

"WE MODEL A CERTAIN WAY OF LIFE"

Sermon Series, #3: Great Texts, Core Truths

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The French priest and paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin observed, "A presence is never mute." What he meant by that is simply by existing our lives constantly send messages to others. Messages about what we value most and consider truly essential. Messages about where our priorities and allegiances finally lay.

We rise on Sunday to drive to church. A neighbor peeks through the curtains and notices. A presence is never mute. We cook a dinner and serve it in a soup kitchen and your coworkers learn of it. A presence is never mute. We refuse to pile on as the horde scapegoats a poor unwitting soul. A presence is never mute.

I begin here because today's theme in our sermon series is that to be Christian is to be willing to influence the lives of others in the same way Christ influences us. Most of us wouldn't blink an eye about this mandate to be a good example for our children. Shaping their character and faith is a cherished goal for most of us.

But many of us in the mainstream churches want to back off when it comes to shaping the lives of those not so close to us. We say things like, "Who am I to tell them how to live?" Still, Teilhard de Chardin has reminded us that it is not so much a question of *whether* we will influence others. A presence is never mute. The real question is *how and in what direction* we will influence those around us.

I recall in my forties, I noticed veteran pastors I had always admired were retiring. A couple of them died. I felt hollow and a little lost suddenly bereft of the mentors who helped me find my bearings in this difficult and demanding work of ministry. I'm not prone to depression but I recall feeling a dip back then. Finally, it realized what I need to do upon losing such leading lights, who'd helped me find my way.

The time of life was now upon me to do for others what they had done for me. God was expecting me to mentor others seeking to find their way in God's work. Young, bright, aspiring theologues need to have handed them what was handed to me. For example, many of you here remember Kaji Spellman, a former associate pastor of this church. Kaji was one of my student interns when I was pastor at Ridgefield. She and I worked well together for a year. Isn't it odd how we naturally seek out inspiration, all of us? But when it our turn comes to be an inspiration, or even a steady example, we find ourselves edging toward the exits. Diving headlong into that—moving to the next stage—brought me out of my funk.

Now not many of us think of ourselves as shapers or teachers of others. Perhaps in imagining ourselves in ways like this we are too burdened with images of dry lectures droning before a bunch of drowsy, bored people in stifling rows of desks. But teaching happens in all kinds of ways. Think of the many dynamic ways Je-

Jesus got his message across. Telling enigmatic stories called parables that drew the listeners in and offered a surprise ending. Putting the lowly—a child, a leper, a blind man, a shady woman—front and center and remarking at how God works. Noticing small acts of faithfulness and how good miraculously arises from them. We hear Jesus schooling, soothing and empowering them in our Gospel lesson.

Guess what, friends. None of us is perfect. None of us is even close. But every one here this morning has good and growing areas of your life that please God. These are places in your life that can benefit others in growing their faith in God.

Jesus said, “No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit.” But the fruits of our lives not meant to fall and rot, but to nourish others. “Can a blind person guide a blind person?” Jesus asked. No, we need the seeing to guide the blind, is the answer. And while no disciple is above the teacher, Jesus reminded us that everyone who earnestly follows him will be like the teacher.

At this point I want to get more practical about how we influence those around us. Here are four practical suggestions about approach whether we talk with a life-long Christian who has fallen away or someone without a religious background. It’s truly as simple as four words: example, respect, conversation, proclamation.

The first word is **Example**. When I meet with parents to plan a baptism, I remind them that they are the single biggest spiritual influence on their child’s life. I tell them that their child will hear and absorb what they say, more than they realize. But that their child *will notice absolutely everything* that they do. If the deeds we live don’t match the words we speak, credibility falters. This is true with everyone.

Of course, none of us can completely match ideals we profess with the reality of life’s brokenness. But if we have enough character, others notice. They begin to say to themselves, I want what he has. If we manage to live with joy in the face of difficulty, people will notice and say, I want what she has. If we live serenely, not returning evil for evil as the gerbils of life chew on us, it makes an impression.

Example. If ours resembles Christ’s at all, we won’t need to seek out chances to talk to others. They’ll find us. They’ll want to know what makes us tick. Sadly, example is as far as many mainstream Christians will go. But Jesus bids us farther.

The next word is **Respect**. None of us will allow someone to influence us who would not respect us. Likely the best, clearest and easiest way to convey respect is to listen carefully to another; to truly hear their story; to earnestly pay attention to important details. To honor their directions, interests, and backgrounds. As we ask questions, they may share sensitive things about their past. As followers of a suffering servant Savior we show humble respect by not judging them. As we listen, we can empty ourselves of judgment because we know God is equal to judging and we are not. In a spiritual sense, respect means looking beyond their wrongs and failures and frailties to see how the light of God shines within them.

The third word is **Conversation**. Once we have listened, remembering to ask about their spiritual influences through life, only then we do speak. As we do, we guard against saying too much too soon. If they have spoken of their doubts, we let them know that we too have doubts, and they're never easy. Is there anybody here who doesn't have any doubts? Good. If they have spoken of their fears, we can let them know that life in communion with God, doesn't mean all fears flee. Is there anybody here who lives a life completely emptied of fear? No? Good. We have fears also, except we know that our fears have more than met their match.

Faith lives and breathes in dialogue. As we enter with others into their darkness, that does not mean we should neglect sharing with others light by which we see. What burns deep in your heart? What holy dreams have a grip on you? What lights up your eyes as you perceive God's healing presence at work in the world?

The fourth word is **Proclamation**. Tell God's story, if there is a part of the Bible you cherish, if you see God at work here in ways that move you. Tell the stories. If you are too shy or intimidated, fearing that others will see you as predatory or overbearing, here is your fall back phrase, "Come and see." Invite them to come here with you where Bible stories are taught and the living presence of the Holy Spirit at work among us for good is experienced. You don't have to have mastered the entire Bible or the sweep of church history. You don't need to be able to pray in fancy phrases. You need only be willing to say in simple, sincere language what Jesus means to you. How living out your life in the presence of God makes all the difference. If you're still working on that, just say, "Come and see."

Today God blesses us with a score of delightful new members meaning to share our journey here. Won't you help them find the way? This doesn't mean that we have all the answers and they have none. They all have gifts and experiences we need to hear about and put into action if we are to become the church God means for us to be. Their presence today suggests that is already happening. And that is for everyone here a source of real joy, seeing our promise fulfilled.

Martin Luther King, Jr. once observed all that has to happen for evil to gain the upper hand here is for the good people of the world to do nothing. We know that liars and criminals gladly school others in hurt and mayhem. But are we willing to exert a counterbalancing influence for the good? Friends, nature doesn't tolerate a vacuum. If we won't say or show it, who will? You are up for this. I promise. Amen.