

## Practicing the Presence

Acts 8:26-40

“Practice what you preach.” That old saying is usually trotted out when some high profile “holier-than-thou” type has had their wings clipped and their reputation riddled with holes. Or a “sterling” character is revealed to have feet of crumbling clay.

But there’s a problem with the phrase “practice what you preach.” It all depends on what it is you’re “preaching.” Mother Teresa practiced what she preached, but so too did Adolph Hitler. Osama bin Laden practiced what he preached, as did the Unabomber.

If only the church “practiced what it preached,” we say, then the church which confesses “Jesus is Lord” would be the #1 outlet of love and peace in the world. But once again, we should consider carefully what is being “preached” and who is doing the “preaching.”

When we get wrapped up in preaching a doctrine or a direction or a divine plan, we end up practicing things like “spiritual laws” or “strategic plans” or “target quotas.” But that’s not the kind of gospel mission or message presented in today’s text from Acts.

The power that “preached” to Philip; the power that “preached” to the Ethiopian eunuch in today’s Act’s text: that power was neither scripted nor strategic, neither planned nor programmed. It was the power of the Holy Spirit. It was the power of the Spirit of God working through one of Christ’s followers in surprising, remarkable, and unexpected ways.

For the first generation of Christians the gift of the Holy Spirit present within the human heart was what made “Christianity” a living reality. There was no preconceived idea for “church growth,” no specific guidelines for “mission expansion” or “church planting.” There was only the openness of disciples to the wonder-working power of the Spirit.

In other words, the first generation of Jesus’ followers did not “practice what they preached.” Instead they “preached what they practiced.”

And what **they “practiced,”** first and foremost, was **the presence of the Spirit.** What they “practiced” was incarnating (or embodying) Christ by listening to and obeying the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

For Philip “practicing” the Holy Spirit, what we now call “practicing the presence,” meant leaving Peter and John and a successful missionizing arena in Samaria in order to wander by himself down a hot road in the middle of nowhere, a road headed vaguely towards Gaza.

Philip doesn’t have a “plan.” Philip doesn’t even have a map. Philip only had a “practice” — a practice of acting according to the directives of the Holy Spirit.

It is only because he lets the Holy Spirit guide his feet and guard his focus that he finds himself in just the right place at just the right time. No one could have ever “strategically planned” for an Ethiopian eunuch who was a “God-fearer” (a Gentile who studied and revered the truth in Jewish scripture) tooling down a deserted desert track in the hot mid-day sun. It took the intention and inspiration of the Holy Spirit to bring together one-on-one Christ’s disciple and Christ’s NEXT disciple.

The first century church did not expand geographically and embrace whole-heartedly the diversity of people who came to call Jesus “the Christ” by programming and planning. Instead the first century church “practiced” the Holy Spirit. They “practiced” the

presence of God. The first century church prayed and prophesied their way forward. Then they “preached” the “good news” — that is, the living presence of Jesus Christ in the lives of disciples.

Every person who confesses Christ and is baptized receives the Holy Spirit. From that moment on the Spirit of Christ is present within that disciple. But too often that “presence” is put on a shelf. The “presence” is side-lined or side-stepped, as other concerns take center stage.

**There is a huge difference between the Spirit of Christ being present in every disciple’s life, and the Spirit of Christ being preeminent in every disciple’s life.**

Philip opened himself to the message of the Spirit and ran down a chariot in the middle of a desert road. He did not “trust his gut.” He did not consider the strange circumstances. He did not take a strange road to a strange place and offer his message to a strange man.

Philip let Christ’s Spirit take preeminence in his life.

Philip let Christ’s Spirit be the practice of his life.

Philip let that Spirit determine his path and his passion.

The RMS Titanic collided with an iceberg just before midnight and sunk on April 14, 1912. Why is it that a shipwreck that happened one hundred years ago still holds our attention, still feeds our fascination?

I mean, in its day the Titanic was considered the singular greatest scientific, mechanical, man-made marvel of its day. The beautiful, enormous, exceptionally engineered ship represented the epitome of modern design, scientific genius, and human creativity. The “Titanic” was not just a ship. It was the “practice” of perfect human achievement made manifest.

And then it sank. It sank on its maiden voyage. Over 1500 people died. Everything “Titanic” represented was suddenly dead wrong.

Her design — obviously fatally flawed.

Her science-certified perfection — catastrophically collapsed.

Her representation of human perfectibility — sunk to the bottom of the sea.

Suddenly the “practice” that everyone was “preaching” was broken and worthless. The “practice” of faith in human technology and human power had cost a great number of human lives, even as it had demonstrated how hollow faith in human achievements could ring.

It is hard to imagine this kind of optimism in human ability and technology. By the early 20th century, we were heady with our own self-importance and human progress. Scottish physicist Lord Kelvin believed that all that remained for scientists to do was to measure physical constants to the next decimal place in accuracy. The Prussian Patent Office closed down in the belief that there were no more inventions to be made.

But perhaps Andrew Carnegie, the steel magnate and industrialist philanthropist, expressed the confidence in human ability best. In 1914 Carnegie gave 2 million dollars (which would be over \$20 million today) to establish the interreligious “Church Peace Union” -- later renamed the Council on Religion and International Affairs. Carnegie said: “it is too bad that the churches cannot have some funds for peace work. They could really do more than any other institution in existence.” In giving the funds, he stipulated that should world peace come before the money ran out, the trustees should use the money for the alleviation of global poverty. And if human poverty were eliminated and

there was still money left, then the trustees should feel free to invest in other good causes at their discretion.

Can you begin to imagine it? Can we even begin to comprehend that kind of naive confidence in our abilities and skills?

And yet that is exactly what we practice daily in our trusting in programs, plans, processes, technology, maps. Instead we are being invited in today's text to live like Philip, not trusting in our own ability to program and plan, to design and direct, but trusting in the Spirit. In the words of Zechariah 4:6: "Not by might, not by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord." Not by might, not by power, not by programs, not by processes, but by God's spirit.

**It is time the Holy Spirit had practical relevance in our lives** through its dispatch and direction. The Holy Spirit is more than a doctrine or a strategy. The Holy Spirit is a presence that we practice. Theology should be nothing more, or less, than the Holy Spirit working its way through our lives. The church should be nothing more, or less, than the laboratory of the Spirit at work in the world. And the Holy Spirit moves and manifests its presence through prayer, through prophesy, through the disciplines of the Spirit.

We aren't our own, and we don't have to make it on our own. We can relinquish our Titanic pretensions, and Carnegie illusions. It is time we practice the presence of the Spirit, and then preach what we practice.

You've been baptized. So the Holy Spirit is present in your life. But will the Holy Spirit be preeminent in your life this week?

The Holy Spirit led Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch.

Where will the Holy Spirit lead you this week?