

Memorize & Ponder

**Brentwood Presbyterian Church
September 22, 2013**

Don't Be Afraid to Speak

**Acts 18:8b-11 & Ps 113
(33, 489, 671, 635)**

Empires thrive and survive on violence.
Violence is also the cause of their collapse.
It's a complex dynamic,
a toxic blend of arrogance, greed, delusion, and defensiveness.
There are imperial ambitions driven by these forces in world affairs,
in national affairs,
and in personal affairs.

In world affairs, empires have risen and fallen through human history:
Egypt, Babylon, Rome, the Ottomans, Germany, France,
Great Britain, China, Japan, Russia, and the United States,
just to name a few.

Judaism's foundational story of Exodus
grew out of emancipation from Egyptian imperial power.

Early Christianity emerged in the midst of Roman imperial power.

Western Christianity, of which we are the heirs, spread around the world
in the midst of the expansion of European imperial powers.

We ourselves live in the time of American imperial power.

In national affairs here in Canada, European Christian settlers
have exercised imperial power over First Nations peoples
and wave after wave of immigrants.

In personal affairs, family violence,
usually perpetrated by an imperial male,
continues to plague our communities.

This week I've had a powerful reminder
of the lasting impact of this kind of imperial behaviour
at the national and personal levels.

Saturday morning, I did a 2-hr shift as a church listener
at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission
in the Agridome on the PNE grounds.

The focus was on survivors and descendents of survivors
of the residential school system in Canada,
a form of imperial assimilation perpetrated on our First Nations.
We heard stories of disrespect, physical violence,
sexual assault, and cultural genocide.
It was hard to listen.
It was hard to hear.

But listen and hear we must.
Back in 1994, our denomination issued a confession
to God and to our Aboriginal brothers and sisters
admitting the sins of imperialism –
complicity with the government's assimilation policies,
deafness to their cries for justice,
cultural arrogance,
and insensitivity.
We expressed our regret for the deep scars left by these sins.
We sought God's guidance as we seek opportunities
"to walk with Aboriginal peoples
to find healing and wholeness together
as God's people."
We still have a long way to travel and a lot of listening to do.
Only after listening, I believe,
will God give us healing and redemptive words to speak.

Some of the same dynamics are at work in domestic violence,
a situation that can be seen as a personal form of imperialism.

Jill and I attended the 40th anniversary celebration
of the Dixon Transition Society on Friday evening.
They were able to help 550 people last year.
That's the good news.
The troubling news is that they turned away 1500.

These are just two brief glimpses of the world in which we live.
This is the world into which God has sent us to be blessings.
And part of that blessing is to speak the Gospel
in the midst of the imperialisms that plague our world.

But that's scary.
It's easy to feel inadequate to this task, afraid to speak, confused about what to say.

I suspect Paul had many of those feelings.

He had been complicit in the imperialism of Rome and the Romanized Jews.
He was a new convert, just figuring out what that dramatic experience
meant for his life and witness.

He was in a strange city,
a hub of the empire's trading networks,
filled with all sorts of strange religions and practices
that vied for attention and loyalty.

I'm pretty certain he must have felt inadequate, afraid, and confused.
He was, after all, only human.

But as such, he was a beloved child and friend of God.
Jesus, God's Christ, had transformed his whole being,
resurrecting the gifts for being a blessing that had been dormant in Saul.

In the visitation we read about this morning,
Jesus encouraged Paul to overcome his fears and speak.
"Do not be afraid," he said, "for I am with you.
There are many in this city who long to hear the Gospel,
who are ready to hear the Gospel.
But you must speak it to them in word and deed."

That was Jesus' word to Paul and it is Jesus' word to us.
In the midst of the imperialisms of our day,
speak the words of the Gospel so people can be freed.

And what are those words?

Let me suggestion three pairs of words
for you to focus your witness upon.
In jazz, we would call it a core chart,
a melody line around which you can improvise
in the various situations in which you find yourself this week.

Accepting love – this is God's gift to all.
There are no conditions, only possibilities
that flow from a deep acceptance of this love,
a love, Paul says later to the Christian community in Roman,
from which nothing in all creation can separate us.
That's the first pair of powerful words that express Gospel.

Empowering energy – this is the impact of God's gift within us.
Love is the most powerful energy in all creation.

Love is what fills us, by God's grace.
Love is what nourishes us to flourish.
Love casts out the fears of imperial insecurity.

Blessing presence – this is what we do with the energy of God's love.
We find ways of blessing those we encounter,
those among whom we have influence.
We use every dimension of our redeemed energy
to make God's accepting love known,
to help God's love have its desired impact.

So, **accepting love, empowering energy, and blessing presence** –
that's the core chart for the church,
for this community of Jesus Christ and his people in mission
in an imperialistic world.

It's a dramatically different way of being.
It takes the kind of courage that arises from knowing
that Jesus, the Christ, is with us in everything we do.
But it brings the kind of blessings that God desires.
It helps to build the Commonwealth of God.

*May God be with us and guide us
as we find ways to speak and act
that bless the world.*

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