

# Behaving like the Body of Christ

A sermon based on Mark 8:27-38 and James 3:1-12

The second in a series of three sermons on belonging, behaving, and believing.

Don Friesen  
Ottawa Mennonite Church  
September 17, 2000

I'm preaching a series of sermons this month on the themes of belonging, behaving, and believing—three elements of our life together as a Christian community. I began with the theme of belonging, but at least one person warned me last Sunday that he was going to skip today's sermon. A sermon on behaviour sounded too up front and personal to him!

One could preach a sermon on behaviour in very general terms, but one runs the risk of saying nothing, and taking twenty minutes to do it. Getting specific and personal about behaviour, however is risky. I've told you before about the preacher who, in a series of sermons on behaviour, came down hard on gossip, and the enthusiastic elder sitting in the front row said, "Now, that is preaching!" And when, in the second sermon, the preacher excoriated greed, the man said, "Now, that's preaching!" But when in the next sermon the preacher went on to warn against adultery, the man said, "Now, that is meddling!"

Another preacher, new to his congregation, preached his first sermon on gambling, only to be told that one-third of his congregation raised race horses. So the next Sunday he preached about the ill effects of tobacco, only to be told that many people in his congregation grew tobacco for a living. So it went for several Sundays, until the preacher, wanting desperately to preach prophetically and specifically, spoke on "The Sin of Fishing in the Territorial Waters of a Foreign Nation," this to a congregation situated in the middle of Saskatchewan!

It's hard being a preacher. It's even harder when the congregation is touchy about codes of personal behaviour. The temptation is to steer clear of mentioning specific behaviours, which is probably why someone once defined a preacher as "a mild-mannered person speaking in a mild-mannered way to mild-mannered people, urging them to be more mild-mannered."

## **Behaviour has a great impact upon us**

We may not take kindly to being preached at about personal behaviour, but I daresay that behaviour, good or bad, has a great impact upon us. For example, we are quick to notice disparities between one's profession and one's behaviour. A Christian college that was having trouble with an increasing number of students cheating, attempted to find a solution. It must have been a well-endowed college, for it hired a consultant to do a study of the problem and make suggestions. The consultant recommended an elaborate plan to eliminate opportunities for students to cheat. The moral issue was never addressed, and no guide for Christian behaviour or character development was ever suggested!

We are quick to note the credibility gap when one's behaviour is not commensurate with one's profession. An increasingly popular approach is to downsize one's profession in order to allow all kinds of personal behaviour, but only a fool would be impressed by a person who professes little, and behaves like it!

Now, in considering the relationship of behaviour to belief, if it is possible minimize belief for the sake of allowing greater behavioural latitude, it is also possible to over-emphasize behaviour. This was the fault of the Pharisees, as I outlined it last week. They were so fixated on the minutiae of behaviour, trying to micro-manage behaviour in every detail of life, that Jesus admonished them for neglecting "the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith." (Matthew 23:23)

Those who over-emphasize behaviour can be quite off-putting, especially if accenting the goodness of their own behaviour. They resemble the flawless but lonely Lucy in the Peanuts comic strip. Lucy told Charlie Brown, "I have examined my life and found it to be without a flaw. Therefore, I'm going to hold a ceremony and present myself with a medal. I will then give a moving acceptance speech. After that, I'll greet myself in the receiving line."

Behaviour can affect us negatively, some behaviour impressing no one but ourselves, but good conduct can also be inspiring. Perhaps the story of Eric Liddell (documented in the film, Chariots of Fire) impresses me more than you—and challenges me less than you—and so I'll try to tell his story in as mild-mannered and delicate a manner as possible. Eric Liddell was a gifted sprinter who competed in the 1924 Olympics in Paris. He went to the Games as a favourite to win a medal in his event, but when the event was scheduled to be held on a Sunday, Eric refused to compete. Despite enormous pressure, he was steadfast, refusing to violate his own personal credo regarding the Sabbath.

It's impressive when one's behaviour matches one's profession, especially when the cost of such congruence is enormous. If we are impressed by costly and committed behaviour, so too are the Scriptures. There are numerous passages in the Bible that note the importance of behaviour, for better or for worse. The Book of Job, for example, decries those who "behave arrogantly". (Job 36:9) Proverbs condemns those who are "devious in conduct". (Proverbs 14:2) The prophet Ezekiel bemoans the "lewd behaviour" of Israel, behaviour so distasteful that even Israel's enemies were "ashamed" by it. (Ezekiel 16:27) The Apostle Paul chastises the Corinthian congregation, saying, "As long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not...behaving according to human inclinations?" (1 Corinthians 3:3)

If the Scriptures condemn untoward behaviour, they also hold up commendable conduct. The Bible encourages us to "behave in the world with frankness and godly sincerity". (2 Corinthians 1:12) It encourages congregations to "behave properly toward outsiders". (1 Thessalonians 4:12) It alludes to a code of conduct for congregations, referring to "how one ought to behave in the household of God". (1 Timothy 3:15) The New Testament also encourages us to "be reverent in behaviour," going on to mention, specifically, "slander" and "alcoholism". (Titus 2:3) Proverbs holds that "wise conduct is pleasure to a person of understanding". (Proverbs 10:23) The Scriptures commend "pure, upright, and blameless...conduct" (1 Thessalonians 2:10), and encourage us, as believers, to "set...an example in speech and conduct" (1 Timothy 4:12) and to be "holy...in all (our) conduct". (1 Peter 1:15)

We are encouraged to behave honourably even in untoward circumstances. 1 Peter says, “Conduct yourselves honourably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honourable deeds and glorify God...” (2:12) “Keep your conscience clear,” he writes, “so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.” (3:16)

### **The behaviour of each body part is important**

The Bible, of course, gets quite specific about proper and improper behaviour, building, as it does, on the foundation of the Ten Commandments, and therefore having an aversion to things like theft, adultery, murder, and the like.

Our reading from the New Testament book of James gets very specific, focussing on only one body part—the tongue! The tongue may be but a small body part, says James, but its behaviour has powerful repercussions. Just like a huge ship is guided by a very small rudder,” says James, “so also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.” (3:4-5) Just as a great forest fire can be “set ablaze” by a small spark, so too the behaviour of just one small body part can have very serious consequences.

It probably doesn’t take much persuasion to convince us of the awesome power of the tongue. We all know that words carry great power for ill and for good, though James tends to concentrate on their negative power. Words are used to accent the faults of others. They are used to camouflage flaws in our own character. They can express delight in the weaknesses of others. Words are used for gossip; they have been used to assassinate someone’s character. We use words to criticize without thought for the consequences, to judge without understanding, and to condemn without knowing the circumstances.

Words are powerful, penetrating our minds, our hearts, and inflicting us with emotional wounds that take a long time to heal. Who among us has not been guilty of opening our mouth and saying things we wished later we could have taken back? However, as an Arab proverb phrases it, “A team of the strongest horses cannot pull a word back once it is spoken.”

Though James may focus on the negative power of verbal behaviour, he, unlike the Pharisees, is not wholly concerned with behaviour, but with what behaviour reveals of our inner being. “From the same mouth,” observes James, “come blessing and cursing,” leading him to ask, “Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.” (3:10-12)

This is more than a call to be mild-mannered and pleasant in our speech! James is pushing us to greater faithfulness, not only in speech, but in all aspects of our behaviour and being. To state it positively, as does Philippians, we are to dwell on “...whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable...” (Philippians 4:8)

## Turning from Galilee to Jerusalem

There are throughout the New Testament inducements to improve our behaviour, to take our spirituality and the behaviour that issues from it to the next level. The Apostle Paul, using imagery that is as timely this week as it was in Paul's day, compares spiritual aspiration to running an Olympic race (1 Corinthians 9:24), saying, "Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one." (9:25) For that reason, says Paul, "I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air; but I punish my body and enslave it, so that...I myself should not be disqualified." (9:26-27)

There are turning points in an athlete's career when he or she must decide whether to remain an amateur, or to press on toward the next level of athletic pursuit. The same applies to our faith. Paul wanted to grow in his faith, to improve his discipleship, saying, "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own.... this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 3:12-14) "Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind," he adds. (3:15)

Our Gospel lesson for this morning is an important passage which has given birth to many sermons and theological abstracts concerning the identity of Jesus, but what drew my attention this time around was the turning point it represents in the life of the disciples. Scholars agree that today's gospel text is a watershed in Mark's gospel, for after this point in the gospel story events move quickly toward the cross. Mark, chapter 8, marks a great turning point in Jesus' life, for whereas the first half of the book records Jesus' ministry in Galilee, the second half records Christ's Passion in Jerusalem. Our Gospel reading marks a dramatic shift in the story. Jesus is turning from Galilee in the north to Jerusalem in the south. He is turning from a fairly successful and relaxed ministry to an uncertain future filled with danger and violence. He is turning from a situation of some influence and power to a situation of great powerlessness, and encouraging those who follow him to make the turn with him.

Small wonder that Simon Peter reacted negatively to this plot twist. It didn't fit in at all with what had been taking place up to that point! To which Jesus replied that being his disciple doesn't mean hanging around Galilee forever. Galilee may have been a backwater kind of place out of which little came and little more was expected (John 1:46), but it also represented a comfortable level of Christian discipleship. Galilee, as a metaphor, is where we go to workshops to learn how to be a Christian. Galilee means weekend spiritual life retreats, Bible studies, sitting in worship and listening to sermons. Galilee represents all those wonderful times when we just sit around with other mild-mannered people who agree with us and wax nostalgic about the spirituality of yesteryear. These are important aspects of our life together, and that's where most of us started our journey of faith, but perhaps it's time to move on! There is a marked difference between following Jesus around Galilee, and following him to Jerusalem.

## **Moving our behaviour up a notch**

Life is filled with such turning points—moments when we move from the difficult to the challenging. We enter kindergarten and are suddenly faced with the stark realization that we will not have our parents' constant attention and presence anymore. We start Grade one and realize that from now on we'll only be seeing our families on evenings and weekends! We start Junior High, possibly in a new school, and as if that weren't adjustment enough we have to cope with a whole host of physical, emotional, and psychological changes in our lives! We leave home for university, and while the realization that we will not have our parents' constant attention any longer is now a comfort, our new freedom is not without its anxieties.

Sometimes life's turning points are thrust upon us. The story is told of one Georgene Johnson, a native of Cleveland, Ohio, who decided that at forty-two years of age she was going to adopt a good attitude about her age, so she started running to keep in shape. (Told by Fredrick Kane) She did well in her running, running increasingly longer distances, and decided to move her commitment up a notch by entering a 10K competitive race. Nervous about it, she arrived at the race early, but to her surprise there were already a lot of people milling around, stretching and getting ready! All of a sudden a voice on the microphone, said, "Move to the starting line." This was it! A gun sounded and they were off!

After about six kilometres it occurred to Georgene that they ought to be turning around and heading back to the finish line. She finally stopped and asked an official, "How come the course isn't turning around?" "Ma'am," he said, "you are running the Cleveland Marathon!" Her event, the 10K, was scheduled for a half hour after the marathon, which was forty kilometres! Some of us would have stopped right there and said, "That's it, I'm going home." But to her credit, Georgene kept right on going and finished the race. She said, "This is not the race I entered, but for better or worse, this is the race that I am in!"

Life sometimes puts us into situations that we didn't train for, that we didn't volunteer for, and that we don't want to be in! But we're in it. A divorce, for example, may thrust us into a single state we don't really want! A disease make plummet our life into misery we did not request! Old age may bring more debilitation to us than we had imagined when we were fantasizing about retirement! This hasn't turned out to be the way I planned it! This isn't what I thought was going to happen. I thought my life was going to be different! This isn't the race that I entered!

Sometimes these turning points are thrust upon us. At other times we deliberately choose to make a decisive change. This is what Jesus was asking his disciples to do. When he "began to teach them that (he) must undergo great suffering, ...be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed" (Mark 8:31), it didn't sit well with Peter and his fellow disciples, but Jesus appealed to Peter to listen for a higher calling ("divine things," verse 33) He said to Peter, and the disciples, and us, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it...." (8:34-35) On the other hand, said Jesus, "...those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." (8:35)

## **An invitation to costly discipleship**

I wish there was a mild-mannered way of saying it, but the New Testament warns that even something as noble as the love of family cannot stand in the way of commitment to the Kingdom of God (Matthew 19:29). Jesus demands our obedience. Jesus is not some mild-mannered little fellow coming up to us, hat in hand, saying softly: Please, may I have a word with you. He comes to us as the Lord of History and makes demands! As someone (Daniel Berrigan) said, “If you want to follow Jesus, you had better look good on wood!”

C.S. Lewis, who held the chair of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge and who continues to be one of the most widely-read Christian writers, began as an agnostic, but was “surprised by joy,” the very title of a book in which he tells of his early life and of the turning point Christ introduced to his life. He felt Christ saying to him, “Give me your all. I don’t want so much of your money and so much of your work—I want you. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it!” (“Is Christian Hard or Easy?” *Beyond Personality*)

When Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51 and 53) and invited his disciples to set their faces in the same direction, they could have walked away, saying, No! We don’t mind giving a few hours here and there in Galilee, but Jerusalem? Uh-uh. I have to take the kids to soccer next Sabbath. They didn’t walk away. Though they may not have fully understood the implications of heading to Jerusalem, or the redemptive value of suffering, or the heavenly success of earthly failure, they rose to Jesus’ challenge, and “pressed on” to Jerusalem! They heard a higher calling, and decided to move their commitment up a notch.

The strength of conviction and commitment Eric Liddell demonstrated at the Olympic Games in 1924 is impressive, but Liddell pressed on, even after winning the Gold. Shortly after the games, he gave up his Olympic career so that he could take up a Christian mission in China, an even costlier commitment, for there he met his death at the hands of the Japanese in World War II. His was the true athletic spirit, physically and spiritually.

To belong to the body of Christ is to behave—corporately and individually—like the body of Christ. It is not to rest in the Galilee of comfortable commitment, but to rise to the challenge of making our behaviour more congruent with our beliefs, and making our beliefs more congruent with Scripture and with Jesus’ example, for we “belong to Christ”. (Romans 1:6) We “belong to...him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God.” (Romans 7:4) AMEN

---

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.