

# Sermon on Verbs



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Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

My husband and I are graduates of the 2 year Academy for Spiritual Formation. This Academy is offered through the Upper Room (part of the UMC) is a global ministry dedicated to supporting the spiritual life of Christians seeking to know and experience God more fully. It began in 1935 as a daily devotional guide, but since then has grown to include publications, programs, prayer support, and other resources to help believers of all ages and denominations move to a deeper level of faith and service. What it entails is going for 4 weeks for 2 years to a retreat center where the classes and disciplines are offered. One can go just to learn and to practice or one can do all the required study and writing to be certified in spiritual direction.

In each of the 4 week courses offered there is a daily practice which includes periods of silence, worship, small group dynamics and they bring in professors from seminary's to teach the courses. The professors may be from Catholic or Protestant denominations. It was at the 2 year academy where my husband and I met but the academy experience stays with you. My husband and I are returning in September for what they call a 5 day academy. It is something that I would commend to anyone seeking to deepen and open themselves more to the Spirit of God.

Our professor for one of the lectures was Rev. Dr. Roger Owens (Professor of Christian Spirituality and Ministry at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary). His class was entitled, "Spirituality of the New Testament".

He began by reminding us of a teaching of Augustine. Augustine said that we think of the cross as the crucifixion, but we are to imagine the cross as a professor's chair, so the sanctuary becomes a classroom with the teacher in place. Augustine said that if we think of the cross in this way then it is not so much a burden as it is to make space for Jesus, who is the professor and think of the journey as a school where we are sitting at our desk in a place of learning. We are reminded that Jesus said that we are to take up our cross and LEARN from Him.

One of the challenges to us from Dr Owens was to do some exegetical work on the verbs of the New Testament.

But before he gave us time to do this work, he read to us some of the prayers of the church and challenged us as pastors to think of the verbs we use in our prayers and hymns. It produced some surprising results.

His point is that as community we miss the verbs in the New Testament – verbs that teach us an important aspect of our relationship to God. What happens if we don't look at the verbs? Dr. Owens' proposition was that we begin to think about the reign of God as a human project for us. We begin to think that this is what church and faith is - a project of working for God trying to better the world for God. We busy ourselves feeding the poor, working for justice, going on mission trips and building for people. Dr. Owens' point is that as church we quickly jump into the doing and perhaps miss an important side to our faith.

What I want you to do this morning is to listen for some of the verbs as I read our scripture lesson for today from 2 Peter 1: 2-4:

<sup>2</sup> May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. <sup>3</sup> His (speaking of Christ) divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. <sup>4</sup> Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust and may become participants of the divine nature.

**What are we to do?** – receive everything needed for life and God's precious promises. **What is God doing in Christ?** - calling humanity to receive and providing everything we need for life and godliness.

Here is another example from Luke chapter 12 – just listen:

Luke 12: 22 <sup>22</sup> He said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. <sup>23</sup> For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. <sup>24</sup> Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! <sup>25</sup> And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>26</sup> If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? <sup>27</sup> Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin;<sup>[b]</sup> yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his

glory was not clothed like one of these. <sup>28</sup> But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! <sup>29</sup> And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. <sup>30</sup> For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. <sup>31</sup> Instead, strive for his<sup>[c]</sup> kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

– **What are we to do?** Stop worrying, consider how God cares for nature and all of creation, we are to strive for the ways of God. **What is God doing in Christ?** God is valuing humanity, God is clothing us, God is doing the feeding and God knows and provides for what we truly need.

The entire gospel of John is about believing. Believing is something we do but who gives us faith? God does. Who empowers us to believe? God does. But God also tells us that our believing and following begins by listening - simply listening to the word of God. By listening we learn many things including that God has given to us the faith to believe. How important is listening - I checked and found almost 1600 references to hearing in the Bible. Not all the listening or hearing is on our part - God is listening too. We are to listen to God and we are told that God hears us.

So far in our little track our verbs what are we to do? We are receiving faith, we are to know that we are being called, we are to stop worrying, we are to spend time considering God's care and nature, and we are to listen and learn from Jesus who gives us faith.

Remember about how important our prayers are. In our prayers offered this morning, what is God doing? God's Spirit is moving across the face of the earth; God is creating, God is blessing, God is abiding with us and God is dancing. **What are we doing?** We are gathering together, we are celebrating, we are receiving blessings, we are trying to live lives of hope and peace and we are dancing too.

Now I am not saying that we should all stop doing. My goodness if the teachers stopped teaching and the musicians stopped singing and the mission people quit serving - we would be in trouble.

Let us learn from our other gospel story about Mary and Martha per Meister Eckart, a German theologian and philosopher from the 14<sup>th</sup> century:

The story of Martha and Mary gets bad press – that if we are busy it is seen as a bad thing or if one is sitting at the feet of Jesus that is a bad thing. Eckart talks about the story of Martha and Mary in this way. Mary was younger and Martha was older. Martha had more experience and Mary was sort of new on the job. Mary needed more time with Jesus so she sat at his feet (the feet of the professor) and listened as he spoke to her and Martha was in the kitchen being busy but she could also hear and she could do more because the words were more familiar and she had lived the life of discipleship longer. Yet Jesus still says you are getting a little too busy Martha, so Jesus declares that both of them (Martha and Mary) are valuable, and both are necessary. It is important sometimes to sit at the feet of Jesus uninterrupted but there is also a time for being busy but if the busyness drowns out the word of God, stop.

Eckart's thought was that sometimes we can become so preoccupied with our doing that we neglect our sitting in front of the professor's chair willing to be taught.

Sr. Kathleen Flood, Dominican Sister and staff at Loyola in Chicago teaches a segment on Spirituality and Healing. I remember her sharing part of her own story. Sr. Kathleen said that before she could become a novice, she had to go on a retreat to discern what God was calling her to do. She went to Wisconsin to a glen where there is a dry streambed. She wanted to walk in the dry streambed and was amazed how smooth the bottom of the bed was – she said it was like walking on marble. She said that she could walk into the rock where water had cut incredible patterns into the rock. She remembered that the Desert Fathers had written about the nature of water and stone. They wrote, "the nature of water is soft, the nature of stone is hard but if a bottle is hung above a stone the water drop by drop will wear away the stone" meaning that the word of God is soft, but our hearts are hard but the one who sits to listen to the word, the word will soften the heart. Scripture makes smooth hearts where God can dwell and shine through us being made known to others.

For Sr Kathleen it was so important that we practice the spiritual disciplines of worship, reading scripture, prayer and sitting in quiet listening as these disciplines creates a space within us so that there is room for grace and the work of God.

One last story:

Most of us have likely flown on airplanes. They give the same instructions on every flight. They tell you that if the cabin begins to loose oxygen the

masks will drop. What are you to do next? Remember the instruction? If there is a child or a feeble person sitting next to you one is to put the mask over your own face first and then put the mask over the child or infirm person. The reason – because one cannot help another when we are gasping for our own air. That is when we are at the most risk for making the reign of God a human project. We cannot serve God best when we are gasping in need of our own feeding from God.

I am going to challenge all of us to do some verb listening this week. Do some reading from the gospels or perhaps from Ephesians, Galatians or Philippians. And then take a moment to think – who is doing what action?  
**What is God doing? What are we as humans to do?**

Find for yourselves the many times that God says, to listen, receive, enter, seek God's reign first.

Holy One, thank you for the reminder today of how much You want to give to use. Help us to receive from our worship, our learning and our listening. Teach us that listening and resting are two important aspects of our becoming beacons of Your light. Amen