

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA
October 10, 2010

Jeremiah 29:1, 4–7
2 Timothy 2:8–15

WHAT IS OUR BEST?

Henri Nouwen is a favorite author of mine. In one of the books he writes, *Bread for the Journey*, about our world today—about our understanding of the gospel—“Words, words, words! Our society is full of words. They’re on billboards, on television screens, in newspapers and in books, now in Kindles and iPads. Words whispered, shouted, and sung. Words that move, dance, and change size and color. Words that say ‘taste me, smell me, eat me, drink me, sleep with me, but most of all, buy me!’” With so many words, we are quick to surmise that they are just words and they have lost their power in our lives.”

Later in *Bread for the Journey*, he reminds us how words have not lost their power. How God creates simply by speaking a word. “Let there be light. And there was light and it was good.” So how can we begin to trust again the creative power of God’s word in our lives. In essence, when will we be at our best in God’s words. Well ... maybe, like so many things in faith, we recognize that when we are at our worst.

I have a friend who started working for a new company, and part of the assignment in this new era that we live in is that co-workers are supposed to get to know each other on a social level, away from work. So, in this company, they’re given a little incentive to have people over to their houses and have a sit-down dinner with other people that they work with (the company helps to underwrite the meal). And one couple decided to take them up on their offer. They were going to have a dinner party and invite others from work. If they had children they wanted to encourage them to bring their children so that everyone can enjoy getting to know one another.

They all arrive and are seated, and there’s one little girl—a four year old—who sits down and stares at her mother’s co-worker unrelentingly. In fact, she stares so hard at him during their meal she can hardly eat her own food. My friend said that the guy being stared at checked his tie and his shirt and patted his face to make sure there wasn’t any food there. He messed with his hair to smooth it all down, but no matter what he did she just kept staring. He tried to ignore her, but finally it was all too much for him and he whispered, “Why are you staring at me?” Everyone at the table had noted what had happened that night. And so with that question, the room went silent. The little girl said, “I just wanted to see you drink like a fish.”

The company’s intentions were thwarted. But we have to be careful, don’t we?—careful that our thoughts don’t become words in the wrong context, careful that our words don’t turn into actions and actions into habits, and habits into a new identity for us—an identity that is far from Paul’s advise to Timothy. “Remember Jesus Christ raised from the dead, a descendant of David.”

How many of us can say that is the essence of our faith? How many churches need to reclaim that simple confession that has the power to change our communion? We pride ourselves on being people who are pursuing the truth. It's one of the lines that I refer to often about what it means to be Presbyterian. I'm very proud that we value the truth, and that we are constantly pursuing what is truth, but we also know how easy it is to run the risk of turning the truth we garner in on itself. When we are the best we can hope to be, we do not possess the truth, but we point to the truth that is Jesus Christ—not an idea, not a group of words, not a concept—the truth of the historical person of Jesus Christ, and yet the one who is not bound by history or by time. Yes, our tendency is to become the center of attention, to supplant Jesus and in essence to live what Paul is saying here—to deny Jesus.

Jesus gives the right to do that, to mistakenly take center stage. But even when we do, if we are faithless, he will remain faithful. If we deny who Jesus is—as risen from the dead, as the means of our salvation—if we deny that it is his life-giving power that changes our communion, he will still remain faithful. If we deny that the life we are living now will be the life that we will live for eternity, he remains faithful.

This is the good news. Jesus is raised from the dead. He is the means of our salvation. He is the fulfillment of all prophecy, and he gives us life eternal that begins now. Paul says you don't need to clutter this up with anything else. This is the essence. Preach this: Resurrection, Salvation, and a Changed life. And then Paul says what we all need to hear, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one who is approved by him—a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth. The truth for churches is that we can only be faithful when we are willing to change. Reformed and always being reformed—very important words for us. Changed, but always to be changed. Do we think that way? Changed, so that we are willing to go where people are not asking to go. That kind of change. Change, where we embrace issues which lead us to expand our concern, not to shrink it. Our primary job—our task, our top priority, the thing that matters more than anything else to us—is that we are encouraging people, individually and, yes, corporately to embody salvation in Jesus Christ.

We just finished a series that said how we do that. *Why faith matters. Why we come to church.* And I have failed you, because there is not one person in this room, not one of us who can tell me what the fourth reason is (just last Sunday's message about why we come to church). That's terrifying, isn't it? You remember the first one, maybe, because it was about teaching our children how to love and how to receive love, how to forgive, how to be affirm. You might have caught a little bit of the fact that the sermon was about us not being perfect, and we come because we want to remember that even though we do this faith journey imperfectly, we still do it.

And you might have a little bit of a recollection of the Lazarus story, in that when we come to church we are relearning how to be compassionate—being in God's presence requires that we are embraced by compassion. But there's a reason we don't remember from last Sunday. It is the thing we resist the most. Timothy—remember—your mentors and being a mentor? When we accept that responsibility, faith becomes very, very personal. It meddles with our decisions and choices. We don't remember that the reason

we come here is to mentor one another because that's where it gets really tough. Mentoring requires us to be so much more involved than just having an intellectual faith. And yet mentoring is when we are at our best, as long as we remember Jesus Christ and point to him. That's when we're the Church. That's when we're the body of Christ. And that is when we are at our very, very best.

So may it be today and in our future. Amen.