

Have you ever heard the piece of folk wisdom expressed in the phrase, “practice what you preach”? It’s a phrase that used to have more usage than it currently does. In former times it could be used to chastise a politician whose words were different than his actions; or by an adolescent in the midst of a power struggle with her parents; or by friends or neighbours caught up in debates about how to raise children or control their pet or function in community. “Practice what you preach” – has someone ever challenged you with that imperative? As someone who actually does ‘preach’ it is a phrase that causes me some angst. The central message of our Christian scriptures is to love and love, therefore, has been either the central or secondary theme of almost every sermon I have preached. Love one another - but I haven’t! That is to say I haven’t always shown love or empathic understanding or generosity in my life. Just ask Victoria after I’ve been intransigent in a domestic squabble. Just ask the parishioner at St. Martin’s who felt unheard when she came to tell me about the untimely death of her dog. Just ask the man waving his arms on the side of the road as I hurried by to my destination.

I discovered that it was actually Jesus who first uttered this phrase. Speaking to the crowds, Jesus advised them that the scribes and Pharisees correctly expounded the religious laws and should, therefore, be

listened to; but, Jesus warned, they should not be imitated for “they do not practice what they teach.” I don’t want to be that kind of religious leader. I don’t want to be one who says all the fine words, who is able to expound the deeper meaning of scripture, but doesn’t follow through with actions.

I got thinking about this phrase when I read this morning’s Bible lesson from the letter of James. James, who is thought to be the brother of Jesus, is writing to the fledgling Christian community when he states, “Be doers of the word and not merely hearers.” I suddenly realized James’ instructions put you and I in the same boat - the preacher is challenged to ‘practice’, the listener is challenged to ‘do’. In his 2009 book *Saving Jesus from the Church*, pastor/professor Robin Meyers argues that 2000 years of Christianity tended to obscure this wisdom. He argues that as the church became an established part of society an emphasis was placed on holding proper beliefs. Preaching the word, hearing the word, agreeing with the word became more important than enacting the word.

Church growth experts suggest that throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century entry into the Christian community followed the pattern of believe, behave, belong. If you believed the right things, got baptized, went to confirmation, towed the “party line,” you belonged in the church. Behaviour was almost irrelevant. Those same experts suggest that the pattern changed in the

21<sup>st</sup> century. Those who want to join the church desire to belong and only later (if at all) believe. Last year I asked the people attending the “Spiritual Conversation” groups at St. Martin’s why they were involved in the church. Without exception they stated that belonging, a sense of community, was their primary motivation. When I asked if there was anything else that drew them to church they reported a vague sense of the holy, something spiritual, that their hearts were moved. It appears as if “belonging” has surpassed believing as the appeal of the church. Yet, even in this new age, behaving – acting, doing, practicing – is still a distant third.

Meyers, the pastor/professor, isn’t surprised. He recognized that the old formulations of Christianity just don’t make sense to the modern mind – an omnipotent God-father who orders life and Jesus, the sacrificial lamb whose saves us from sin – don’t resonate much with liberal Christians. Modern people want to belong, at least those in the second half their life, but they are less concerned – maybe even less convinced – of orthodox beliefs. Meyers thinks this is good news. He celebrates the fact that people want to explore Jesus as a spiritual guru and wisdom teacher rather than worship him as Divine Son and Saviour. The number of you who resonated with my musings two weeks ago that God might be more a verb than noun suggests that Meyers is on to something.

He doesn't stop there, however. While he celebrates that correct doctrine is being replaced by genuine curiosity, he pushes us to be more than voyeurs of Jesus' life. He challenges us to become disciples, to be preachers who practice, listeners who "do," followers who make love the essence of their life and work.

Fortunately the God-power of love is not limited to those inside the church. Love, gritty love, is at work in the world. The August Observer (show slide) tells the story of Evanna Brennan and Susan Giles who put their gritty love into action by wandering amidst the addicts and destitute on Vancouver's East side. At the ages of 71 and 65 respectively they decided to employ their life-long nursing skills to bring medical care to this marginalized community. One story in the article describes the pair visiting "Rick" whose use of painkillers gradually led to full-fledged addiction. As he pulls up his pants, his legs reveal ulcers some extending to the calf muscle. The nurses clean the wounds and re-bandage his legs. In the article Rick concludes, "It is not hard to see that they love their work." At an age when some escape to Mexico or to the bridge club, Evanna and Susan are clearly committed to love in one of the grittiest places in our country. (end slide) The Observer article does not say whether this pair have any

relationship to church but we can be assured that they are “practicing” the power of love.

Ruth was a Lutheran minister ordained about the same time I was. It is likely in her tradition that she made vows more doctrinal than mine. Yet her ordination was suspended when she acknowledged love for a female partner. In bitter irony the church rejected this woman who subsequently has spent her life practicing and doing gospel. Her works range from reconciliation initiatives long before the TRC to preserving prairie ecology by donating farmland to the Nature Conservancy of Canada. No action impresses me more than her and her partner’s commitment to a niece born with life limiting cerebral palsy and who is in need of constant support. Beginning as helpful aunts they cared for her every other weekend. Eventually they embraced and loved this child into womanhood supporting her at every turn while caring for her medical and bodily needs. Ruth would be quick to tell you that this was not a sacrificial act but an experience where love given was love returned. Her niece is now a young adult and Ruth and her partner imagined with her how she might live with increased independence. The result was Astonished! (show slide) a Regina not-for-profit inclusive community which addresses barriers facing young adults with complex physical disabilities seeking to ensure opportunities for

learning, recreation, employment, and housing. Ruth continued to practice what she preached long after the church told her to quit preaching. (end slide)

And then there is Jim. A member of Elim Church down the road. Jim is a former bank manager who in retirement sensed God's call to act. Choosing to live in an 800 square foot apartment he diverted his resources of time and money to working with the kids who frequent the area around Idyllwild and 33<sup>rd</sup>. (show slide) Many afternoons, and three or four nights a week, Jim and his wife oversee the floor hockey games that help keep the neighbourhood kids off the street. Early into what they call "a ministry" they recognized that these kids needed food and a little bit of loving as well as floor hockey. Now they provide a meal before most evening events. Recently I saw Jim with four of "his kids" at Fuddruckers where he was sponsoring the only birthday party that a young boy would know. (end slide) Jim is committed to Christian orthodoxy and recognizes Jesus as 'saviour' – he and his wife join the unchurched Evanna and Susan, and post-church Ruth and her partner, in living the love which is God into the world.

I'm told that McClure church is wanting to revision itself. Few can doubt that McClure practiced what was preached from the pulpit and not only listened to but "enacted" the word of God. Your ministry with and to

seniors; your long tradition of supporting refugees; your commitment to be 'ecumenical.' 'Affirming' and 'reconciling' are but some of the more public expressions of living love into the world. My guess is, that within this congregation there are likely stories such as the ones I have told of individuals or small groups of the faithful committed to acts of gritty love. Whatever the future of McClure holds, it must lead from this place that we call sanctuary back out those doors into the world. If God is a verb, if God is what happens when someone acts with love, justice, courage and compassion than God's people can never be content with singing hymns and shaking hands on a Sunday morning. I recently read that the average United Church member is over 60, is Caucasian and is comfortably affluent. It is so tempting to quit practicing and doing; but we who have experienced the turning of the culture and still find ourselves here on a Sunday morning are called back into the world to bandage ulcerated legs, to empower all manner of abilities; to befriend the impoverished and racially different. This is the call to McClure Church – the same one that Jesus and his followers issued to the first Christians: practice what you preach, be doers not just listeners, live love with boldness. May the power of God which is love flow through us and pour out on to the streets, for heaven's sake. Amen.