**Proclaiming from the Housetops** Rev. Dr. John Wilkinson
Matthew 10:24-39 The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
June 25, 2023 St. Paul, Minnesota

I am grateful indeed to Scott Kenefake for the gracious invitation to be with you this morning, for many reasons. On a personal level, I remember with fondness my time as a colleague with Linda Loving at Fourth Church in Chicago.

David Van Dyke and I spent many, many hours doing the work of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, working first toward ordination equality and then marriage equality. Some years back, your wonderful organist Aaron David Miller and I shared leadership of more than our share of weddings on Michigan Avenue in Chicago, and it’s a joy to experience Aaron’s giftedness this morning. On a church-ier level, endeavors that have mattered to me, such as McCormick Seminary and the Covenant Network, have mattered to you, in terms of leadership and financial commitments, for which I am thankful.

I come this morning wearing at least two hats. I am a very recent board member of the Presbyterian Historical Society, a gem of our denomination doing important work. I hope you will stay after church and learn more about PHS and its mission. Most recently, I have been appointed Director of Ministry Engagement and Support for our denomination, working at the national level to encourage support – including financial support – of our broad ministry and mission. In that light, I’d like to say thank you: thank you for the many ways that this congregation has supported that ministry and mission over many years, through shared mission, per capita, special offerings like One Great Hour of Sharing, the Presbyterian Giving Catalog and many other ways.

As Presbyterians, we are connected, and your support means a great deal to our whole Presbyterian ecosystem. Please know our gratitude, and know what a difference your generosity makes.

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The lectionary gospel lesson has dealt us some difficult words from Jesus this morning, words that fall into my category called, “Yes, Jesus, of course, but I really wish you hadn’t said that.” We will dive into those words more deeply in a minute. But let’s remind ourselves of our contexts, briefly. Six days after Juneteenth. The end of Pride Month. Wildfire smoke from Canada filling our skies. The glory of all things Taylor Swift. Then there are broader contexts. We still navigate the impact of twin pandemics: COVID is not nearly over, and its trajectories, including implications for the church, continue to emerge.

And of course, the constant presence of race and racism, explicit and implicit, and our call to respond, particularly as people of faith. Then there are your contexts, of course, where you and yours may be on your life journey, your health journey, your faith journey.

All of this to set the stage for Jesus’ explosive, provocative, uncompromising teaching. The whole of Matthew 10 has been called the missionary discourse or the mission discourse. Jesus is summoning his twelve disciples and commissioning them for their work. This is serious business: you will cure the sick, raise the dead, cast out demons. You might be welcome, but prepared to be unwelcome.

In fact, prepare to be persecuted or prosecuted, hated, or more. You will be sheep in the midst of wolves. Teri Ott writes: “Jesus makes the sacrifices of following him clear. His disciples will get heckled, insulted, spat upon, arrested and even killed by those who want to uphold the world’s order.” By those who want to uphold the world’s order.

This hardly feels like a friendly recruiting pitch, something you would find on Indeed or LinkedIn. “Come, join my team and face likely failure and even more.” We don’t hear the disciples’ response then, but we can imagine it, because we imagine our own response now.

Scattered throughout this discourse are words of reassurance: do not be afraid. You are of great value to God. Still, this remains serious, risky, high demand business. Jesus will remind them of his own call, to bring not peace but a sword, to put family member against family member. “Take up your cross,” he says, and prepare to lose your life in order to gain it.

Did you note embedded in this discourse a few words about the message that accompanies the mission, a few important words that link what a disciple *does* with what a disciple *says*.

That’s where I want to hang most of our conversation this morning, the two-part move that I am suggesting, a move that links the contexts we’ve explored, the story – our personal and collective stories, packed and unpacked and repacked – and how that story is shared. Jesus knows that the disciples will face rejection. But guess what? Get this. They have the power of truth on their side. “…have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.”

For 30 plus years, I have prepared sermons and liturgies and worship bulletins. And more than anything else, I receive two questions about that endeavor: why and how do you choose the hymns that you do, and why do we pray a prayer of confession? The first question usually follows an unfamiliar hymn or one the questioner simply didn’t like. The second question is typically followed up with these thoughts: I didn’t do the things that this prayer confesses, or that prayer didn’t make me feel very good about myself. Taste in hymns aside, I understand the second question. We want to feel good in general, and in church in particular, about ourselves, our lives, our world.

To that end, we want things left covered, in the shadows. We want some secrets to remain just that. So we pray a prayer of confession to counter those very impulses, to clear the deck, to clean the slate, not only ready our hearts and souls to hear the word we are about to hear, but to live our lives more fully, more completely, with honesty and freedom. We acknowledge and admit, individually and collectively, where we have fallen short – to use the familiar language, have done the things we ought not to have done and have not done the things we ought to have done.

And even if you didn’t do the particular thing we are confessing – knowingly, at least – you have, or you will, and you are connected, spiritually connected, to those who did. Elsewhere Jesus called himself “the truth,” and even when we are told that we can’t handle the truth, we know deep in our souls that the truth will set us free. Honesty about who we are, before God and one another. No family secrets, no faith secrets. And when that truth emerges, we are the better for it. We know that. That is what Jesus is saying. Have no fear, even when fear is the common currency. No secrets, nothing remains hidden.

Light is not only a good disinfectant; it heals, empowers, liberates, unbinds – those who have been keeping secrets and those about whom secrets are kept.

We live in a moment, perhaps – per Jesus’ words, we’ve *always* lived in a moment – where truth is up for grabs. In order to smooth over the narrative, we have left parts out. This is not about partisan debate. Educators and legislators and academics can do that. But there is another familiar prayer of confession affirming that our proclivity is to accept lies as truth. And we do. We restrict or erase or ignore. Forty years ago, two Presbyterian denominations reunited after a 120-year split, a split precipitated by slavery.

Some of you will remember that reunion. Forty years. Yay us. Not long after, we wrote a new confession of faith, a new creed, for the newly hatched church. A brief portion of that Brief Statement of Faith appears on your bulletin cover this morning: “In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.” To hear the voices of peoples long silenced. In a family system, that might be the child who was abused or neglected.

In a nation’s narrative, that might be whole populations of people, those who were enslaved, or those whose land and life were confiscated. In a church system, that might be young voices, or Black voices, or the voices of women, or indigenous voices, or LGBTQIA+ voices. To hear the voices of peoples long silenced then becomes more than an exercise easily labeled as “woke,” more than a detour, but a clear and compelling theological mandate. I grew up in Ohio, and while I learned plenty of Ohio history, it was an incomplete history, leaving out the uncomfortable parts about whole communities.

The book I am recommending to so many right now, in particular white Presbyterians, is by William Yoo, who teaches church history at Columbia Theological Seminary. In *What Kind of Christianity: A History of Slavery and Anti-Black Racism in the Presbyterian Church*, Yoo lays out a devastating history of sins of commission and omission. To read it leaves you deeply impacted; in fact, if a group of you would like to read this important work, I would be honored to join in some kind of discussion with you. *Hamilton* has left us with “I’m not going to waste my shot” and “room where it happens.” It also left us with “who lives, who dies, who tells the story.”

This is about telling the story, and the theological truth is that as discomfiting as it is, as disruptive as it is, as questionable marketing as it is, when we tell the truth, either discovering and uncovering it ourselves, or even better, hearing it from those long-silenced voices, we will be a more honest church, a more compelling church, a more faithful church, a church most likely always needed, but certainly needed now, as we move through this moment into the next, with a world hungry for what we have to offer, even when it doesn’t know it or believe it.

Which is the second part of the two-part movement Jesus suggests, and which we seek to follow. After the uncovering of the truth, the exposure of the secrets, the bringing into the light, there is work to do, the mission and ministry of the church. “…what you hear whispered,” Jesus says, “proclaim from the housetops.” Proclaim from the housetops. That word is just a touch scary to us Presbyterians, with our button-down ways and our historical commitments to maintenance. Proclaim quickly becomes “evangelism.” And maybe it should, proclaiming this ever-expanding story, with its openness and honesty. It’s not mine to prescribe what that proclamation looks like for you all.

“Preach the gospel; use words if necessary.” That little adage is attributed to many, and it’s true, at least in part. Proclaim with your actions, your reaching out, your mission that includes hands on relief and then moves to action on housing and hunger, on climate and gun violence. Proclamation can look like many things, the choices you make, how you spend your money.

So act. Yet Jesus reminds us this morning that words matter as well, and how they are articulated, and who does the articulation, and how we hear them, and then, and then, how they are woven together to tell a story, to reach back, to look around, and to move forward.

Jesus practically guarantees that it won’t be easy. And he promises that he will be with us.

So that we embrace the call to proclaim, even to proclaim from the housetops with a deep sense of hope, in the face of all fear, hope, a word you all know so well. Amen.