

**Walking Sermons
Hebrews 10:19-25
Hillyer Memorial Christian Church
January 29, 2012
by David Mallory**

I want us to take just a moment this morning and conjure up a list of all the channels of human communication that we can possibly think of. Now number one on the list would be the face to face conversation. I mean that's basic to every relationship we have, isn't it? But then we should also include the phone call. There's email, Facebook, Twitter. Years ago there used to be a thing called a letter. There are winks of infatuation, handshakes of welcome, high fives of congratulations. Have you ever noticed at a football game when the coaches on the sideline are trying to communicate the play in to the quarterback? The way they flail and swat their arms, it looks more like a mosquito infestation than a channel of communication. I think if we really put our mind to it, we could probably come up with a whole grocery list of methods. But the one we might easily overlook is the sermon. Because think about it, in a world of thirty second news flashes and microwaveable popcorn, there are very few places where we willingly sit and listen to someone rattle on for twenty minutes. I'm reminded of the little boy who was sitting in the pew drawing stick figures on his bulletin. The preacher was droning on and on and on. Until finally the young lad looked up at his mother and said, "Mommy, will you give him what he wants so he'll shut up." Sermons communicate. They teach us, they comfort us, they challenge us. The sermon that I just read to you this morning clearly states that its goal is to provoke us.

Now I know what you're thinking. What sermon preacher? But that's exactly what most scholars think the book of Hebrews is. Tucked in with the letters to Timothy and Titus and Philemon, Hebrews is not a letter. It's an oral communication, a word of exhortation. It has points to ponder and ideas to extrapolate. It's a sermon. But then that's about all we know about it. Like we don't know who's preaching. Some say it's Paul. Some say it's Barnabas. Some say Clement or Priscilla or Silvanus. And since we don't know who's preaching, it follows that we don't know who the congregation is. It may be Corinth or Ephesus or Smyrna or Rome or maybe all of the above. We just don't know. But what we do know is what the preacher tells us. And the preacher tells us that this is a

congregation that's in trouble. There's been declining worship attendance. The people have lost their zeal for mission. The mainstream culture has seductively distracted the leadership. Stop me if any of this sounds familiar. The preacher tells us that this is a church that's tired.

And so the preacher, hoping to revive this weary congregation dives into this long and arduous exegesis of who Jesus is. He says Melchizedek is the high priest. Jesus is like Melchizedek. Therefore Jesus is the new high priest. He says the old covenant requires the blood of the lamb. Jesus gave his blood to fulfill the regulations of the old covenant. Therefore Jesus is the new covenant. Hebrews is tough, it's complex, it's confusing. It's like cracking through a bowl of oysters. It's awfully messy. But we can't stop. Because somewhere in here we're bound to find a pearl.

And at least for me, I think we find it here in the tenth chapter. The preacher announces, since we, as the church have been blessed to enter the sanctuary of the Almighty, "Let us hold fast to the gift of hope. Let us not neglect meeting together. Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds." The Greek word used here for provoke is the word *Paroxysmos*. And it's one of those words that doesn't translate very well into English. It does mean provoke. But it also means encourage, it also means spur, it also means pester. It's one of those sweet and sour words that can be very uplifting but at the same time very irritating. I think the preacher is trying to remind us that, as church, we have a responsibility to each other. We have a responsibility to encourage, to spur, to provoke if necessary. And let's be honest with ourselves, we've lost some of that, haven't we? Our world has grown so individualistic that we often come to church wondering "what's in it for me?" I heard a story one time of a parishioner who was criticizing the minister for the hymn selections. "I just don't like any of the songs we've been singing lately." "Well I'm sorry," the clergy responded, "but we're not singing to you." Sometimes it's like we're worshipping on an island. We sit in our same pew equal distance from those on our left and those on our right. We sing loud enough so that we can hear our own voice and we crack our bibles wide enough that no one will know we're on the wrong page. Now correct me if I'm wrong. But it appears to me that sometimes we lose sight of the communal aspects of church. And I think the preacher is trying to refocus us. She's trying to remind us that we have a responsibility to encourage, to spur, to provoke if necessary.

Now I've gone to church all my life. And I've heard thousands of sermons from some really fine preachers. And even though this library of sermons has been formational for me, I have to confess, there's very few of them that I remember in great detail. Even fewer I can quote directly. Instead what I remember is the walking sermons. Like Verna O'Neal. She was my eighth grade speech teacher. Now believe or not, I was a shy child. And there's no way I was going to get up in front of a group of students and give a speech. But Mrs. O'Neal saw something in me that I didn't see in myself. She encouraged me, she spurred me, she even provoked me. For me, Mrs. O'Neal preached the sermon "There are different kinds of gifts, but the same God works in all of them." Or like Anita Pickle. When I was first asked to be an elder in the church, I was convinced I wasn't ready for that kind of responsibility. But Anita wouldn't let me say no. She encouraged me. She spurred me. Sometimes she provoked me. For me, Anita preached the sermon, "You are the light of the world." Or like Helen Riley. She was the choir director at my home church for somewhere around 175 years. Since we didn't have a youth choir, I hid out in the pews. But Mrs. Riley found me. She encouraged me, she spurred me. She provoked me. And I joined the adult choir. For me, Mrs. Riley preached the sermon, "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord." I think of Larry Gilliam. Larry has been working with youth so long that now he's working with kids who are the kids of the kids he sponsored years ago. One time he asked me to help him with youth work. But I couldn't do that. Those kids wouldn't listen to me. But Larry wouldn't take no. He encouraged me. He spurred me, sometimes he provoked me. For me, Larry preaches the sermon "Let the little children come to me." Even though they probably don't realize it, these folks communicate the gospel message to me. They communicate it not with their words, but with their actions. They are walking sermons. And I think that's what the preacher is trying to impress upon us. That whether we're standing in the pulpit or passing the communion trays or visiting with a homebound or leading morning watch or driving down the interstate or coaching the soccer team or talking with the teller at the bank, part of our charge as believers is to be walking sermons. To encourage, to spur, to provoke if necessary. To model for others what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. We have to realize that the Gospel message is most transformative, it's most impactful, when we put shoes on it.

Back in the 13th century, St Francis of Assisi gathered a group of young students who were eager to learn how to preach. And together, they set out across the country to proclaim the gospel message. At one place, they visited with an elderly sick fellow. At another, they helped a poor widow find food. At another, they gathered a group of schoolchildren and taught them new games to play. But never, never did they assemble a congregation and deliver a sermon. Finally one impatient young novice confronted Francis with this oversight. “Sir, we’ve been on the road for days. And yet you’ve not taught us a thing about preaching. When are we going to stop and preach?” “My friend,” Francis smiled, “We’ve been preaching. For as we walk, we preach.”

Let us pray - Gracious God, we’re honored and humbled that you have entrusted us with the ministry of your church. Remind us again what this mission requires. Teach us to give not just words to the Gospel message but also feet. May others see in us the witness of Jesus Christ. Amen.