

Preached by Rev. JF Hudson at Pilgrim Church: 3/2/08
Scripture: 1 John 3:17-23, 4:7-8

“Talk the Talk and Walk the Walk”

From the text: Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. ...Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.

To talk the talk of faith, and walk the walk of faith.

I call it my chocolate donut epiphany, a moment from my childhood faith that forever changed the way I thought of religion. I'm in church with my family on a Sunday morning, seven or eight years old, and even at that young age I'm immersed in the service. The beautiful spoken words about God and love and human care; the pretty hymns about Jesus who loves all the little children, even me! The speech of the clergyman, soaring, then whispered, then dramatic. The sing-song comfort of ancient liturgy and ritual; the gentle touch of my father's hand as he gives me a quarter for the collection plate.

And then it is over and we depart, we pile into our cars and all hell breaks loose in that tiny church parking lot as cars zoom out of spaces and rush for the street. A few folks even honk at one another as they jockey for position: everyone's in such a hurry, so impatient! We've got to get to Dunkin Donuts for the last of the chocolate donuts! It's disconcerting, disconnected: what about all the nice things we just said in church? What about all that love stuff we just prayed? The sincere words we sang? Does that speech connect to who and how we are out here, on the street, in the world? And all for a chocolate donut....

If we're going to talk the talk of faith, we've got to walk the walk of faith too. This is week four of our “rituals of faith” preaching series. We examined faith embodied, faith prayed, and faith sung. Today we consider faith lived, faith lived out in our day to day lives, the connect or disconnect between what we say we believe about our God through rituals, and how we act out that faith in God, in our lifestyles, in our faith walks, in the real world.

That's always the great risk and the great tension of being a person of God: the connection or disconnection, the correlation or contradiction between faith proclaimed and faith in action. Because it is not so hard to look out into the wider culture, and maybe even our own lives sometimes, and confess that Christians don't always do such a great job at making the rhetoric of ritual real. Christian preachers who use their pulpits to condemn folks wholesale, to sow seeds of hate. They proclaim, “Well all those homosexuals are going to hell you know. And the war—well that's God's righteous crusade. And by the way if you're not a Christian, then you're not getting through those pearly gates.” Churches that portray themselves as bulwarks of morality in society but

then hide institutional secrets that protect clergy who abuse. Politicians who wrap themselves in the flag and the cross all to get a vote on Election Day. As Mahatma Gandhi once said in response to all those churchgoing British, who prayed to God on Sunday but enslaved millions of his fellow Indians the rest of the week, “I’d be a Christian if it wasn’t for all the Christians!”

And Jesus—well there was one human sin that made him really, really mad and that was religious hypocrisy. When folks (like the Pharisees) knew all the rituals of religion and mouthed all the laws of faith and memorized all the traditions of God, but who failed to translate their religious piety into religious behavior. Who spoke of God’s love but then stepped over the beggar who languished on the front steps of the Temple. They talked the talk of faith but didn’t always walk the walk of faith.

The writer of the letter of John spoke to this spiritual challenge: “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” And so John challenges all Christians: “Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.... because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.”

God is love. It’s that simple and that hard. As the iconoclastic inventor Buckminster Fuller once said, “God is not a noun. God is a verb.” God is love, in action. So my prayer for all of us is this: may we both talk the talk of faith and walk the walk of faith. May our spiritual rhetoric be matched by our spiritual reality.

Faith lived out is the hardest Christian ritual of all. We’ll always fall short. But—I believe that this is the narrow life path our God of love calls us to walk. To sing of God’s love and then live with God’s love. To pray for God’s love then put that love into action. To take God’s love from the church pew to the church parking lot and beyond. God bless us in that profound journey of faith.

Let all God’s people say, “Amen!”