

**Preached by Rev. JF Hudson at Pilgrim Church: 9/23/07**  
**Scripture: James 2:14-17, Luke 10:25-37**

**“To Begin at the Beginning: Charged in Community”**

*From the text: “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” The scholar said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’”*

I love great rhetoric. I love language, and I really love great speeches, oral art that soars, inspires, that moves a community to action or captures perfectly a moment in history. This summer I read the newest Franklin Delano Roosevelt biography, “FDR”, by Jean Edward Smith, and within it I was reminded just how gifted FDR was as an orator. Consider this excerpt from his 1936 Inaugural Address, delivered while the country was still in the depths of the Great Depression: “Here is the challenge to our democracy: In this nation I see tens of millions of its citizens denied...the necessities of life...I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished. It is not in despair that I paint you that picture. I paint it for you in hope--because the Nation, seeing and understanding the injustice in it, proposes to paint it out...The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little.”

Now that’s a speech! Yet—the greater gift of FDR’s rhetoric is that it was backed up by his actions, actions as President. He didn’t just speak of the ill-housed, the ill clad and the ill-nourished—he did something to better their lot. In just the initial 100 days of his first term, FDR and the Congress passed and signed into law fifteen major bills that guaranteed millions of home and farm mortgages; provided emergency relief for 17 million unemployed and hungry folks; guaranteed 95 percent of all bank deposits; repealed Prohibition and created the Tennessee Valley Authority. Amazing—now that is rhetoric in action!

Always that is the challenge for humans, whether leaders of nations or just folks like you and me. To match our words to our deeds. To live up to the noblest spoken intentions of this life. To talk the talk and to walk the walk. And so though we promise, “to have and to hold, until death do we part” at the marriage altar, that flourish of flowery devotion means nothing until we face the gritty challenges of married life. How many thousands of times have we pledged, “one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all”? Yet that civic declaration is finally empty until our citizenship is put to the test—in war, as voters, Americans. Perhaps the hardest rhetoric to act upon is our religious ideals: “forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” As a Christian how many times have I prayed those words? But do I really have to forgive my enemies, as God forgives me? Can’t I just say it?

Words and action. Language and life. Ideals professed and ideals enflashed. That’s the third and final theme of my preaching series on our being in community with one another at Pilgrim Church: first, we are formed in community by God. We all need each other. Second: we are found in community: God seeks each of us. And we are charged by God in community to live out our faith as an active seven day a week lifestyle, an alive faith, a lived faith. Not just pretty hymns or familiar warm and fuzzy

traditions or a gorgeous building we call home. No: faith only lives when it is lived. Do you hear that?

I believe, when God calls us to be Christian, to follow Jesus, God asks us to strap on our spiritual work boots, literally. Kind of like these boots! That we should pray like heck on Sunday morning, but then go out into the world and actually try, try to live as the Master lived, to see Christ's rhetoric as something more than religious poetry, or mere philosophy. To talk the talk of faith and to walk that walk in our work boots of faith.

That's what the familiar story is about today that we heard in Luke's Gospel. A lawyer—better translation religious scholar—tries to trick Jesus into tripping up in front of a crowd. "Teacher," the man said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" If Jesus answers wrong he'll look foolish so he turns it back onto the one who went to seminary! Jesus asks: "What is written in the law?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." Rhetorically, abstractly, in words that man answered very well. But Jesus doesn't let him off the hook that easy and so he tells the familiar story of the Good Samaritan.

A person is robbed, stripped, left for dead on the road. Two very "religious" folks walk by: a graduate of the Harvard Divinity School working on her PhD in theology and the pastor of a suburban UCC church in eastern Massachusetts. Now one has a very important paper on social justice to finish so she rushes on by. The minister is so lost in thought about his upcoming sermon about God's love in action that he strolls on by and he's also late for a Deacons meeting. But then—a third person, someone the world views as less than "religious"—well she stops. She binds his wounds; puts him in a taxi, drives to the Red Roof Inn on Speen Street, pays for two days stay and leaves.

Jesus then asks the man, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The scholar said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

The crowd Christ spoke to that day was a religious group no doubt—they went to temple every week. Put their shekel in the plate. Knew all the words to their favorite hymns and prayers. They knew the rhetoric of their faith: but Jesus was pushing them to move beyond words to action. To not just say, "Well I'm a good Jew." But instead to also act as a person of faith.

This lesson of faith in action seems simple, obvious and yet it is not always so easy to live out our faith, is it? To believe Jesus should have something to say to us: about how we live, how we vote, how we raise our kids, how we run our businesses, how we spend our money, how we act, act, as individuals, as a church, a town, a nation. Faith only lives when it is lived, and not just in this sanctuary in here but out there too, on the Road to Jericho, in the boardroom, at the bus stop, in the workplace, on Beacon Hill.

As Saint Francis of Assisi once said, "Preach the gospel at all times and if necessary, use words." My hope for all of us, as we continue in this new relationship as pastor and people, as Pilgrim Church, is that one of the hallmarks of our community is that we will always strive to put flesh and bone to the ideals of our faith; that we will worship and work; read the Bible together then rebuild homes in New Orleans and serve supper at the Salvation Army; pray for the homeless on Sunday morning in the meeting house then house the homeless on Monday night in Fellowship Hall.

Our faith in action doesn't always have to be so dramatic either—it can be quiet, faithful too. Scooping ice cream at a funeral reception; making a call on a lonely widower; treating employees with justice and fairness; saying grace with our kids at the dinner table.

But the key is to hear the final words of Jesus from the parable and respond, respond. “Go and do likewise” he said. Go! Do! I brought my work boots to church today and I pray you did too. May we be so filled up, strengthened and inspired by the religious language of Sunday, we can do nothing but go and do the rest of the week, all in the name of our hard working savior, all in the hope that faith only lives when faith is lived. Preach the gospel at all times and if necessary, use words. Let all the people say, “Amen!”