

## How do we speak of God? Part 4 - By the manner of our living - August 9, 2009

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*Scripture Text: Ephesians 4:25-32*

In the previous three weeks of this worship series, we have explored how we speak of God in many ways – how we name, un-name, and re-name the Living One, how we sometimes idolize particular understandings of the divine.

We've entered into the tension between the known and the unknown and we've considered how we speak of God's continuing presence in our lives.

As we conclude our series today, I want us to think about the ways we speak of God in our everyday living. Not in our times of worship, or in particularly theological conversations, but in those moments when speaking of God may not necessarily be our intention.

You know those times, don't you - those instances when what we say or how we act reflect something about the God in which we believe?

For many modern Christians, we communicate far more about the Christ we follow in this way than we do through direct conversation.

In and of itself this isn't necessarily a bad thing. It even has a trendy name within the church today – lifestyle evangelism.

Yes, I said the e-word. Evangelism.

Evangelism has developed a bad reputation over the years. Especially due to some of the more recent ways people have gone about sharing the good news and love of Christ. Methods that focus on hellfire and brimstone or self-centered satisfaction. Far too often such evangelism is without personal connection. It takes place through cold-calls, pamphlets, and tracts and seems to care most about racking up the highest count of newly-saved persons.

The Church of the Brethren has a long history of opposing this kind of practice. In part this comes from our pacifist nature and is expressed in a longstanding commitment to using “no force in religion.”

That's not to say we have no interest in evangelism, but rather that we aren't interested in “arm-twisting for Jesus.”

Instead we choose to focus on engaging with people in the midst of everyday living, letting our faith and beliefs be apparent in all we do.

Brethren have been practicing lifestyle evangelism since long before it was trendy and popular.

Alexander Mack, one of the first Brethren and a leader in the early movement, was once asked by a friend how outsiders would be able to identify the members of their new group.

Would they produce and profess a new doctrine or creed? Would they create a particular church structure or adapt certain patterns of other radical separatists?

Mack's response was simple, but profound: these new Brethren would be known “by the manner of their living.”

To take this a step further, you might say the Brethren were known for how their lives spoke of God. It wasn't that they had every facet of Christian living figured out and codified in unchangeable rules for conduct. It wasn't that they had all of the answers when it came to biblical interpretation.

Rather it was the way they went about their day-to-day lives, the manner in which they sought to live first and foremost by the example and teachings of Jesus, that made them identifiable as Brethren.

A couple weeks ago I talked about shifting our ways of thinking from emphasizing having all the right beliefs to holding our beliefs in the right way. This different way of approaching orthodoxy can also be applied to orthopraxy. Where orthodoxy is concerned with belief, orthopraxy is about practice. So instead of codifying and regulating every particular correct practice, the emphasis moves towards engaging in our practices in the right way, whatever those practices may be.

Let's look at evangelism again as an example:

One way of approaching evangelism dictates holding certain beliefs about heaven and hell, about what it means to be saved. There are certain actions and outcomes that are expected and deviation from the pattern is not encouraged.

But what if we concern ourselves more with interacting with others in ways that imitate Christ? What if our lives so profoundly speak of the love of God that others can't help but notice?

It's this kind of living that the author of today's scripture text has in mind.

Speaking truth to one another. Recognizing anger as a natural emotion but that it does not necessarily have to lead us into sin and brokenness.

Giving up our ways of living in the world that deprive others, and striving to find ways of sharing what we have with the poor and oppressed. Not cutting one another down, but building each and every one up.

Recognizing that patterns of living that perpetuate bitterness, wrath, malice, and violence are not the ways of God. Instead, the way of Life is one of kindness, love, and peace, filled with forgiveness in the same way that the love of our Creator has forgiven us.

Together these teachings on Christ-like living helped early believers to follow what they called “the way.” Living in such a way was a testimony to who God was, how God had been in Jesus, and what life in God's new Kingdom was like.

These verses served as part of the model the early Brethren used as they too sought to follow that way, and they can serve the same purpose for us.

In our membership class this past week we had a wonderful discussion on the bible and how Brethren have historically approached our sacred scriptures. While we have long professed that we have no creed but the new testament, we discussed how we continue to take the whole of scriptures very

seriously. From the vast and varied stories of the Hebrew bible, through the Gospels and the many letters of the New Testament, we talked about how we we come together in community to encounter all of scripture through the lens of the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

And so as I read and prepared to preach on this text this week, I couldn't help but think of how this part of the letter to the Ephesians is read through the lens of Christ.

Even though these words are not attributed directly to him and likely reflect some tradition of this community and the influence of the Apostle Paul, I still find them resonating very strongly with my own understanding of how Jesus would have us act.

Jesus never hesitated to speak the truth to anyone he encountered, even to those in power, all the way up to his death on the cross.

He encouraged honest living that focuses less on ourselves and more on those whom society is often quite satisfied to overlook – the needy and marginalized.

His words and actions shared the grace of God with all who would hear him.

He empowered his followers to transform their negative feelings and interactions towards one another into kindness, forgiveness, and love, even with enemies.

As we encounter this text from Ephesians, we can clearly see the way of Jesus shining through. And so we can take it as a commentary on just some of the ways we can begin to engage in a manner of living that speaks clearly about God.

It leads us towards practicing our faith in a way that is more about *how* we live our lives rather than dictating a particular set of beliefs and actions.

Stanly Hauerwas put it well when when he said that "The work of Jesus was not a new set of ideals or principles for reforming or even revolutionizing society, but the establishment of a new community, a people that embodied forgiveness, sharing and self-sacrificing love in its rituals and discipline. In that sense, the visible church is not to be the bearer of Christ's message, but to be the message."

Speaking of God by the manner of our living is not about being the bearer of Christ's message, but being that message.

While it is good and worthwhile to examine the meanings of our theological language and understandings, it all becomes an essentially meaningless thought exercise if we do not put our faith into action.

Actions that we take up particularly because of our desire to love and serve – like helping to feed the hungry through the food pantry, building habitat for humanity houses, volunteering at local shelters, and so on. But also actions that are a part of our everyday living and being – the way we treat others, the priorities we reflect in our daily routines, in how we spend our time and our money.

As people who follow the way of Jesus, our lives speak to those around us both in times we intend and in times we do not.

Our challenge today is the same as it was when spoken by Alexander Mack three centuries ago – to be known by the manner of our living, to see our whole lives as the message of Christ to a broken and hurting world.

As we move into our time of open response this morning, how is the Spirit moving within you, having heard these words of scripture and reflection?

In what ways have you experienced the challenge of speaking of God through everyday living? How might we move from emphasizing doing all the right practices to engaging all our experiences of living as the message of Christ? When have you witnessed Jesus made known through the manner of our living?

Anyone who that would like to share aloud is invited to signal for a microphone so you can be heard clearly by all. Together we respond, both in speaking and in silence.