, "A Living Prayer".

In this world I walk alone
With no place to call my home
But there's One who holds my hand
The rugged road through barren lands

In these trials of life I find
Another voice inside my mind
He comforts me and bids me live
Inside the love the Father gives

Take my life and let me be
A living prayer my God to Thee.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Julie Schaaf

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(1) All Creation Sings: The Voice of God in Nature, J. Ellsworth Kalas, Abingdon Press,
2010, p.100.