

Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

Rev. Dr. Daris Bultena

September 13, 2009

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Proverbs 1:20-33

²⁰Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. ²¹At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks: ²²"How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple? How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing and fools hate knowledge? ²³Give heed to my reproof; I will pour out my thoughts to you; I will make my words known to you. ²⁴Because I have called and you refused, have stretched out my hand and no one heeded, ²⁵and because you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof, ²⁶I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when panic strikes you, ²⁷when panic strikes you like a storm, and your calamity comes like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come upon you. ²⁸Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently, but will not find me. ²⁹Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD, ³⁰would have none of my counsel, and despised all my reproof, ³¹therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way and be sated with their own devices. ³²For waywardness kills the simple, and the complacency of fools destroys them; ³³but those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster."

Mark 8:27-38

²⁷Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" ²⁸And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." ²⁹He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." ³⁰And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

³⁴He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

“Work Clothes”

Here it is the hinge point in Mark’s gospel. Prior to this point we have Jesus traveling, healing, teaching, and doing miracles. His ministry takes him many places. And then we encounter today’s text. Following this text it becomes completely clear that the goal is Jerusalem. The remainder of the Gospel is the journey towards Jerusalem and what awaits Jesus there. The passion is at hand.

This is a turning moment. There are two significant questions that Jesus asks his disciples. Do notice that this text is a text that deals with the insiders. It is as they are traveling that he has this conversation—and we get to listen in on the conversation. There are two questions. The first question matters, but it is the second question that is of utmost importance.

The questions are: First, “Who do people say that I am?” The second question is: “And who do YOU say that I am?” The answer to the first question is no doubt a re-telling of what Jesus has already heard. “Some say you are a prophet. Others say you are Elijah.” Jesus follows with that second question.

“And who do you say that I am?” It is Peter who responds. Peter is the one who has those moments of insight and passion and he puts the answer out there on the table. “You are the Messiah.” Yes, he has formed the words and spoken them. When they hit the air it is as if they take on a life of their own: “You are the Messiah.” Had they thought it? Sure. Had they discussed it amongst themselves? I would not be surprised. But now, Peter has answered it right in the presence of Jesus. “You are the Messiah.”

When I first moved into my house the top of the back yard was covered not only in overgrown trees, briars, and scrubby shrubs, but it was also covered in poison ivy. I was determined to do something about it. There were poison ivy vines as thick as my wrist back there. I had heard that for those big ones—the ones that were thick and trailed all the way to the top of the trees—what I had to do was cut a section of it out near the ground and then pour Clorox bleach on the base of it.

I was very afraid of coming into contact with those oils. So, I had special clothes that I wore when I got serious about the poison ivy. I had an old London Fog long coat that I wore and I had work gloves that I taped to the sleeves of that coat so that there was no way any of the skin of my arms could come in contact with those vines and leaves.

It was not until I was fully in my work clothes that I was ready to get out there and do what needed to be done in order to clean up the hill in my yard and make it a place that was fit for both man and beast alike. I'm sure that if any of the neighbors saw me in that get up they would think that I had lost my mind. That first summer I lived here was one of those really hot summers. It was not a summer like this one has been. The temperatures were up there in the upper 90's and the humidity matched it. There I was in my jeans, long sleeved shirt with the collar buttoned, and my coat/glove combo contraption.

It took most of the summer but I worked at it. Bit by bit I worked at it. There was many an afternoon where I would continue to pour the Clorox beach on those vines—always careful to first put on those same work clothes with that wild outfit. I was always careful how I handled that coat, and eventually had accomplished enough of the task that I was able to be done with my get up of sorts.

The reality of it was the poison ivy was going not going to be gotten rid of unless I did that work. Were I to claim that portion of my yard and

make it a safe, welcoming, and productive space, I first had to get rid of that invasive weed that was on everything. I had to do that work.

I hated it. It was hot. It was dirty. It was sweaty work. I did it. I did not necessarily enjoy it. I did realize at that point, very early on in the whole home ownership thing, that this having your own yard to take care of is a bit overrated. It is not as much fun as I envisioned during those years of being a renter when I had no yard at all.

Nonetheless, I did the work. I'm proud of it still. It looks good. It still a bit overgrown back there, but all things considered it has come a long ways since then. It has taken doing the work. It has not always been fun, or easy, but it has been accomplished. It is not the best yard in town, it is not even the best one on the block, but it is mine and I like it and, how do they put it now—"it's all good."

Peter spoke the words, "You are the Messiah." He spoke the words, but he did not quite have it right. When Jesus started to make it clear what the implications of that were—Peter protested. Peter had an elemental idea of what it would mean that Jesus was the Messiah. There was a basic but clear understanding of Messiah. The Messiah would come and deliver God's chosen people from the domination of Rome. Their land would once again be free and Rome would be out.

The Messiah was to be the one who would make that happen. But that was a small view of the Messiah. Too small. So when Jesus started to talk about how he would suffer and die and then after three days rise again—Peter just would not hear of it. He wants Jesus to stop talking that way.

It was not that Peter could not grasp what Jesus was saying. He just did not want to do the work that was involved with seeing the whole

concept of Messiah in a very different light than what he had seen it. Jesus was asking Peter to open his mind and see it different.

That takes some work.

Here it was as if Peter had given the correct answer, “You are the Messiah.” Yes, Peter, yes indeed, but the right answer is not enough. You also have to do the work that is involved to discover what that means. You have to be willing to go this way with Jesus in order to learn and comprehend what is involved with his being the Messiah.

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There is that old story about the priest and young woman. She comes to the priest and says, “Father as we say the creed there are a few things in the creed that I do not think I believe. Should I, at those places, just not say the words or what should I do?” Thinking that the priest would validate her just dropping her voice out at those places she was stunned at his response. He told her, “My dear child, keep saying those words until you believe them. They are larger than you are.”

You see there was still some work she had to do. And by saying the words, over and over and over again, eventually those words and the doctrine behind them would become a part of her. She was standing in a heritage much larger than herself.

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We do this thing in the church—we call it membership. We join the church. And at times I think I know what that means and at other times I’m not so sure. We also do it with officers in the church—we call it ordination and installation. We set apart particular people for particular work—ordination. We commission those people to do that work—installation.

These are holy actions, but still curious ones. These are beautiful moments of commitment, but they are also mysterious.

Peter did not get what it meant to accord Jesus with the title Messiah. He would have to work to understand and comprehend that along the way on this journey toward Jerusalem.

We are on that same journey—maybe not towards Jerusalem—but we are on the same journey. Jesus says, “if you will become my follower, then deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me.” Those are mysterious deep words.

They take some work to comprehend and even more work to live into.

I do not think they are about our dying on a cross—they are not literal. They are bigger than that. They are about our being willing to lay our lives on the line and to sacrifice in those times and places where we are called to sacrifice.

To take up your cross is to pattern our living after the life of the amazing Jesus who so incarnates the presence of God that his love will willingly give up his life for another.

The life we are called into is not just one we step into in a moment. It is one that we work at. We get it—we see it—we comprehend in bits and pieces. There are moments of absolute clarity. Praise God for those moments. Then there are also moments of absolute darkness, confusion, and despair. Somehow thank God for those moments too—because God is as present in them as any other time.

I think that the work clothes we wear in this journey are the Church. It is membership. It is being an officer. It is ordination and installation. It is baptism. It is being alive in the Spirit. It is the Church—the Church is the Body of Christ.

As the Body of Christ we are out there in the world wearing this coat and gloves of love that reach out to wilderness of this age and transform it into a place of welcome that is fit for habitation. When we so wear that love of God—when we so dress ourselves in it—it transforms the world and it even (and especially) transforms us.

That love—that is the cross. It takes work though—it isn't elementary—its deep—it takes work to see that worldly instrument of death as the means through which love is made manifest and real.

We are called to that work. We are called to not just bear that cross, but to be that cross in the world. We are called to be the place where love is seen, and heard, and real. That love of God is real work that we are called to. Everything else—hey, it is just poison ivy growing on the hill of our lives—we don't need it. What we need to grow is love.

Oh members, elders, deacons, oh people—that is what needs to grow: LOVE. It grows as we work it and allow the Holy Spirit to work it in our lives—LOVE. Dress in it. Grow it. Live it. Trust it. Be it. Bear it. Share it. Show it. LOVE.

Everything else—it is just poison ivy growing on the hill of our lives. Love is the Clorox bleach that transforms the whole landscape. Amen.