

Good Afternoon,

I want to thank Reverend, Doctor, Professor, Dean Moriah, for the opportunity to be with you today and for the honour and opportunity to participate in this wonderful lecture series "Speaking Life to Death".

This afternoon, the theme is *Practicing a spirituality of Hope: Empowering the "Disabled". The Minister as Enabler*. It is my hope that as I share from my professional, personal and spiritual experience that I am able to contribute in some small way to the ambitious and exciting week that has been organized for you.

The Minister as Enabler

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath appointed me to preach the gospel to the poor, he hath sent me to heal the broken hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord (Luke 4:18, 19)".

With these words Jesus delivers his inaugural sermon and publicly initiates his messianic Ministry. Quoting these prophetic words from the Book of Isaiah (61:1, 2) he purposely and strategically avoids any reference to God's vengeance upon oppressors and focuses solely on the mission to alleviate suffering: to speak life to death, hope to hopelessness, and empowerment to the dispossessed. In dramatic fashion he closed the book, took this seat and let the words ring in the ears of the listeners before punctuating the silence with the affirmation: "this day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears" (V.21).

By this act, Jesus shatters four thousand years of misconception of the Messiah as returning prince and warrior and replaces it with the vision of the messiah as humble servant and minister to the disenfranchised. By these words he established the lense through which his three year

Ministry must be viewed in order to be properly understood. And through these words, not the great commission of Matthew 28: 18-20, he establishes the mandate for all future ministers of the Christian Gospel, or so I believe. And if you won't take my word for it, my friend Pedrito Maynard-Reid makes a convincing argument for this in his book "complete evangelism." Dr. Maynard-Reid is vice President for Spiritual Life and Mission, and Professor of Biblical Studies and Misology at Walla Walla, University. He suggests that through the nature of his incarnation, his social and Ministry activities, suffering, death, ascension and continued Ministry in Heaven Jesus repeatedly addressed every form of injustice he encountered and always publicly declared his brotherhood with the poor.

Consider just briefly that:

- he was conceived as a bastard child of parents who were married in shame
- he was born like a refugee in a cattle stall after a lengthy enforced pilgrimage to his father's ancestral home
- he was raised as a fugitive-foreigner fleeing a death sentence from Herod
- he was deprived a formal education in Torah as a result of being an exile and having questionable parentage
- he traveled largely with the unlearned followers he personally called
- he had table fellowship with those whom Jews were compelled to shame by law
- he publicly acknowledged being touched by an unclean woman (who would have preferred to remain hidden) and he touched many who were unclean
- he numbered women among his closest confidants, supporters and students in a time when it was forbidden for women to serve as disciples

Dr. Maynard-Reid argues and Luke affirms that Jesus' Ministry was a Ministry of hope to the hopeless. A Ministry of empowerment to the disabled and more than this . . . Jesus scripted himself as being one with those to whom he ministered.

For those who take their model of Ministry from old testament sources let me offer a belief that Jesus' Ministry orientation was not new, but rather a re-affirmation of God's expectations from his people since the Garden of Eden.

Perhaps the most famous old testament text that supports this in chapter 58 of the book of Isaiah:

"Is not this the fast that I have chosen? To loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdened and to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? When thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hid not thyself from thine own flesh?"

A close reading of the Old Testament would show that the activities that most resulted in God's displeasure were not acts of blasphemy or idolating and sins against God, not even severe immorality but rather the individual and corporate abdication of the obligation to be in fellowship and service to the poor.

"Behold this was the iniquity of thy sister Sodom, pride, fullness of bread, and abundance of idleness was in her and in her daughters neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy." Ezekiel 16:49.

So if we accept that the true gospel commission, the true call to Ministry is the Ministry to the poor, the next question for us today as ministers needs to be "How do we do that?"

These days when the time of ministers is largely taken up serving the needs of the already converted, and ensuring that the weekly opportunities have a high production value; (driven largely by congregational demands and expectations). How do we in this climate re-orient our lives to the Loke-Acts model of Ministry; the Ministry of hope to the disabled?

I would suggest that once again we turn to Jesus as our model for Ministry and for today, I would

suggest that the Ministry of Jesus can be summed up in a series of roles or activities which he undertook with his disciples.

- Jesus modeled the Ministry of hope
- Jesus mentored a small group of disciples into this counter-cultural model of Ministry
- Jesus' preaching emphasized the love and hope he modeled
- Jesus' teaching unraveled historical and traditional misconceptions of God and emphasized the God of Love and Hope

and though Jesus preached to thousands and had regular communion with his closest disciples, his most profound acts of Ministry took place in intimate almost individual encounters with those who lived on the margins of the society of his day.

(Later I hope we will have time to explore these four methods)

Why is it that this Ministry of hope that Jesus modeled isn't more of a focus for modern Christian churches (and, one could add, modern Christian ministers). I will offer a few suggestions and warn you that this is where the brother stops preaching and starts meddling.

- The intimacy exposure of Jesus Ministry exposed the most delicate elements of his life. His humble origins, questionable parentage, and relationships were open to the most severe scrutiny. For us today, particularly those of us who have suffered the occasional indiscretion or lapse in Christian character, to be genuinely engaged in heart to heart Ministry requires that we regularly confront our own demons and expose our own hypocrisy (David is the example here).
- Secondly, entanglement. Jesus' Ministry brought him into close relationships with many many people, not only his disciples, but many others whose lives he touched deeply. And I assure you that these people did not respect Jesus' office hours. In short, Jesus' Ministry of hope made his life complicated as he signed on to minister to people whose lives and needs required Ministry outside of his one hour a week appearance at the

mountainside synagogue.

There is a great risk to getting caught up in people's business. But let me remind you of the story of Naomi and Ruth and the blessing that came to both of them.

As a clinical, forensic, child and family social worker, I have had extensive experience in ministering to the poor and dispossessed.

- I have worked with inner city youth in recreation and education settings
- To the poor through food bank and anti-poverty advocacy
- To those suffering from addiction and major mental illness
- To both perpetrators and victims of extreme physical violence and sexual abuse
- To violent and repeat offenders and those classified as unredeemable psychopaths the kind of folk you'd find on death row in an American Maximum Security Penitentiary, where I worked while completing graduate studies
- to those with character defects, developmental disabilities and social, sexual and environmental defects that place them beyond the cure of human healers

In my twenty years of service, in my professional, personal, and spiritual vocations I have attempted to model this Ministry. I have always maintained a commitment to mentoring others.

Teach

Preach

Maintained a relationship of personal and professional mentoring in which I could frankly and regularly confront the two paralyzing fears of Ministry fear of

Exercise

- who are those who most need your Ministry and fellowship of your congregation?
- Identify an aspect of each of the four elements of Jesus Ministry that you want to emphasize / re-emphasize or introduce into your personal Ministry and that of your congregation.
- Consider the fears of exposure and entanglement and share your experiences in overcoming. How can you model this to your congregation?