

New Year Kick-off Sermon

Title: More than words

Passage: Matthew 22:34-39; 28:16-20

Pastor Walt

I'm really excited to share the Word of God with you all today as we kick off the year as one church community. I will be preaching from two passages today. The first one is from Matthew 22:34-39, and the second from Matthew 28:16-20. So now, I want to invite you all to turn to your Bible with me to these two passages.

Now, before we read the passage, I want to encourage you all to develop the habit of bringing your own Bible to church on Sunday. I know sometimes we have the scriptural verses for the sermon printed in the bulletin, but it's important to have your own Bible handy in the worship service, for I assume that one of the main reasons why you come is because you want to learn and hear from God's Word. And the benefit of bring your own Bible to church isn't so much to make sure that the preacher is speaking on the right passage, but to note where the passage is, so you can keep the verse handy for your own sake when you go home. In fact, there are so many other benefits when you bring your Bible to church on Sunday, that I can make a sermon out of it, but today is not the time to do so. But still, I want to challenge you to make this into a good habit and discipline. Make this as a top priority for you this year in 2010, alright?

Let us now read these two passages together.

Matthew 22:34-39

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Matthew 28:16-20

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

The Word of the LORD, thanks be to God. Let us pray.

Prayer

LORD, how beautiful is the sight when your people gather together to seek your will, especially on the first Sunday of the year. Your beauty is manifested in us as we come before your presence. May your words penetrate into

our hearts as we learn to lift up this year into your hand, not only as individuals, but also collectively as one body here at SFCC. May your Spirit work through us this year so that we will be united and ready to impact the lives of those around us through both words and deeds. In Christ's name we pray, amen.

As we begin, I want to invite to think about 3 different scenarios.

Scenario 1

It's a Wednesday evening in downtown Seattle. The weather's cold. You have no money in your pocket, and you are so hungry that your stomach is churning upside down. You walk up the handicapped ramp and enter the door of a building where it serves free meals. You are immediately greeted by the scent of freshly-cooked meat loaf and baked bread. It's warm inside and as you go further into the building, you are greeted by people all with a big warm smile on their faces, and they shake your hand. You ask where all the food come from, and they tell you that all these meals are put together by those who make donation and by those who package them together at a warehouse run by an organization called Northwest Harvest.

With a grateful heart, you line up with a food tray. The line leads to the serving area in the kitchen where they are serving some of that meatloaf that you smelled earlier. Then you see some grated cheddar cheese to add that your bowl, and then further down, you find bread and some drinks. You take your tray of food, walk out into the dining hall, where tables are set with placemats and utensils. You sit down, eager to grab that first bite of meatloaf in your mouth. But you suddenly stop. It's been a rough month. Meals like this are hard to come by, and yet, here's an oasis in the desert, a place where you can come and eat. You smile and say a short prayer to yourself: perhaps this is what heaven is like.

Scenario 2

You are in your eighties and you live by yourself. You often feel lonely, and you wish there's someone you can talk to. At the same time, you are limited physically due to the pain in your joints. Your apartment is a mess because you are either too tired or too weak to do anything.

Then you hear a knock on the door. As soon as you open it, you are greeted by a bunch of young people, who politely introduce themselves as volunteers from church, and they tell you that they are scheduled to come to your place to tidy up your apartment. As they take out the trash, wash the dirty dishes, and recycle empty boxes into the bin, you are greeted by a young adult who seems to be interested in you and your story. As you two talk and share your life with each other, everyone else is diligently cleaning up the apartment and making it look homey again.

As they are about leave, your eyes become moist and you say to them, "Thank you so much." You close the door, you turn around and see the difference in your apartment. You smile and

say a short prayer to yourself: perhaps this is what heaven is like.

Scenario 3

It's a hot summer afternoon, even during the Christmas season in Eastern Africa. All the kids in the village are out playing. Though they don't have much to play with, they invent games using anything they could find. Then suddenly, you see a big truck with a big sign that says "Samaritan's Purse" heading towards the village from afar. All the kids stop their activities and simply stare with you in wonder, "what in the world is this??"

Finally, the truck pulls over, along with other vehicles. Several volunteers come out and through a translator, a volunteer says, "God loves you all and each of you will receive a Christmas present today." You cannot believe what you are hearing, but when they open the truck, you see loads of shoeboxes, all nicely packaged and gift wrapped. You receive and open a box, and you find toys that you have never seen before in your life.

You ask, "Is this all for me?" A volunteer standing right next to you says "Of course honey, it's all for you." While you are checking out the toys, you see a little pamphlet that has a lot of drawings in it. You take it out, and begin to read it with a translator. You hear that God loves you and that He died for you in the person of Jesus so that you can have a new life. He is the ultimate gift.

At the same moment, in Southeast Asia, an under-nourished little girl and her family are told by the World Vision staff that someone has decided to sponsor her so that she can go to school and that her family can have food to eat. With that thought, both of these two kids smile, and say a short prayer to themselves: perhaps this is what heaven is like.

And you know what brothers and sisters? Maybe it is. The scenarios that you just heard are examples of what could happen in the lives of people if we, the church here at SFCC, are to live out our faith and our belief. Whether it's:

- One Night Count (Counting the number of homeless people in the King County), or
- World Vision Children Sponsorship, or
- Providing transportation for new international students, or
- Helping out with the seniors and their homes, or
- Packing food at NW Harvest, or
- Preparing gift boxes for the Samaritan's Purse;

All these are great opportunities for us to show the community and the world that God is love indeed. In fact, all these things are the natural flow of our faith in Jesus, for Christ first loved us and therefore, we must love others. It's a natural flow of our faith. In the 1st Matthew text we read, Jesus knows that true love for God is always coupled with a genuine care and compassion for people. If you say you love God, your love for Him will be followed by your love for people.

And not just loving the people that we see week in and week out in the church, or in our small groups or fellowships, but loving our neighbors, loving our colleagues, loving our classmates, loving our non-Christian friends, and showing them the love of God.

In fact, if you truly believe in God, not only you will love the things God loves, you will also hate the things God hates. You say, wait a minute, God doesn't hate because God is love. I mean, we hear that all the time right? Nowadays, people always say, especially on university campuses, "God cannot hate because God is love." To that I say, "God must hate because God is love." You see if I say I love goodness, then I must hate evil.

- If I say I love children, then I must hate anything that would cause them harm like abuse and exploitation.

- If I say I love my wife, then I must hate anything that would ruin this love we share, such as neglect or infidelity.

In the same way, if God is holy, then he must hate what is unholy.

- If God loves justice, then he must hate injustice.

- If God loves equality in all men, then he must hate inequality and oppression.

- If God loves and cares about people's physical wellbeing, then he must hate famine, starvation, and malnutrition.

This means, if we say we love God, then we must love the things God loves and hate the things He hates...and that will always lead us to action. If not, the Bible says, all these talks about loving God are empty words. In fact, the Bible says, faith, if it's not accompanied by action, is dead.

Transition to the year 2010

Now, some of you may ask, what does this have to do with the year 2010 and our church, well, let me tell you, it's got everything to do with it. If you have been with us since the 40th anniversary celebration back in October, you will know that the church's theme for this year is Love Christ, Love the Church, and Love the Community? I mean, it's very catchy isn't it? Love, Love, Love, Christ, Church, Community. But what does that really mean?

We can say and recite the theme of the church all year long, but if we really do believe in this theme, that we the church here at SFCC is to love Jesus, love each other, and love the world, then we must do the best we can to show what that looks like this year. It's gotta be more than just words... We gotta show what we love in our practice. Otherwise, it's just all talk. You with me?

Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not saying we don't live out our faith in this church community. In fact, ever since I've been to this church, I feel that as a congregation, we have been expressing and practicing *what we believe* and *who we claim to be*. At SFCC, we are known for warm fellowships and friendliness. We value family and

relationships. We care about mission in Taiwan and also those who immigrated or studied here in Seattle. So it's true, we are a congregation that have been expressing and practicing what we believe, but we are not done – not by a long shot.

In the second passage in Matthew, after an emotional roller coaster ride as they watched Jesus crucified, died, and then in three days rose again, the disciples now have Jesus with them. They enjoyed and treasured their time with Him, and they shared life and they fellowshiped with one another. But in the passage we see that as Jesus was about to leave the world, he gave his disciples his last command. He said, "Go! Go out, he tells them, and make disciples of all nations."

In other words, he's saying to them, "*There's a world of people out there, and they need to know about me. Go and tell them about my story. And don't just tell them – show them. Show them my love, my life, and how both have changed you and can change them too.*"

You see, Jesus knew that the church would not survive if they would to simply fellowship with one another, there has to be an outward expression in order to fulfill the mission of God. And I'm convinced that if we remain true to our calling – to follow God's lead wherever that takes us – we'll discover together God's will for our church... both inwardly and outwardly.

Conclusion

Now, as we close today, I want to ask you to do something that may seem a bit strange – but humor me. I want you to close your eyes – go ahead, close them – and I want you to dream with me a little bit. I want you to dream with me what our church would look like if we were to fully and completely live out what we say we'd do: to love Christ, love the Church, and love the Community? What would that look like? (Wait...)

You can open your eyes now, but hold on to that vision – hold on to what you saw in your mind's eye, and don't let it go. Because I wonder if you saw the same thing I did – something wonderfully exciting. When I close my eyes, you know what I see?

- I see a congregation that enjoys being with one another and takes great joy in growing and learning together.

- I see a congregation that gathers every Sunday morning to worship God, not because it's a good or a religious thing to do... not because it's an obligation or a family tradition... not because their parents force them to... But because they want to love and worship the LORD their God.

- I see a congregation that whenever there are visitors or new faces, after the service, without being told, members will all be eager to greet them, meet them, and welcome them into the community.

- I see a congregation that its members are transparent and open with one another in small groups and fellowships. They are eager to love, already ready to forgive, and bear with each other.

- I see a congregation that is so deep in love with Jesus and so grateful of His message that its members are always eager to share the Good News with their non-Christian friends and families.

- I see a congregation that begins to understand itself not only as an inward looking but also an outward expressing church – taking that faith and going out, not just to Taiwan or to its immigrants and students here in Seattle, but also to the local communities, and to the world.

- I see a congregation who not only gets excited about what God is doing through the updates from the missionaries, but its members are ready to engage in mission themselves: both locally and globally.

I once heard a saying that goes like this: *Christian faith is "a come-and-go affair." We come up to the mountain, but we must go back down again. We come to worship, but we must go and serve.* I couldn't agree more. Every time we walk into this building as a community of faith, we enter into holy ground. But the moment we take the step out of the building, we enter into the mission field, a world that desperately needs to hear the Good News.

Let us take part in this great adventure of what God has in store for us this year. Let us live out our faith so that we can truly love Christ, love the Church, and love the Community. May God bless the preaching of his Word, AMEN.

Earthquakes of magnitude 7.0 hit the poor Caribbean nation of Haiti on January 12th. This was the worst quake in the area in the last two hundred years, leaving many casualties and devastation in its wake. Please pray for family of those who perished, and help them to rebuild their homes with your contributions. The following are some relief agencies through which donations can be made:

MERCY CORPS

<http://www.mercycorps.org/>

THE SALVATION ARMY

http://www.salvationarmyusa.org/usn/www.usn_2.nsf

SAVE THE CHILDREN

<http://www.savethechildren.org>

SAMARITAN'S PURSE

<http://www.samaritanspurse.org>

WORLD VISION

<http://www.worldvision.org/>

At night the camps get cold and wet. Samaritan's Purse is distributing warm blankets to those in need. You can



also visit their web site and participate in their work of the gospel and love. It is only a mouse-click away!