

St. Peter Lutheran Church - Modesto, CA

✠ Sixth Sunday after Pentecost ✠

July 16, 2006

Sermon by Pastor Johann Caauwe

“Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. For, “Whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech. He must turn from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”

Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. “Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.” But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,

(1 Peter 3:8-15 NIV)

Public speaking makes most people nervous. For many people, having to get up in front of a group of people to speak makes their heart beat rapidly, their palms get sweaty, their hands and knees shake. They may even feel like they have a lump in their throat and a knot in their stomach. Even people who do it all the time, who are professional speakers say that even they get nervous and sometimes wonder if they’re cut out for the job.

In the Old Testament lesson today Jeremiah put into words some of those same thoughts when he said **“I don’t know how to speak. I am only a child.”** And yet God called him to be his prophet, to speak his Word to the nations. Simon Peter (in the Gospel) said to Jesus, **“Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!”** But Jesus called Peter and his fellow fishermen to be his disciples – to be fishers of men. They didn’t feel qualified or prepared to speak, but God called these men to speak.

I suspect that the people to whom Peter wrote his first epistle may have felt much the same way. They might not have said, “I don’t know how to speak.” or “I’m a sinful man.” But I think they might have said something like, “Lord, not now. Lord, not in the middle of all the things I’m facing right now.” You see, Peter wrote his epistle to people who were struggling. They were suffering. These Christians were spread far and wide because of persecution and they were continuing to face more opposition. They probably thought that they weren’t ready to speak. But Peter in our text for today, reminds them that **suffering Christians are called to speak**. It is precisely in times of suffering, in times of difficulty that Christians are called to speak words of blessing and to speak words of hope.

One of the things that Peter gives these people in his letter is an encouragement to live sanctified lives. He tells them that they are to live in such a way that the unbelievers who are criticizing and accusing them will see their good deeds and glorify God in heaven. In chapters 2 and 3 he shows how they can do that in all their dealings in life: how they obey their authorities, including masters or employers; or how they live with their spouses. Basically he says that how you act shows what you believe; it’s a reflection of your faith. And people will see that. That’s

what he's talking about in the beginning of this text. After he had addressed all these different relationships people have, he says, "**Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another, be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble.**" This is the way you are to live and your actions are a manifestation of the faith you have.

But that doesn't mean that everyone was going to return the favor. Remember he's speaking to suffering Christians. They were and would continue to be at the receiving end of exactly the opposite kind of thing that Peter is telling them to be and do.

People were going to be doing and saying some nasty things to them. And what were they to do about it? Peter continues, "**Do not repay evil for evil or insult with insult.**" You are going to be tempted to come back at them with a few choice, biting words of your own. But Peter says, No, don't do that, "**Do not repay evil for evil or insult with insult, but with blessing**" Instead of getting them back, speak good words, words of blessing, even to those who are attacking you with lies and accusations.

Why? "**because to this you were called so that you might inherit a blessing.**" You were called to receive a blessing. God wanted to bless you. That's what God always wants to do with his creation. In fact, you could say that's the very reason God created the world. All he wanted to do was to bless Adam and Eve—and he did. He gave them that beautiful garden and he gave them each other and he gave them joyful work to do. It was a blessing for them to **live** with God and **listen** to God and **love** God. But even when Adam and Eve rebelled against God, when they insulted him with their disobedience and their lies, he never stopped wanting to bless them. So he promised a Savior to fulfill his demand for perfection and pay the price for their imperfection. Jesus did exactly that. By his suffering, death, and resurrection, he brought God's blessing to mankind.

And to you: "**To this you were called that you might inherit a blessing.**" Even though you have insulted God with your lips and with your life, you have been called to receive blessing. You didn't earn it or deserve it, but God graciously called you to receive his blessing by faith. He did that calling through the work of the Holy Spirit who acts in baptism, and in the Word of God, and in the Sacrament of the Altar.

Now, as you find yourself on the receiving end of unkind words and unjust actions in your life, God still wants to give you blessing. He wants to bless you in much the same way as he blessed Adam and Eve. He wants you to find joy and happiness in living a sanctified life of faith. And there is blessing there. If you respond to evil with good, if you keep your tongue from lies and deceit, you will be blessed. Peter says, "**Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?**" God says that there is blessing for those who do good. And we understand that things often work that way. In general, if you watch your tongue, you'll stay out of trouble; you'll be blessed.

"**But** [Peter continues] **even if you suffer for what is right, you are blessed.**" God also intends to bless his children who say the right thing but are criticized for it. He promises to bless those who suffer for doing what is right. That's not an easy thing to see when our lives are filled with suffering or sorrow. It's not an easy thing to do.

But because we have graciously received blessing from God, we will. We will speak words of blessing to others. And we will also speak words of hope.

I suspect that things may have looked hopeless to Peter's original audience. These were dangerous days for the Christians. Their lives were at risk for holding to what they believed. And so Peter very plainly says to them, "**Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened.**" Don't be

afraid if you are called in to testify about your faith. Don't be afraid if someone finds out you are a Christian and questions you. Everyone else is afraid, but you, don't be afraid.

Instead, "**in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord.**" Jesus Christ is the Lord. He is *the* Lord all by himself, whether we believe in him or not. As the risen and ascended Lord, he is sitting at the right hand of God ruling over all things. But the one who is Lord over all things in heaven and earth is also Lord to me. He is my Lord, who as my Savior loved me enough to die for me and save me. And he promised to me that he would watch over me every step of the way. He promised that he would go to heaven to prepare a place for me. So in my heart, and, in your hearts, Christ reigns as Lord and king. And where Christ reigns, he drives out fear and gives hope.

Now Peter says, "**Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.**" People will ask. They might not be friendly questions, but people will ask why Christ is so important to you. They might wonder why you don't seem afraid. They'll ask you to explain – why do you think the way you do? – why do you talk the way you do? – why do you believe the things you do?

Peter tells his readers to be ready when the questions come. What will you say? What can you say when you are called to speak?

It seems unlikely that we will find ourselves in the same kind of situation as the people to whom Peter was writing. But you and I know that people do ask questions. And they're not always asking because they are curious. Sometimes people will ask questions just for the sake of argument or just to put down your beliefs.

But when the questions come, what will you say? I need to say something about the hope that I have, but I don't know how. How can I be prepared when I'm called to speak a word of hope?

People who teach public speaking skills might say that the most important parts to preparing a speech are 1) a mastery of the subject (you have to know your stuff) and 2) practice. If we are preparing to speak a word of hope, perhaps we should follow that same advice. We ought to do everything we can to know the hope that we have and then to practice speaking about it. The obvious way to do the first is Bible study. Only in the Bible do we find the source and the content of our hope. But how can we practice speaking words of hope? Here again, we have the opportunity to practice speaking of our hope when we gather to study God's Word with other Christians. There we can practice putting onto our lips what is already in our hearts.

The Old Testament lesson for today (from Jeremiah chapter 1) was the sermon text when I was ordained and installed one year ago this past week. In that lesson God called Jeremiah to be his spokesman, despite his hesitations and inadequacies. No doubt those words were comforting to a congregation receiving a new pastor. I know they were comforting to a new pastor beginning his ministry. There is great comfort to know that the call to serve in the public ministry comes from God. A pastor is called by God to speak his Word to his people.

But you know, you also have a similar call. It's not a call to be a pastor or may not even be a call to public ministry, All of you (as Christians) have a call to speak. You are called to speak words of blessing, (words of kindness and love) because you yourself have been blessed. And you are called to speak words of hope, hope for the future despite the fears and dangers of earthly life. Do we feel inadequate? Probably. Are we nervous, worried, or afraid? Possibly. But will our heavenly Father ever cease to give us his blessing? Will our Lord Jesus Christ ever fail to be the strength of our hearts and the sure hope for our lives? Never. This call comes from him. Likewise, the blessing comes from him and the hope is from him. He is the one who will provide for us the strength when we are called to speak. Amen.