

Sermon preached by Rev. David T. Young at Hickory First Presbyterian, 6 August 2017

**“Upwards, onwards and outwards!”**

John 21: 15-19

Today we conclude our 6 week sermon series entitled ‘**Sharing faith the Jesus way**’...

Over the past 5 Sunday’s - going through the Gospels of *Matthew, Mark, Luke and John* - we’ve heard the story of:

- the Samaritan woman at the well;
- Jesus healing the paralytic who was lowered into the crowd through a hole in the roof;
- the Prodigal Son who was welcomed home so warmly by his loving father;
- and the *call* of the fishermen, the first Disciples of Jesus... /

Each of these stories we heard and reflected upon in order that we each might be **encouraged** to share - *always* - our faith, the Jesus way. /

Today we’ve heard the story from John’s Gospel where Jesus **reinstates** Peter...

**You remember Peter...**

- he’s the one who denied Jesus;
- the one who experienced the crucifixion first hand - *and indeed, as a result of that experience*, had thought himself that the adventure with Jesus was completely over;
- *so much so* that he’d gone back to his previous life; back to doing what he knew, to what he did best - **fishing**... /
- **but of course** the resurrection had changed everything - *just as Jesus knew it would*;
- and so here we have in today’s scripture, Jesus — coming alongside Peter... asking him if he loves him — **and loves him truly** — giving him another chance, just as he always **does**.... and then commanding him:
- feed my lambs; take care of my sheep; feed my sheep; **follow me!** //

**Follow me**... that’s what these past weeks have been all about...

Teaching; encouraging; guiding; challenging; **reminding us**:

- **how** to share our faith the Jesus way;
- to look always **upwards** to Jesus;
- **onwards** to where he leads;
- **outwards** as we reach out into the world *and the community around us* responding to that great commission to **follow him** and his **example** and to **love** every single person as if there were only one to love! //

**Sharing faith, the Jesus way! //**

I recently read of a book called, *‘Why Preach? Why Listen?’*...

The author suggests that on any given Sunday when ministers or pastors look out at their congregations, they should imagine that many of the people sitting in the pews - *or chairs* - almost did not come that day:

- they considered staying in bed because the day was too cold and wet;
- or the day was too nice and they wanted to be outside;
- or they had people coming to stay and meals to prepare;
- or the lawn needed mowed;
- or there was something great on Netflix they were hooked on;
- or they simply couldn't be bothered...

**I'm sure that would never apply to the good folks of Hickory First Presbyterian!!! /**

Some people, *it is suggested*, considered staying at home because in their hearts and minds their **faith** did not measure up to what they thought was the faith of others in the congregation...

Somehow, *because of what they believed*, or what they doubted, *what they did*, or what they did not do -- *in their minds* -- they weren't quite **good enough**, and were never going to **be good enough!!** //

**Not good enough!** / **Not good enough???**

If our series has taught us anything over these weeks then it is that we **ALL OF US** (*within and out-with these walls*) are good enough:

- even with our faith inferiority complex;
- even with all our faults and failures;
- even with those things about ourselves that we keep buried and hidden lest we be judged and condemned by our fellow Christians... /

But of course there is still a rub.... because so many people out there in the world - in our communities the world over - **ARE STAYING AWAY FROM OUR CHURCHES** :

- because they genuinely believe they are NOT good enough;
- because they fear being **judged** by fellow **Christians**... /

If our great commission is to go and be witnesses for Jesus - *to share our faith the Jesus way* - to feed His lambs — then we all need — from time to time — to take a good, long hard look at ourselves:

- perhaps at our attitudes; perhaps at our prejudices;
- a look at the image we portray to those in our communities who are unChurched.... *yet still the lambs and sheep Christ speaks of...*
- still the very people we are called and challenged to **love** and **welcome** and **accept** as we share this awesome faith we've found...
- **this faith** that speaks of a transforming Jesus who turns the chains - **that hold us back or weigh us down** - into the social bonds that connect us to service! //

When we gather in Church on a Sunday many of us are under the pressure of work, or family commitment, as well as less helpful things that weigh down our hearts and minds...

As we worship we are given opportunities to recognise our own failures as individuals; to **clarify** our **values** and our **motives**, and to see all that we **do** and all that we **are** in the light of the Gospel message! /

Here -- *in Church* -- there is a breathing space, *which is not escapism*...

Here -- *in Church* -- we are challenged to recalibrate and reevaluate **who** we **are** and **what** we **do** and **why** we do it....

Here - *in community* - we are reminded of the needs of those around us, and the opportunities we have to make a difference for good as we share our faith - **the Jesus way**...

Here we are offered God's gift of the freedom to serve others, *freeing ourselves from the contemporary obsession with self...* /

When we engage, *and engage truly*, with the gospel message, we are freed from the confining assumptions that chain us to **ourselves**, or our **work**, or things **less than helpful** that *bind us* and *limit us* and *narrow us* and *burden us!* /

*When we engage with the Gospel message*, we are exposed to the inclusive, affirming theology of Jesus such that an individual, set in their ways, *decided in their mind*, **possibly even confirmed in their prejudice**, has a complete about-face:

- something intervenes, or interrupts, and everything is different! //

Each one of us here — if we're honest with ourselves — will have been -- *at some point* -- on wrong paths that have hurt others and us:

- we've all been headstrong, stubborn, *blinded to our own ambition*, selfish to meet our own need and oblivious to the true cost to ourselves...

And out there in the world - *where we are called to live out and to share our faith*:

- the hard-driving businesswoman who is so determined to get a promotion that she loses her marriage;
- the teenager - *angry and hurt* - who cannot forgive a parent's error;
- the man who is so locked up in his emotions that he cannot express his love for his partner;
- the employer whose cultural values prevent him from promoting women equally;
- the partisan political leader incapable of compromise;
- the sports fan incapable of sporting behaviour;
- the person unable to believe that refugees can ever be a good thing and that they're just a cloak for terrorists;
- the hard, demanding, parent who cannot give a child a break;
- the *church-goer*, prejudiced against recognising women in leadership roles, or people 'not quite like us' in the pews, or children crying during worship, or unwilling to allow divorced people to remarry...

And there will be many more instances in our own lives where **we** have been close-minded, and stubborn; prejudiced and discriminatory...

What happens then when Jesus appears to us and asks, just as he asked Peter, “do you love **me** more than these”...

What happens when awkward, *radical*, **unsettling Jesus** looks us straight in the eyes and says:

**“Hang on a minute. Not in my Name”**... and we’re surprised to find our minds changed, our hearts changed, our attitudes changed, our lives changed.

That’s the Jesus who calls us to love one another

That’s the Jesus who commands us to go and feed his Sheep ...*all of them*...

That’s the Jesus us who tells us to share the faith we’ve found... following his wonderful example of love and inclusion and dignity and respect! //

If we share our faith - *the Jesus way and not our way*; if our ministry to our communities is to be truly Christ-centred... **churches will grow**... people will be attracted to our churches *and the welcome received in Christ’s name* - **instead of being put off by it!** //

Do you love me? Do you truly love me?

Then feed my lambs; take care of my sheep; feed my sheep — every one of them:

- whomever they are; whatever they’ve done;
- whatever choices they’ve made; wherever they’ve come from;
- however different from us they might be....

If you love me and love me truly, says Jesus – then follow my example: **FOLLOW ME!**

**Something to think about!**

**AMEN**