

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

January 14, 2024

Rare Words

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

“The word of the LORD was rare in those days...”¹ Unfortunately, that statement is true of all days and times. The word of the Lord was rare in the time of Samuel, and it was rare in the time before Samuel too. The word of the Lord was rare in the time of Moses and Joshua. The word of the Lord will be just as rare after Samuel too. It will be rare in the time of Elijah and Isaiah, Ezra and Nehemiah. It remains rare in our day too, doesn't it?

Russell Moore, editor-in-chief of *Christianity Today* said essentially the same thing in an interview with NPR a few months ago:

Moore told NPR that multiple pastors had told him they would quote the Sermon on the Mount, specifically the part that says to “turn the other cheek,” when preaching. Someone would come up after the service and ask, “Where did you get those liberal talking points?”

“What was alarming to me is that in most of these scenarios, when the pastor would say, ‘I'm literally quoting Jesus Christ,’ the response would not be, ‘I apologize.’ The response would be, ‘Yes, but that doesn't work anymore. That's weak,’” Moore said. “When we get to the point where the teachings of Jesus himself are seen as subversive to us, then we're in a crisis.”²

Clearly, the word of the Lord is rare in these days if quoting the **ACTUAL** word of God, Jesus Christ, is met with disbelief and derision. But this should come as no particular surprise. We humans, after all, are quite adept at

¹ 1 Samuel 3:1b (NRSVue)

² Limbong, Andrew (interviewer). August 29, 2023. “In 'Losing Our Religion,' Russell Moore tackles a crisis in evangelical Christianity.” NPR's Book of the Day. Washington, DC. National Public Radio

ignoring the things that are inconvenient or might make us uncomfortable. And let's be honest, verses like the following make most of us uncomfortable:

- "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."³
- "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me."⁴
- "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire."⁵
- "But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart."⁶
- "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."⁷
- "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."⁸

I can't help but imagine God sitting at a dinner table with a rambunctious and rebellious humanity strapped into a highchair, doing everything to feed us the Word we so desperately need. I picture God gathering up a spoonful of the Word...the Word of life and love, connection and community...the Word that sustains our very lives; gathering up a spoonful of the Word and trying to get us to consume it. All the while humanity is squirming around and otherwise doing everything possible to avoid that spoonful of life and love.

Perhaps the only time when the Word of the Lord wasn't rare was when the Word walked this physical plane in the form of Jesus Christ. But even then! Even with the Word of God present in human form, people still managed to avoid God's Word. Nathanael is either so tired of waiting for the fulfillment of God's messianic Word or he is simply skeptical by nature; but either way, he initially misses God's Word, even when Jesus is standing right in front of him.

Perhaps the issue is less about the rarity of God's Word and more about the rarity of those willing to hear it. Eli seemed willing to hear the Word of the Lord in our reading from the Hebrew Bible. But was he really? The hard words Samuel is told to prophesy to Eli is a repeated warning. Eli has been

³ Mark 10:25

⁴ Matthew 25:40b

⁵ Mark 9:43

⁶ Matthew 5:28

⁷ John 15:13

⁸ Mark 10:21b

told before that his son's actions are evil. But Eli, despite hearing the Word of the Lord, doesn't really hear it. He is either unable or unwilling to act on it. And when the Word of the Lord is ignored, it usually goes badly for us; as it does for Eli.

The Word of the Lord is **not** rare! We just don't want to listen to it! God is with us and speaking to us constantly. The God who formed our inner most parts accompanies us every moment of every day...we're just too inwardly-turned most of the time to know that. God's Word is not rare, hearts willing to hear it are!

The Word of the Lord is **not** rare. Every word of love and grace spoken is an echo of God's Word. Every word of forgiveness and generosity spoken is an echo of God's Word. Every word of encouragement and reconciliation spoken is an echo of God's Word. Every word of blessing and support spoken is an echo of God's Word. God's Word is not rare, we just forget the language of God! We forget that words have power and that the Word of God can be an important part of our daily lives if we look for it.

When we follow the Way of Christ we will see great things! We will see how prevalent the Word of God is in our lives and in our reality. We will see how powerful the Word of God can be to bring peace and justice, reconciliation and wholeness. We will see how God's Word is present and active at all times and in all places. We will see how our own words can be a part of God's Word.

What language are you using? Are you using the language of God? The Word of God? I bet you are more than you realize, but we need to realize it more! Speak the Word of God to others! Speak words of forgiveness and healing. Speak the rare Word of the Lord until it isn't rare any more. Speak the Word of the Lord until more and more hearts...all hearts...are open to it! Amen.