



SERMONS

Celebration of Life Sermon for Bobbie Jo Presbrotten – November 17, 2009
texts – Psalm 23 – Revelation 21:1-6 – John 3:16-17

God says, “I love you, you are My child, I am pleased with you.”

Prayer: May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen

On Sunday, October 25th, Bobbie Jo and two of her classmates were here for Confirmation. The three of them had white robes on, signifying that before God they were claimed to be pure and holy. Confirmation is an affirmation of baptism, and so the baptismal font was front and center, and this is part of Bobbie Jo and everyone gathered here that day heard.

She heard that on the day of her baptism, fourteen years earlier, God said to her three very specific things and ground and anchor her identity. She heard that first – God claims her as God's own child. That is and that will always be the relationship, that of a parent and a child, not of a ruler and a worker, not of an owner and a slave, but that of a parent and child.

Second she heard that this relationship between her and God is founded upon love, that God, her eternal Father, her eternal parent, loves her and will love her forever. That's pretty amazing, for love is really the most powerful emotion that there is. With love we create, with love we care, with love we reach beyond ourselves, with love we know we can survive whatever comes.

The third thing she heard was that God is her eternal Parent, and God loves her, and thirdly, God is pleased with her. You can always come home. There is nothing you will ever be able to do that will make it impossible for you to be welcomed home with loving arms.

That's all pretty amazing. That identity gives us the courage, the strength, the desire to live and to live fully and completely.

Bobbie Jo was right there, right on the edge. The person she would be for her whole life was just beginning to blossom forward and last Saturday, deep in the night before the day really had a chance to begin, her life ended. That blossoming stopped.

Deep in the night before the new day really had a chance to begin, Bobbie Jo's life which was just on the cusp of becoming, it all came to an end. Way to early, way to soon.

Some will say, “So where was God in all this?” The answer is simple and it all has to do with her identity and with God's relationship with her and with us as well. God was right where God needed to be, holding both Bobbie Jo and Adam close. As their lives came to an instant end with us, God took them in, enveloped within God's loving arms, and carried them home, whispering in their ears, “You are safe, I will keep you close, my love will carry you forward.”

Where was God in all this? The answer is simple. When the sheriff knocked on Duane's door and told Duane the news of his daughter's death, God was right there, feeling all the pain and all the loss. When Rhonda heard the news, God was right there, sharing in the tears. When Trudy heard the news in the first light of what should have been a wonderful day, God was right there, sharing in the scream that this was not to be, this was not the plan.

Where was God in all this? The answer is simple. When each and every one of us heard the news, in the midst of our unbelief that this could be true, in the midst of our beginning to understand that this was indeed true, this news that no one is ever prepared for, God was right there, with each of us, holding us close.

Where was God in all this? As students and classmates and friends gathered to put posters together about Bobbie Jo, as teachers and counselors helped themselves and helped all the students try to come at least to grips with this new reality, God was right there, guiding the thoughts, sharing the tears.

Where will God be in all this? The answer is simple. God will be right where God always is, right there beside us, always. As the psalmist notes in the 23rd Psalm, God is our good shepherd, leading us to the quiet waters, guiding us to the fertile fields, with God's rod and staff, directing us through the dark valleys of life. God is right there. God is right here.

In the midst of our deep sorrow, which is just beginning to really sink in, we have deep sadness at the loss of Bobbie Jo. In the very midst of the sorrow there lies the certain joy. The joy of having known her for fourteen years. The joy of calling her daughter, friend, cousin, classmate.

We have had Bobbie Jo with us for way too short of a time, but with even such a short time we are left with vibrant memories. That is one of the great gifts God gives to us, the gift of memory. And so we will remember her love of horses and of all animals. Her love of poetry and writing. Her good and lively laugh. Her very serious side as well as her very playful side. Her love of ranch salad dressing which she put on everything.

On her confirmation Sunday, along with being reminded of her identity, as one of God's children, whom God loves, and with whom God is well pleased, an identity which we really all share in, whether we know it or not, another thing she heard was to live for today. That this is the day God give to us. God creates every day new, never done before, never to be repeated again. We all have this one day to live. We can consider our past, we can plan our future, both worthwhile things to do. But today is the day we are alive, right here and right now. Today is the gift of life that God has given to us.

God creates us and gives to each of us talents and abilities. Each one of us is divinely crafted and no two of us are alike. There was only one Bobbie Jo, no one like her before and no one like her will ever come again. That's just the way God works, placing in each of our lives the people that God wants us to have.

Some of us are athletes, some of us play music, some of us are artists, some of us are builders, some are farmers, and on and on. Together we are community, a blending of talents and abilities and we are created to live today, because no matter what plans we make for tomorrow, really we do not know what will come. So make this day of creation worthwhile. Enjoy this life, this here and now.

Those are the things Bobbie Jo heard on her confirmation Sunday, just a few weeks ago. I think she took it in. The Bobbie Jo I knew had a lot on her plate, probably more than most 14 year-olds need to have and she was just beginning to make sense of it. She had a great love of life, especially of the animals that surrounded her life.

In the days and weeks and months ahead, Bobbie Jo's life and the memory of her life will settle into all of our lives and some amazing things will happen. You see a horse running free in a spring field and you'll think, "Bobbie Jo would have loved to see this." You'll sit by the side of a stream, or you'll see an old barn, and you'll take a piece of paper and a pen and you'll write a poem, maybe just a line or two, maybe two or three verses, and you will remember Bobbie Jo. You'll be at Pizza Hut and when your pizza comes, you'll wonder, "Hmm, I wonder what this would taste like with ranch dressing", and you'll think of Bobbie Jo.

A few years from now this freshman class will graduate and on the evening of graduation, when all the pictures of all the classmates are shown on the screen, there will be a moment, probably even two or three moments, when images of Bobbie Jo will come on the screen and you will remember.

These are all good things. Every tear we shed is a good tear. Every smile we have is a good smile. Every memory of Bobbie Jo will keep her alive in our hearts and our souls.

There is not single one of us who wants to be here today, for not a one of us would not want Bobbie Jo here, alive and well. But here we are and this is a day of deep sadness but also a day of even deeper and more abiding joy. That God graced us with Bobbie Jo to know and to love. That Bobbie Jo is with God and with all the saints who have gone before. That the day will indeed come when we will see her and all the saints again. That we have memories and those we will cherish forever.

God says to Bobbie Jo and God says to each of us – You are my child, I love you, I am pleased with you. With that as our identity we live this day and every day, giving thanks to God for life, for those whom God surrounds us with in this life, and we simply rely upon God's love and grace and strength, to carry us through the times in our lives when we don't know how to make it through. God will be with us forever, just as Bobbie Jo is with God forever. And that, in the midst of this loss, is the good news. Amen

Reformation/Confirmation Sunday –

Pastor Mark Gruner

It is only through the power of the Holy Spirit that I come to Believe

Prayer: May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen

Every year, on Confirmation Sunday, I ask the same question, “What is Luther's explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles Creed?” The confirmation students are usually stunned, they seem to have no idea, even though it is covered and some years before asking the question I have clued them in to what the answer is. Everybody thinks, “there's goes Pastor Mark again, asking some question that has something to do with Luther.” And then we move on.

This year, I thought, let's actually spend some time with this. Why do I ask this year after year? It's not a trick question and it's not a trick answer. In Luther's explanation lies one of the diamonds that God gave to Luther to give to the Christian Faith. This is one of the great gifts of faith we have been given.

The third article of the Apostles Creed is at the end of the Creed and it goes, “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.”

Luther's explanation goes, “I believe that by my own understand or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith...”

By the way, this is on page 1,162 of our hymnal. Way at the back of the hymnal, starting with page 1,160 is Luther's Small Catechism, and on page 1,162 is the Creed with Luther's explanations.

Alright, so why is this so important, why is this such a gem, why is this such a gift? Well, what Luther discovered, with God's help, is the total freedom of the Good News of Christ. What Luther discovered is the absolute freedom of living within the love and grace of God. That absolutely none of it is dependent upon us. That we don't have to know the right words, we don't have to have the right understanding, that there is no secret messages or handshakes or anything else that we have to know. All we have to do is simply be and God comes to us, again and again, God comes to us, forever.

This means we can question all we want to, we can doubt all we want to, we can even disbelieve all we want to, doesn't matter, God is always there and the faith the relationship cannot be

broken by anything we do.

My absolute, number one Bible passage, the one I hang everything on, comes from Paul's letter to the Romans, in the 8th chapter, where Paul asks a rhetorical question. He asks, "What can separate us from the love of Christ? Can hardship or persecution or peril or sword or all the devils or all the angels or anything else on heaven or on earth?" Then Paul answers the question with a resounding, "No! In all of these things, be it hardship or persecution or peril or sword or all the devils or all the angels or all the powers of heaven and earth, there is no power anywhere that can ever separate us from the love of God through Jesus Christ." Case closed. God's love is overpowering and will triumph over everything, and in the end will triumph over death itself.

The gem that God gave to Luther and Luther then gave to the faith is that it really is all dependent upon God and that is absolutely wonderful. This is absolutely wonderful because if any of this were dependent upon us, we would never make it.

This is the word Jesus was delivering at the Last Supper. When we come to the table we are assured of this reality. Jesus says that this bread and wine, this body and blood is the new covenant and the covenant, the contract, the relationship is not based on anything you do or anything you decide, it is based on everything that God has done and continues to do.

The old covenant was a give and take relationship. God does this, the people of God do this, kind of a wash my back and I'll wash your back thing. Never worked. The people of God never fulfilled their very small end of the contract. So God becomes one with us in Jesus to let us know that there is now a new covenant, all of it is based on the body and blood of Christ.

Paul knew it and Luther learned it and now we have it. It makes no sense, really. There is nothing in our lives that is like this. There is no relationship we can look at that is like this, where the love and grace is total and is dependent on nothing that the one party does but is dependent upon everything that the giver of the love and grace does.

It's amazing and it is unbelievable. It is unbelievable. Which is exactly what Luther said. There is no way, by my reason or my effort that I can come to know Jesus as my Lord and Savior. It is only through the power of the Holy Spirit that I come to believe.

I cannot express how freeing this is. When Luther explained this to his students, they would ask him the natural question. "If we don't have to do anything to earn God's love and grace, then does that mean we can do whatever we want to do?"

To which Luther said, "Absolutely. You can do whatever you want to do. Now," Luther said, "I have a question for you. Knowing that you are a recipient of all of God's love and grace, knowing that God chose to become one with us in Jesus Christ, who then died our death and rose to give us life, knowing just how much love that must involve, just what is it you want to do with your life? What do you choose to do? How are you going to respond to this incredible, undeserved gift of love?"

Oh, well. What is our response. You see, that is the question for our lives. Where do we see this loving God leading us, what path does God want us to choose, how are we now to see one another, to relate with one another, to see our world, to challenge our world, ourselves, our communities. Those are now the real life questions that we wrestle with.

Today, these three will become full members of Pecatonica Lutheran Parish. Know what our motto is, what our theme is, what our mission statement is? It's printed in every newsletter, I say it over and over. We should pretty well know it. Our mission statement, our motto is: We are the people of God in this place and in this time.

Pretty simple. We are the people of God in this place and in this time. We are the people of God. We are the people who know how much God loves us, who know that God will always be with us, who know that God desires nothing but the best for us, who know that everything we have and everything we are is a gift from God, who know that all of our talents and all of our abilities are gifts from God.

Knowing this we also know we also know that we are here. We live in this place and we live in

this time. This is the place and this is the time God has placed us in. This place is this church, is the school we will go to tomorrow, is the home we will return to in half an hour or so, is the store we will enter to purchase food, clothes, whatever we need, is the office building we work at, is the car we travel in. This place is wherever we are at the time.

Time. We live in this time. We don't live yesterday, we don't live tomorrow, we live today, and so we are the people of God today, in this time. So we can't say, "I'll do what God asks me to do in the future, when I retire, or when I get out of school, or when I have children", or whatever time you put out in the future. No. God places us in this time, the here and now. We are the people of God in this place at this time.

That is both assuring and challenging. How are we to be the people of God in this place at this time? That's the foundational question we always have and wrestling with that question every day brings about life. Wrestling with that question every day of our lives leads us outside ourselves and into mission and purpose. It can't do anything else.

To ask God every morning, "Lord, it's a great day, what are we going to do today?" is a great way to begin the day. It's wide open, who knows what will happen, who knows where God will lead.

See! Total freedom! With God we have total freedom, we have wide open opportunities, we have life affirming love and grace. We become agents of that love and that grace when God fills us to overflowing with God's love and grace.

At it's very best, this is what our church, your church, my church, our church is all about. When we really see ourselves as the living body of Christ, then look out, who knows what will happen, who know where God will lead.

So, welcome to your church, welcome to this incredible, unbelievable faith. You are about to affirm your baptism and in your baptism God said three specific things – that God loves you, that God claims you as God's child, and that God is pleased, is happy, is overjoyed with you." That's your identity, that is all of our identity. Know God says to all of us – live it out, engage with life, rejoice every day, and never fear for every step of the way, I will be right beside you.

Luther would say, "This is most certainly true." Amen

October 25, 2009

Pastor Mark Gruner

Text – Mark 12:38-44

Consider who?

Prayer: May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen

President Obama is considering what to do in Afghanistan. He is consulting with all the member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the general overseeing to operation in Afghanistan, and with political leaders on Capital Hill.

Congress is considering a Health Care Reform Bill. In putting this together they are consulting lots of individuals: doctor's groups, insurance groups, financial advisers, lots of different people for input.

When the ELCA met in Minneapolis last August to make decisions for the whole church, delegates from all over the church came. They had each been selected from their representative synods. If it went like our Synod, in the selecting process those who were chosen were the ones whom most people knew, the ones who had given a good resume of all the volunteer work and all the

committees they had been on. And so those who went to Minneapolis were a good, knowledgeable well-reasoning group of folk.

I suppose I could go on and on with numerous examples of how we make decisions. We gather the people whom we feel are important, the people who seem to have a vested interest in the given topic, people who have perhaps written a book on the subject, who seem to be experts.

This is how we operate. Ok, now, let's get to the story of Jesus in the gospel of Mark. Jesus and the disciples are at the Temple, in Jerusalem. This is big time stuff. The disciples are from Galilee, they attend synagogues, they maybe go to the Temple in Jerusalem once or twice a year. This is a big deal. They had just arrived in Jerusalem and it was a triumphant entry. Crowds all about welcoming Jesus and so also welcoming the disciples. They had spent time arguing about who was the best disciple, who would sit on the left and on the right of Jesus.

Now they were in the Temple. Wow. Pretty awesome. And they were with Jesus, who was being hailed as a great teacher. Also, pretty awesome. They sat and watched who was going to the treasury in the Temple. Just the clothes the people were wearing. Wow. No one in Galilee dresses like these folk. These people really know their stuff. They see the rich putting large sums into the Temple treasury and they are impressed. Wow, if just one of them would give that much to the local synagogue, we'd be able to finally fix the roof and put in a new furnace and replace all the leaky windows. Wow, that would be great.

They never even saw the widow putting in her two small copper coins. Copper. Not even silver. No they never even looked at her. They were busy watching the rich, the famous, the influential. The disciples wanted to like them.

Oh my, Jesus, Jesus, what are you doing now? Can't you just leave your poor disciples alone? No, Jesus has to shake up their world once again. He just can't help himself. He sees them admiring the rich, he sees them totally ignoring the poor woman, perhaps not even seeing her, and then he says, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she, out of her poverty, has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

Good grief, there he goes again. Pulling the disciples into a new understanding, into what the kingdom of heaven is really all about. Oh my, oh my, the lesson he teaches is the lesson we never ever learn, or we learn and do and then forget right away and go back to our old ways.

The widow. In those days to be a widow would place you pretty much next to a slave, and remember Jesus told the disciples just before this that they had to be slaves of all and rulers of none. Widows had pretty much nothing, no power, no security. At least that would be true of most of them. A few would be the lucky ones, would have property and power. But for most, when the husband died, they would lose almost everything.

So this woman comes to the Temple. Does she see all the wealth, all the power, all the rich people? Probably, but maybe not. She places her two copper coins in the Treasury. What good will this small amount really do? Not much, but then that's not why she put it in, is it. Did she think she would be noticed if she placed her coins in? No, no one would even see her. Would there be a special thank you for the gift she gave? No, it would never be noticed by those in power. So why did she give?

Could it be that her ultimate trust was in God? That she knew that all she had was from God and so she was just returning what God had given her? Could be, we don't know. All we know is that she gave much from the little she had.

All we also know is that Jesus recognizes her. The disciples are overwhelmed with the wealth, Jesus recognizes her and points her out. Wherever Jesus goes, stuff happens, change occurs, sometimes welcome change, sometimes not so welcome, but change occurs. The reason this story is in the gospel of Mark is because it made a difference to the disciples. Jesus and the disciples must have had hundreds of conversations about all sorts of things from how the weather was to what kind of day it

was for fishing to what they might have for dinner that day. Most of those are not recorded in the Bible. The stories, the conversations that are recorded are those that made a difference in their lives, those that produced change, those that revealed to the disciples something new about life and how life was to be lived.

And this story brought about something new. Admire the rich all you want, they give out of their abundance, and all that is fine. But it's the widow, she is the one to pay attention to, for she is giving not from her abundance but from the little that she has.

If we were to learn the lesson, this is what we would do.

President Obama would meet with his general and Chief of staff about Afghanistan. He would also meet with the sergeants and privates in the field. He would also meet with the villagers of the towns of Afghanistan and Pakistan. He would drink three cups of tea, which is a title of a book about a fellow who got lost when he tried to climb a mountain in the area of Pakistan, a village saved him, he vowed to build them a school and in the process discovered that try as hard as he could, he was not the one who built the school, they built the school, he simply helped.

In speaking and seeking counsel from the poor, from the villagers, from the troops on the ground, probably a good policy would come.

The congress is considering health care reform. They are speaking and listening to lots of people – insurance people, doctors groups, financial experts. If they would also spend time in emergency rooms listening to the patients, spend time in the nursing homes listening to the residents and the families, spend time with the unemployed who have no insurance, then the health care reform that they would come up with would be true reform to solve true issues.

When the ELCA gets together, they bring in the best and brightest to make the decisions for the church, those most involved, those who have served well. If the ELCA would ask those who have never served, those who seem to be too young to have an opinion, those who are too old to take seriously any longer, those who have never volunteered, those who simply come, week after week, to hear a bit of good news for their lives, then the ELCA would come up with decisions that would be based on love and grace and compassion, decisions that would speak of and to and through the widow who gave her two copper coins, and then the church would more closely be the living body of Christ.

We are who we are. The disciples were who they were. Christ sits with us always – pointing things out to us, jabbing us now and then to show us the way to go, challenging us to really, really, look toward the light, to focus not so much on ourselves as to focus on where God might lead, to take us always out of our comfort zone and take us into God's live giving zone, to reveal to us that all, rich and poor, great and small, all are blessed by God, all are created by God, all are saved by God, and all are related.

We are left asking God to simply take our lives that we may be consecrated Lord to thee, take our moments and our days and let them flow in ceaseless praise. Take our will and make it Yours, take my heart for it is Yours, take my love that I may pour it out, ever, only, all for You. Amen

October 18, 2009

Pastor Mark Gruner

Isaiah 53:4-12 – Mark 10:35-45 – Psalm 91:9-16

He has borne our infirmities

Prayer: *May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen*

So, the gospel reading is in the 10th chapter of Mark, which means lots of things have already

happened. Lots of healings, lots of teachings, lots of time to be with and around Jesus. They are closing in on the end. Now they ask him a question. This should be a good one, one about mission, one about purpose, one about meaning, because, after all, they have been with Jesus for a long time. They have heard him speak of the kingdom of heaven breaking into their lives in the here and now. They have learned the prayer he gave them, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Ok, they know this now. They know that they are to be disciples of purpose, of mission, of life and living. Disciples offering the grace, the love, the compassion of God to all.

So, they are now going to ask Jesus a question. This should be a good one. It starts off really good, with a lot of promise. They ask, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." Wow. They are going to ask something really big, something really grand, something with tremendous purpose and direction and meaning.

Jesus asks, perhaps with hope in his voice, "What is it you want me to do for you?" Here it is now, the culmination of all this time together, the big question is coming. They ask, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

What? What kind of a question is that? They could and should have asked anything, and this is what they ask? Are they out of their mind? Are they blind? Haven't they paid any attention at all to anything Jesus has done? I mean, couldn't they have asked something like:

"Teacher, could you train, teach, show us how we can help open the hearts and minds of those we meet that they might see the glory and grace and compassion of God, so their lives might be renewed." Wow, what a great question that would have been.

Or how about - "Teacher, could you be with us always, revealing to us how we might live lives worthy of the grace of God, that we might be vessels pouring out the love and compassion of God." Wow, what a great question that would have been, full of meaning and purpose.

But no, they don't ask questions like that. Instead they ask a question that has to do with power, and rank, and status. They want to sit on the right and left side of Jesus. It's amazing Jesus didn't turn on them and tell them that they really needed to go back to their father Zebedee, go back to fishing, it was a mistake asking them to follow him. They are good fishermen, they should stay there.

Of course, what is worse, is that when the other ten disciples hear what James and John wanted, they all became angry, as if there was some kind of competition to see who would sit on the right and on the left of Jesus.

So, Jesus, full not of disgust, but actually full of compassion, tries one more time to show these disciples whom he has been with for so long, with whom he has tried to explain again and again what the kingdom of heaven is all about, this Jesus tries one more time to open their eyes, to have them see the light. He says, "among all the nations of people they recognize their rulers as those who lord it over them and their rulers so often become tyrants. It simply cannot be that way among us for that is not the kingdom of heaven. Whoever wants to be great must first be servant of all, whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. The Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many."

You now, Jesus often went off to pray by himself. He must have done so out of sheer exhaustion. You can imagine his prayers. "Father, what am I going to do with these people. Again and again I show them the way, and again and again, like sheep, they wander off."

Yet Jesus stuck with these disciples. The message Jesus delivers is the same message that is resonated throughout the Bible. That God is the God of love and compassion and grace, that to be with God, is to abide in the love and compassion and grace of God and then to be a vessel, then to be a source of that love, that compassion, that grace for your own lives and for the lives of all around you.

Just think of the two central stories of the Bible. For the Hebrew people of the Old Testament, the central story is the story of the Exodus. It is their foundational story. Take that story away and there is no people of Israel. Everything that they are hinges on being led out of bondage and into

freedom. When God gives Moses the ten commandments, really all they need to hear is the prologue and the the first commandment. In the prologue God says, “I am the Lord your God, I am the one who led you out of slavery into freedom.” The first commandment follows, “Therefore, have no other gods than me.”

That's it. They really need no other commandment than that one. God led the people from slavery into freedom so what exactly is it that God desires of these people? That they live free. That they live full. That they live with promise and with hope and with certain joy. That they never again, ever, in any way, become slaves to anyone or anything. That they place all their trust, all their hope, all their lives, in the One who freed them, in the One who loves them, in the One who creates them.

The central story, the central figure of the New Testament, for Christians, for those of us who try to follow the way of Jesus, is Jesus. Without Jesus, there is no faith, there is no Christianity. We don't believe in a book, we don't believe in a set of doctrines, we believe in this very specific Jesus, whom we see as the Christ. And the only thing he says over and over again is that in me you have life. As the prophet Isaiah said, so Jesus says, “I have borne your infirmities, I have carried your diseases, I am the one who has taken on your wounds and your afflictions. So now live, and live according to the law of God, live as servants of all not as rulers of any, live using all of your talents and abilities to the glory of God and to the service of all.”

What God always desires for us is our ultimate transformation in the here and now. How many times does the Bible talk of God wanting the people of God to be transformed from:

bondage to freedom

from blindness to seeing

from exile and estrangement to re-connection – What's the parable of the prodigal son other than a story of re-connection?

From sickness to wholeness – just how many healings does Jesus do?

From anxiety to freedom from anxiety – How many times does Jesus, or an angel from God say - “Don't be afraid”?

From self-preoccupation to the ability to be present – The disciples want to know where they will sit, how close they will be to Jesus, and he will have none of it, instead he wants them to know that they are to be servant of all.

From a world of injustice to a world of justice – In the beatitudes of Jesus in Luke, Jesus says, blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom of God, blessed are those who hunger for they will be filled, blessed are those who mourn for they will laugh, and then he goes on to say, woe to the rich, woe to those who are full, woe to those full of laughter. Justice cannot be justice until the kingdom of heaven breaks in and shatters the divisions, shatters the inequalities.

From a world of violence and war to a world of non-violence and peace.

One definition of being saved is to be transformed. Not to conform to the norms of our world, but be transformed into being the people of God.

We are the disciples. Doesn't matter how long we have gone to church. Doesn't matter how many times we have read the Bible. Doesn't matter how many hours we have spent in prayer. We still want to know if we will get to sit on the right or left side of Jesus. We still want to know what God has done for us lately. When tough times happen to us, we are like Job and we want some explanation from God. How come us? How come we were not protected from harm?

Transformation is an ongoing process, a daily ritual of renewal and rebirth. We are always in the process of becoming the people of God, of becoming the people God desires us to be. Of becoming the people who will not be held in bondage but will be free. We continually step out of one muck of life and step right into another. The trick is to keep on walking, keep on moving forward, keep on looking toward the light of Christ, never be overwhelmed by the darkness for the darkness can never win, the light of God will overcome it. And then.

And then. And then those moments when we breathe in the fresh clean air of the love of God.

Those moments we step on the solid ground of the grace of God. Those moments when we simply know that we are agents of the compassion of God. In those fleeting moments we see the glory and wonder of God and we see the glory and wonder of our lives and in those moments, all we say is Amen – Lord let this be so always with us.

October 11, 2009

Pastor Mark Gruner

Mark 10:17-31

James Barthalomew III

Prayer: May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen

James Barthalomew III. What a great name. He was the grandson of James Barthalomew, who was one of the lumber barons of Northern Wisconsin. In the 1800's, thousands of acres of forest were cleared for the building of America, and James Barthalomew became a wealthy man. James Barthalomew II followed in his father's footsteps and owned and operated one of the large paper mills in the Eau Claire area. Times were good. James the III did well in his life. Nothing was too good for this third generation Barthalomew. He attended the University of Wisconsin for his undergraduate work and then Harvard University for his study of law, for the family and the company could use a good lawyer. While in college he fell in love and married Celeste Whitiker, of the Minneapolis Whitikers and over the years there was always that genteel rivalry of Wisconsin/Minnesota, Packers/Vikings in the Barthalomew household.

Life was good for the Barthalomew family. They had three children, two boys, the first, of course, named James Barthalomew, the IV, the second son, named John, and one girl, Diane, named after her mother's grandmother. Income was secure from the family wealth, the career path of James was clear and straight, the children grew well. Summers were spent on long vacations – three to Europe, a couple to Hawaii and then Alaska, and one to Africa.

The family gave generously to many charitable organizations and Celeste served on the Board of many fine agencies and foundations. When they both reached 40 years of age they even started their own Barthalomew Foundation.

One evening, when James was 46 years of age, he woke up in the middle of the night. He couldn't breathe, at least he couldn't breathe deeply, and his heart - his heart felt like it wanted to burst from the confines of his chest, and it was beating so incredibly fast. He woke Celeste and as loud as he could say, which came out as just a whisper, he said, "I can't breathe, I can't breathe."

She reached for the phone, dialed 911. Sweat was pouring from James' forehead and his whole body was drenched in sweat. When the emergency crew showed up, they quickly administered the drugs necessary to calm the heart and then they rushed to the hospital, with Celeste and Diane following closely behind. James IV, already out of college, lived in a different city beginning his career, and John was a sophomore in college. She had called them both and they were waiting to hear from her again before they made any move.

It was quickly determined that James had a massive heart attack and it was good help came as soon as it did. Everything had gone right. There would be tests the next few days to determine if surgery would be necessary, but for now, all was clear.

James, of course, would need to stay in the hospital for a few days. That first night, Celeste

stayed as well, so did Diane. The sons came the next day. The tests indicated that a valve in his heart needed to be replaced and so surgery was scheduled.

The night before surgery, James was alone in the hospital room, the family having gone home for rest. The next day would be a long one. James had a fitful night's sleep, strange bed and upcoming surgery, and nursing staff around and about, make it difficult to get a good night's rest.

Sometime in the middle of the night, around 2 or 3am, James felt the presence of someone in the room. Must be a nurse, checking on his vitals. But there was no sound of anyone, he just knew someone had to be there. Since he lay facing the window he couldn't tell who was there, so he rolled over, to see who it was. It wasn't the nurse, it wasn't any member of his family, but there, sitting in a chair beside his bed, sat Jesus. At least it looked like the Jesus, James would have thought of. It could have been an angel. Whatever, James became a bit anxious.

And so Jesus, if it was Jesus and not simply an angel, said, "Don't be afraid". Don't be afraid, something both angels and Jesus tend to say a lot. "Don't be afraid, I'm just here to let you know you won't be going this path alone. I'll be with you, every step of the way."

James said, "Well, that's good to know. I don't suppose you would tell me how all this will turn out?"

Jesus said, "I assume the surgery will go well, they almost always do."

James asked, "And after the surgery, how will that go?"

Jesus said, "Well that depends."

There was a moment of silence. James was waiting for more. Jesus was busy looking at the machine that was recording James's heartbeat.

James finally asked, "That depends on what?"

Jesus said, "Well, it depends on you, I suppose. How do you want everything to go?"

James said, "Well, I would like a full recovery. I want to see my daughter graduate from high school. She's a senior this year, you know."

Jesus said, "Yes, I'm aware of that, you might be surprised at all the things I am aware of."

James said, "Yes, I suppose so."

Jesus said, "What else is there you want to know about how everything will go?"

James said, "Well, if that works out, great. I suppose I should work on my diet, should exercise more."

Jesus said, "Those would be good things. You know you should really treat your body as a temple, as a place in where the Spirit may dwell, for it is God who created you."

James said, "Yea, I've heard that, and I think I've been doing pretty well."

Jesus said, "Yes you have. You and Celeste have done very well. You've raised a very good family, and you both do very good things in the community. You should feel good."

James said, "Well we do. So, does all this mean that we're in?"

Jesus, looking a bit confused, asked, "In? In what?"

James said, "Well, you know, we've been doing well, I think. We've tried to live good lives and all, so are we in? Have we earned the right to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus responded, "Oh. My. That's quite a question."

James said, "Well, I normally wouldn't bring such a thing up. But you know, you being YOU, and seeing as how I'm about to have this big surgery, I just thought I would ask, you know, seeing as how you are YOU."

Jesus thought a bit and said, "Well, let me ask you, do you think you have earned the right to inherit eternal life?"

James said, "Well I don't mean to brag, but I think we've done pretty good. We even started our own foundation a few years ago. We really do try to do that 'love your neighbor as you love yourself thing.'"

Jesus said, "You're doing well, there is just one more thing you might consider."

James said, "What's that?"

Jesus said, "Sell everything you have, give it all to the poor, and then you will have treasure in heaven and then you will be following me."

Now it was James' turn to be quiet for awhile. Jesus busied himself looking in all the various drawers and cabinets in the room and wondering what would happen if he pushed this button or flipped that switch. He refrained from doing so, though.

Finally James said, "Jesus, I don't know. If it was just me, that might be ok. But I'm James Bartholomew the III, I've got a bit of a family legacy to carry on. And then there's the kids, they deserve part of the family legacy it seems to me. There's Celeste, she's of the Whitaker's of Minneapolis you know. Well, she is very used to a certain lifestyle."

Jesus said, "Your kids seem ok, you raised them well. And Celeste, I really like her, she's got her head on straight. I wouldn't worry too much about them. So, what do you say? Sell all you have, give it to the poor and then you will be following me and you will have treasure in heaven."

James said, "Could I sleep on it?"

Jesus said, "Sure."

Well, the next day was the surgery. James didn't tell anyone of the visit he had the night before. Surgery went well, a pig valve replaced his faulty valve. Recovery went well although James would never eat pork again, felt pigs had already sacrificed a lot for him.

On the sixth month anniversary of the day of his surgery, James sat down with Celeste and told her of the visit he had the night before surgery.

She didn't seem terribly surprised, seemed to know all about it. James seemed surprised at her reaction, and she said, "I know all about it. I was visited the same night and was told you were sleeping on your decision. I've been waiting to see when you would wake up."

"Oh," James said. "Well, I think we ought to do it – go all the way, sell it all, give it all to the foundation and then spend our lives figuring out where it should all go. I could use my skills to really help people, and you could do what you are already doing. We would be in this together."

Celeste said, "Sounds good to me."

James said, "That means probably selling this house, buying something smaller, spending a lot less, a whole different lifestyle."

Celeste said, "I've had a realtor standing by since the day of your surgery."

James said, "What about the kids? Their future?"

Celeste said, "Jim, dear. It's all taken care of. They know all about this. James the IV is not real certain of this but he's coming around."

Well, that was ten years ago. James and Celeste are now in the late 50's. They live in a far smaller home. They still travel but now it's not to sight see but to see where they can be of help. They've helped dig wells in Africa, James has defended villagers in Latin America and has gained them rights they never had before, the Foundation is doing well, seems every time they are short of funds, somewhere more comes in to give away.

On the tenth anniversary of the night Jesus visited James, Jesus came again. James was sitting in his study, pondering if \$10,000 was enough to help start a small co-op cheese maker in Southern Wisconsin, when he felt a presence in the room. He looked up from his computer screen and there was Jesus, sitting in the rocker, admiring pictures of the Bartholomew family, which included some new grandchildren.

James, this time was not afraid. He said, "Hello, Jesus."

Jesus said, "Hello James. How's it going, this giving everything away and having treasure in heaven thing?"

James said, "It's going amazingly well. I thought my life was good before, but now it is just amazing. I love it, I really do. Every single time we find a way to help others we just feel so good. It's unbelievable."

Jesus said, "That would be that 'treasure in heaven' thing."

James said, "I have a question."

Jesus said, "What's that?"

James said, "When I asked, 'what I needed to do to inherit eternal life', that was really the wrong question, wasn't it?"

Jesus said, "Why do you say that?"

James said, "Well, I think I figured it out. I inherited a lot from my family, for which I'm very thankful for. But I didn't earn any of that inheritance, I was just born in the family, so I already had the inheritance. So I can't really earn the inheritance into eternal life, can I?"

Jesus said, "Sounds like you already know the answer to that one."

James said, "Here is what both Celeste and I have discovered these past ten years. That we are here for just a short time. That we have gifts, talents, abilities that are simply God-given. That following in your footsteps is really quite grand. Your path has led us to places and people we never would have known before. We feel we are richer now than we ever were before. We wake each day, thankful for another day and ready to see what will come.

Jesus said, "There you go – treasure in heaven – you are just getting a small foretaste of that grand feast that is to come. Keep on traveling the path you're on. I probably shouldn't tell you this, but the next ten years are going to be a bit rocky for you."

James said, "I know, at least, I assume that is true."

Jesus asked, "Does that make you afraid?"

James said, "At one time it would have, but not anymore, because now I know for absolute certain that wherever I go and whatever happens, you'll be right there, and that's more than good enough for me."

Jesus said, "Amen brother, amen."

October 4, 2009

Pastor Mark Gruner

Mark 10:2-16 – Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Wholeness

Prayer: May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen

Someday it would be neat to see a movie about Jesus, based solely upon the gospel of Mark, because the gospel of Mark, generally thought of as the first of the gospels written, offers a Jesus who has a real wild side. The Jesus of Mark seems of have power and energy pouring out of him and in this part of the gospel there is this, "take no prisoners" attitude Jesus has.

Just a couple weeks ago Jesus was challenging the disciples, who were arguing about who was the greatest disciple, that if anyone wanted to be first, they had to be last and servant of all.

Last week the disciples are complaining that someone else is healing in the name of Jesus and they don't think that is quite right and you can hear Jesus yelling at them. "Whoever is for us will not be against us. If your hand offends you, cut it off. If your foot offends you, cut it off." I mean, that's pretty wicked, pretty point on, pretty "take no prisoners" attitude.

That attitude keeps on rolling with the passage today. The Pharisees are asking a question about divorce, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" Jesus gives them a little more rope by which to hang themselves and asks, "What does the law of Moses say?" They accurately tell him the ins and

outs of divorce, and then Jesus slams the door in their face. “It's because of your hardness of hearts that God had Moses make all these arrangements. This is not the way God intends life to be.”

The Pharisees were in trouble when they asked the question, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce...” Wrong question. Comes from the position that divorce is inevitable, that there will always be brokenness. That we have to accept the world as it is.

Jesus will have none of it. If their question would have been, “Jesus, we see all around us, people who are suffering in relationships that are simply not working, relationships where the couple are no longer talking, no longer smiling, no longer dreaming, but instead are fussing and fuming and finding fault with one another. Jesus, what can be done?”

Ah, now there's a question that Jesus would have understood well. There is a question about relationships, a question about life and living, a question seeking wholeness and completeness, a question desiring God to lead the way to a better life. There is a question Jesus would of enjoyed answering.

Because it is all about union with Jesus and with God. It is all about harmony, all about working and living together, all about expanding the horizons of one's life, about joining together for the betterment of the other.

I've done a couple of weddings over the years, dozens actually. There are always pre-marital sessions before the wedding where we all have a chance to sit down, reflect on what married life is to be all about, how the two getting married are suited to each other, what their strengths are and the areas they will need and will want to grow in.

In all of these sessions, never has any couple said, “Well, pastor Mark, we're looking forward to this wedding and we figure we will be married for five or six years, have a child or two, and then get divorced, due, of course, to irreconcilable differences.”

No, never once has any couple said those words, or any words remotely like those words at any pre-marital session. They all look forward to wonderful lives together, to growing old together, to many anniversaries, to having children and grandchildren. Most have no idea how any of that will work out, but they all have those same dreams.

And that is exactly the way God wants it to be. Last July, our daughter, Megan married Will. I was there and helped out a little bit. By the way, after the wedding sermon, people applauded, to which people from our Parish said, “Pastor, I sure hope you don't expect that back home.”

Anyway, the reading Megan and Will chose was one I had never used before, but it was really good. It was from Ecclesiastes, the 4th chapter, and it reads like this, “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.”

Great passage, spelling out exactly what God desires in our relationships, especially our most intimate and hopefully lifelong relationships. If one falls, the other will be there to pick the one fallen up. Together, they will keep one another warm. A threefold cord can not easily be broken. That threefold cord I took as God being partner with the two, the three making a bond that can't be broken, when all works.

This is where Jesus, this is where God, desires us to be. In relationships that wholesome, that are encouraging, that are uplifting, that are fulfilling, that are life-giving.

So the question is not, “how do we make divorce easier, how do we make it more fair and equitable?” For that assumes that divorce is inevitable. The question needs to be, “How can we go about strengthening the bonds that people have, how do we go about holding people close so that when harm comes they don't completely fall apart.

Time and again, Jesus is always on the side of union, always on the side of tearing down the walls that are separating us, opening the doors we have slammed shut, cracking open the windows we

have painted shut over the years.

Two weeks ago, the disciples arguing about who is the best disciple – No – Jesus says. First and foremost, you must be servant of all.

Last week, the disciples complaining that someone not in the in-group is healing in the name of Jesus and so should be stopped. - No – Jesus says. Whoever is not against us is for us and no one speaking in my name can forever be against us.

This week – the pharisees wanting a clarification on the laws of divorce. - No – Jesus says – division may be necessary but it is never the goal of life.

Again, this week – children are brought to Jesus, the disciples, who by this time should know better, try to keep the children away, but Jesus said, - No – the children have to come, everyone has to come, for the kingdom of God is for everyone at all times in all places.

Next week, guess what, this theme will come up again when a rich man values his possessions too much and all Jesus wants him to do is but a simple thing, give all that he has to the poor, and he cannot do it.

The central theme is repeated over and over. Where God is, there cannot be division. Father, Son, Holy Spirit, we try to make sense of this revelation of God as Trinity. How does it work? Who is first, who is second, who is third? What's the Father's job, what's the Son's job, what's the Spirit's job? We try to make sense of it because it is far easier for us to see division and live with division than it is for us to see union and live with wholeness and completeness.

You know how to make a loaf of bread? You take the basic ingredients – flour, yeast, warm water, salt, sugar, blend them together and knead them until the mixture becomes elastic and then you let it rise and double in size, knead it all again, let it rise again and bake it in a hot oven and what comes out is warm and good and delicious and wholesome.

Eat flour by itself? Never.

Eat a packet of yeast by itself? Never.

Drink warm water? Why?

Eat salt by itself? Never.

Eat sugar by itself? You could but it has no value.

Separate, they are nothing, together they are bread.

Jesus so often, in the gospel of John, said, “I am the bread of life.” We come to communion to take in this bread of life, not to take in a bit of Jesus here and a part of Jesus over there, but to take in the whole Jesus, the complete Jesus, to join in the Trinity of the Father and Son and Spirit.

Will there always be divorce? Of course there will. Will those who are divorced be welcome in the church? Of course they will. Is divorce often far better than staying in an unfulfilling and even dangerous union? Of course it is. But does divorce ever end the union? No, it never does, not totally. Because there was that day, that wonderful day, when two people stood and promised each other their undying and forever love and fidelity. That day can never be erased from their lives. Those glorious days of joy and happiness can never be wiped away, nor should they be.

So divorce is never total, it is never complete. It cannot be, for we are people of relationships and we are people created with memory of love and memory of hurt.

What our God desires from us, what our God desires of us, are unions that are whole, that are healthy, that are fulfilling, that are a shining light to all, that are filled with love and grace and that endure.

Yes, there will always be divorce, yes God will always and forever heal those who have been hurt by divorce, but that is never the goal, that is never the desire, that is never the will of God.

In all of our lives, in every day, in every way, in our joys and in our sorrows, in our wholeness and in our brokenness, God is always present, welcoming us as God welcomes the child, embracing us with eternal love and grace, wiping away every tear we have, kissing us on the forehead, and willing us to a better tomorrow, willing us to a life that is full and whole and complete. That is what Jesus is

trying so hard to tell the pharisees. Amen

September 27, 2009

God of Grace Hospital

Drama based on Mark 9:38-50

Characters -

doctor

nurse

patient with foot wrapped in white cloth

patient with hand wrapped in white cloth

patient with eye patch, or has a headband that covers one eye

setting -

need a table, chairs, sign that says “God of Grace Hospital”, possible wheelchair

At the “God of Grace Hospital” the doctor and nurse welcome in three patients, one seems to be missing a foot, one seems to be missing a hand, and one seems to be missing an eye.

Doctor – Well, nurse, I wonder what patients we will be seeing today.

Nurse – It has been pretty quiet recently, and that usually means anything is possible. Oh look, here comes our first patient. (patient with missing hand walks down the aisle, to the hospital table)

Doctor – Welcome to the God of Grace Hospital. Looks like you have had a bit of an accident there.

Nurse – Yes indeed, it looks like you may of done something to your hand.

Hand Patient – Sure did do something to my hand. I cut it right off, I did. That's what I done did do. I cut my hand right off.

Nurse – (in shock) You cut your hand off?

Doctor – Good heavens, why in God's name would you cut your hand off?

Hand Patient – Because Jesus told me to.

Nurse – Jesus told you to? When did Jesus tell you to cut off your hand?

Hand Patient – Well, he said, and I quote, “If you hand causes you to stumble, 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.” There you go. My hand caused me to stumble so I cut it off.

Nurse – Well, have a seat here and we will see what we can do for you. Doctor?

Doctor – Yes, indeed, sit yourself right down here, and I'll see what I can do.

Nurse – Oh look, here comes another patient. (Patient with no foot comes down the aisle, either limping, or riding in a wheelchair)

Nurse – Good heavens, what has happened to you? Looks like something has happened to your foot.

Foot Patient – You bet something happened to my foot. What happened to my foot is I cut it off.

Doctor – (in shock) What? Why in heavens name did you cut it off? Surely this was an accident.

Foot Patient – Oh no, I did it deliberately, cut it right off, and it kind of hurts now.

Nurse – I bet it does. Why, in the name of God, would you cut off your foot?

Foot Patient – That's exactly why, in the name of God I cut off my foot, exactly as Jesus told me to.

Doctor – What? When did Jesus tell you to cut off your foot?

Foot Patient – Well Jesus said, and I quote him exactly, “If your food causes you to stumble, cut it off, it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell.” So there you go, I had no choice but to cut off my foot.

Nurse – Well, come on over here and we will see what we can do for you. Just get over here with this person who cut off his hand.

Doctor – I can't believe this. Oh look, here comes another patient. (Eye patient comes forward)

Nurse – Oh dear, welcome to God of Grace Hospital. Did something poke you in the eye?

Eye Patient – No, nothing poked me in the eye, I just plucked my eye out and now it kind of hurts.

Doctor – (not shocked anymore) You plucked your eye out. Let me guess, Jesus told you to.

Eye Patient – That's right. Boy your good at this diagnosis stuff. Jesus said, “if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out, it is better for you to enter the kingdom of of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thron into hell, where their wom never dies, and the fire is never quenched.”

Nurse – Right, well join the crowd – this person cut off his foot, this person cut off her hand, and you plucked out your eye. Doctor?

Doctor – I just don't know what to make of this. I think we need more information so we can figure out the right treatment. (turns to the Hand Patient). Tell me please, just what did your hand do that caused you to think you needed to cut it off?

Hand Patient – Well, it was like this. I was playing euchre with my friends. And my partner and I were losing. So it was my turn to shuffle the cards and deal, and I kind of accidentally but on purpose distracted the other players and my hand put the jack of spades and the jack of clubs in my hand, and then of course we won the game.

Nurse – You cheated.

Hand Patient – No, I didn't cheat. My hand cheated. So I had to cut it off.

Doctor – Your hand all by itself, pulled those two cards out of the deck. Are you sure your arm didn't help your hand?

Hand Patient – You're right. My arm must have been involved too. Does that mean I have to cut it off too?

Doctor – NO! Absolutely not! Think about this a moment. Just how could your hand do anything that your brain did not tell it to do?

Hand Patient – Oh no, now I have to cut my brain out too.

Nurse – Just don't do anything, just sit there and think about this a bit.

Doctor – (turning to the Foot Patient) Now, you without the foot. Tell us, just what did your foot do?

Foot Patient – Well it was like this. It was Saturday morning and my mom told me to clean my room. I didn't want to. I had things to do. So I tried to sneak out of the house but she caught me. I told her I cleaned my room already. For some reason she didn't believe me and we both went to my room and it was pretty obvious I hadn't cleaned it. She told me no friends and no fun until the room was clean, and she left. I was so angry, I slammed the door shut, and then I kicked it with my foot, and I kicked a hole right through the door. So you see, I had no choice but to cut off my foot.

Nurse – So, let me get this straight. You were angry with your mom, so all by itself, your foot kicked the door.

Foot Patient – Oh, I see where you are going. My foot could not do this all by itself. It would have needed help from my leg, so I need to cut off my leg too.

Doctor – Good heavens, no. Just sit there for awhile and think about things. This is beginning to become clear as to what the two of you did, but we need to deal with our third patient now.

Nurse – So tell us please, what did your eye do?

Eye Patient – Well, I was at the mall, having lunch with my friends, when this really cute guy walked by. I started dreaming what it would be like to be with him and how come no cute guys like him go to our school, and then I started thinking other thoughts and then I realized all this was my eye's fault, so I immediately plucked it out.

Doctor – Of course you did. Perfectly logical conclusion, because it was your eye who thought the guy was cute.

Eye Patient – Well no, my eye just saw him, I thought he was cute. Oh no, that must mean I have to cut off my whole head.

Nurse – NO! Just sit there. Doctor, are you thinking what I'm thinking.

Doctor – I'm sure I am. When Jesus said, “cut off your hand,” and “cut off your foot”, and “pluck out your eye”, he was exaggerating. He was using hyperbole. Do any of you know what that is?

All Patients – No.

Nurse – Let me give you an example. How many of you have cell phones?

All Patients – We all do.

Nurse – Good. Have you ever left your cell phone in your pants pocket and then your mom washed your pants?

All Patients – Oh yea, that's happened a couple times.

Nurse – Good. So has your mom then ever said to you something like this, “If I've told you once, I've told you a million times, make sure you take your cell phone out of your pants before you throw them in the laundry.

All Patients – Wow, you must know our mothers.

Nurse – Well, did she actually tell you a million times?

Hand patient – No.

Foot patient – No, not actually a million.

Eye patient – Well, let me think, a million divided by 365 days, divided by five years is about 500 times a day. My mom may be pretty close.

Doctor – Don't you see, she was exaggerating to bring home the point. And the point is?

Hand patient – Cell phones don't grow on trees. Hey, is that another hyperbole?

Doctor – Kind of. I think you're getting the point, so here is my diagnosis. (to the hand patient) – It was not your hand that caused you to stumble, it was your desire to win at all costs that you cheated in order to win. Playing cards with your friends should just be a fun thing to do. It's great to be competitive but that desire to win overpowered all other thoughts and that's really what caused you to stumble.

Hand patient – Your right. So what do I do now?

Nurse – We'll get to that soon, because the cure will be the same for all of you.

Doctor – (to the foot patient) And you, it wasn't your foot that caused you to stumble, but it was your anger. In your heart of hearts you know what your mom asked you to do was not that hard and really not that unreasonable and actually cleaning your room would be a good thing for you to do. But you didn't like being told, you tried to get away, you were caught, and you got mad. It was really your anger that came from your disobedience that came from your desire to not be told by anyone what you should do. All that is what caused you to stumble, not your foot.

Foot Patient – Wow, you're right. I feel like such a fool. Why didn't I just clean my room?

Doctor – (to the eye patient) And you, without the eye. Your eye didn't cause any of your stumbling. What caused you to stumble was your desire to be with this cute guy. In itself, that was alright too, after all God creates us with bodies and God really wants us to be attracted to one another. It's just that your attraction took a wrong turn and you began to think thoughts that were really unhealthy for you.

Eye patient – Wow, it's like you read my mind.

Doctor – Well believe it or not, all of us have the same issues all three of you have.

Nurse – However, we still have both our feet, both our hands, and both our eyes.

Doctor – Would you like your foot, your hand, your eye back?

All patients – You bet!

Doctor – Good. Here is the cure. Nurse, you want to tell them?

Nurse – Be happy to. The three of you are in “God of Grace” hospital. The cure is really pretty simple. What each of you need to do is pray to God.

Doctor – The prescription I am giving you is pray, at least three times a day, every day, for thirty days. When this prescription runs out, come back here for a refill, because the prescription is never ending, it will last your whole life long.

Hand patient – Pray? That's what we need to do? But how do we do that?

Nurse – You do it just by doing it. Trust us. At first you may stumble around with your prayer, but after awhile you will not only get used to it, but you'll actually look forward to it.

Doctor – We want each of you to try it now, to see if you get the idea. You without the eye, why don't you start.

Eye patient – Ok. (folds hands, bows head) Dear God. Hi. Uh, I'm not sure what to say, but I'm really sorry. I guess a lot of times I look at people, like cute guys, and I judge them just on how they look. That usually doesn't work out well. God, if you could help me see beyond another person's outside looks and begin to see what is inside them, what they like and what they don't like, you know, really see them for who they are. That would be great. I'm really sorry I stumbled, so God if you could help me see better, I mean, really see, that would be great. Amen

Nurse – Wonderful prayer. Take off your headband.

Eye patient – (takes off the headband. Eye is ok, sight has returned) Hey, look, I can see again! This prayer thing really works!

Doctor – Hand patient, you're next.

Hand patient – Ok, I'll give it a try. Dear God, I'm sorry. The other day I was playing cards with my friends. We should of just been having a fun time, but I really wanted to win. I was upset I was losing, so I did something really stupid. I cheated to win. That was really dumb because winning the game by cheating didn't even feel good. God, if you could help me with this, that would be great. Help me just enjoy being with my friends. Winning is great, but if you could help me to know that winning isn't everything and really winning by cheating is actually nothing, that would help a lot. Amen

Nurse – Excellent! Take off the bandage around you hand.

Hand patients – (takes off the bandage, hand is all better) Look at that! My hand is all better. I'm going to call my friends and see if they want to play euchre, and this time I'm not even going to care if I win or lose.

Doctor – Good for you, you are on your way to full recovery. Just remember, it's a life long process. Ok, Foot patient, now it's your turn.

Foot patient – Right, I'll give it a try. God, I'm not sure where to begin. I got really mad at my mom and really it was for no good reason. Why do I think everything has to always go my way? I sure could use some help in that. I mean, I love my mom, I really do. So God, if you could help me with all this, it sure would help. Thanks. Amen

Nurse – Take off your wrapping around your foot.

Foot patient – Look, it's all better. You know the first thing I am going to do? I'm going to go home and apologize to my mom for getting so mad at her. Then I'm going to do something I have never ever done. I'm going to ask her if I there is anything I can do to help her.

Doctor – Wow, you really have come a long way in a short time.

Nurse – Well you are all free to go now. Remember your prescription – pray three times a day, every day. That will help you not stumble quite so much.

All Patients (The three walk off, happy.) - Thanks for the cure! Mind if we tell other people of this cure?

Doctor – Tell everyone. That's what the God of Grace Hospital is all about, giving out God's grace to all who are in need of healing.

September 20, 2009

Mark 9:30-37

Pastor Mark Gruner

We are all children

Prayer: *May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen*

We are all children. We really are. The disciples are children, at least they sure act like children. Jesus is trying to teach them something, and this something is really important, it's stuff they

really need to pay attention to. He tells them that the day is coming when he is going to be betrayed and then he will be killed and three days later he will rise again. The disciples really need to know this, it's going to come in handy.

But they don't understand what he is talking about. So, of course, the grown up thing to do would be to ask a question, get some clarification, have Jesus explain what he is saying. That would be the grown up thing to do, but the disciples are like children. They don't understand what he is saying and they are afraid to ask him anything about it. They don't want to look dumb in front of each other. They don't want Jesus to think they are dumb, so they don't say nothin'.

So, just like children, since they don't understand what Jesus said and since they are afraid to ask, they do what comes most natural, they change the subject and end up arguing with one another. You can pretty much hear how it all went.

Peter – What did he say?

John – I don't know.

James – Ask him.

Peter – I'm not asking him, you ask him.

John – I not asking him, you ask him

James – I don't have to ask him, cause I'm his favorite.

Peter – No you're not, I'm his favorite.

John – Don't matter, I get to sit at his right side.

James – No you don't, I get to sit on his right side, cause I'm his favorite.

Peter – Are not.

James – Am to.

Jesus – What are you children arguing about in the back seat?

All three of them – Nothin'.

Children. The disciples are just like children. Jesus knows exactly what they've been arguing about, so he says, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all, and servant of all." They probably didn't get that lesson either. So, what does Jesus do now? He gives them an example that they might actually get. He finds a real live honest to goodness child, places this child in front of them all and says, "Here's the deal guys, whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Who knows if they got that one either. Eventually they would learn all three lessons. They would learn of Jesus' death and resurrection because they would have lived through it. They became servants of all in their spreading of the Good News of Christ. They stayed children and learned what it meant to be called "children of God" and they came to see that as a badge of honor.

How truly odd that would have been in those days. Today is way different. We lavish attention on our children. Baptisms of infants and children are high festival days. Birthdays and Christmas seems to be all about the children.

Not so in the days of Jesus and disciples. Children were pretty much worthless until they could produce something, until they grew up and became workers, then they would have value.

That makes some sense when we realize that infant mortality was quite high. You have five children, perhaps two would survive to become adults, so don't get too attached to any of them because most of them will not survive childhood. Those days were not just two thousand years ago, those days were just a couple hundred years ago. When we were down in New Orleans we heard some history of the area and around the time before the Civil War there were all sorts of diseases that took the lives of children – malaria, epidemics, accidents, being a child was dangerous.

So, for Jesus to set a child in front of the disciples and say you had to welcome the child and then you would welcome me, was like saying, you must accept and find worthy and find value, that which really has no worth an no value, and then you will welcome me.

Now that's something. That is a whole other way of seeing life and understanding what life is

all about. The really cool thing, is that this is exactly what appealed to the early church, this finding value in that which most of society saw little value. The early Christians were seen as odd folk.

In our Bible Study of the first letter of John, which meets, by the way, on Wednesday mornings at 10am at Hollandale and Thursday evenings at 7pm at Blanchardville, we recently read a letter written to a fellow by the name of Diognetus. In this letter the author is describing these strange people called Christians. The letter was written around 200 AD, so it was written about the early church. The author writes,

“For Christians are not differentiated from other people by country, language or customs; you see, they do not live in cities of their own, or speak some strange dialect, or have some peculiar lifestyle...They are passing their days on earth, but are citizens of heaven. They obey the appointed laws, and go beyond the laws in their own lives...They love every one, but are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death and gain life. They are poor and yet make many rich. They are short of everything and yet have plenty of all things. They are dishonored and yet gain glory through dishonor.”

Maybe what Jesus needed to do was present to the disciples an object lesson. Telling them he was going to be arrested, tried, sentenced to death, die on the cross, and three days later, rise again, that is a bit hard to understand. The disciples would be rightfully confused. So setting a child in front of them, a person they would normally have no regard for, and then saying, you have to accept this child for everyone who accepts this child, accepts me and also accepts the one who sent me.

That they could not have ignored, but it would have thrown their world inside out and upside down. This child had no power, no influence, no status, really, in those days, no rights. For the disciples to wrap their minds around the idea the one who has no power, no influence, no status, no rights, and by accepting that one they would be accepting Jesus, they would know Jesus, that's a lot to take in.

But they got it, maybe not fully and completely, but they got it. And the early church got it. In the first letter of John, from the Bible study we are doing, there is this telling line. John asks this question, “How does God's love abide in anyone who has the worlds' goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?”

In the letter of James, that we have been reading from for several weeks now, a couple weeks ago James wrote this about true faith. He wrote, “Religion that is pure and undefiled is religion that cares for the orphans and the widows in their distress.”

Pretty powerful messages there and messages we continually need to hear for it is so easy to become one with the dominant culture. It is so easy to become one with the culture that tells us what we deserve, and, of course, we deserve nothing but the best, the newest, the most improved.

Whenever we think to ourselves, “I need this” or “I need that”, we should have in our mind's eye the picture of Jesus holding the child in front of the disciples and saying to them, “look and see, what is of no value, what is of no worth in the world, what has no power, this is what you must accept and when you do so you will be with me.”

Boy, is that tough. Today we have two baptisms at Blanchardville. Halleluiah for that! That's great and wonderful! It would be great and neat and wonderful to have a baptism every week. To have both sacraments every week, wouldn't that be something?

But in these baptisms we all agree to these things:

- that we will live with these children among God's faithful people
- that we will bring them to the word of God and to the Holy Supper
- that we will teach them the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments,
- that we will place in their hands the holy Bible
- that we will nurture them in faith and in prayer
- so these children will trust God and will proclaim Christ through word and deed, and so they will care for others and for the world God has made, and so they will work for justice and

peace.

We promise we will do these things, that, at our best, we will be like the disciples and we will be like the early church, and we will get it, we will embrace those who have no value, no power, no status, and in doing so we will know God. The good news of Christ goes absolutely contrary to everything we think and we are told to believe that will bring us success in this world.

But you know something? All those things we are told that will bring us success and power and status and fame and all the rest, all those things don't seem to be doing so well.

Maybe Jesus is onto something. The other day I heard a woman who literally had been held captive, say that she had no idea of how her life would change once she gave it all over to God. Everything turned around and while for a little while she was very much still physically a captive, she knew that in Christ, she was free and so every day was a day of thanksgiving.

Jesus did everything he could possibly do to open the eyes and hearts and souls of his disciples, indeed of all who came near to him. His whole effort was to show how God might abide in their hearts and souls, and when they got it, when they caught just a bit of it, ah, well, that's when they celebrate a foretaste of the feast that is to come.

“See this child? This one of no value and no worth? Welcome this one and you welcome me.”

Amen

Skit for Rally Sunday, September 13, 2009 – based on Mark 8:27-38

Characters -

Becky – leading worship and helping lead the singing of the campfire-type hymns

Golf guy – has the golf stuff, wanders by on his way to his car and tee-time

Setting – McKellar Park – Rally Sunday – During worship, “Golf guy” walks by with his golf stuff. He is in a hurry, has a tee time soon. But he does wonder what is happening in the park.

Becky – Way to go everyone. We did a great job with “A place in the choir”. The message, of course, is that we all have a place in the choir. All of our voices have been given to us by God. God loves hearing us sing. So remember, Wednesday nights we have choir practice and everyone is welcome, because you know, we all got a place in the choir.

Now then, our next song, I'm sure we all know well. It is called, “Love, love, love”. Now for us introverted Norwegian people, we might want to shorten that to just, “Love, love” and leave off the third love.

That reminds me of a joke. There is this married couple who are celebrating their 30th wedding anniversary. Someone asks the husband if he loves his wife. He says, “of course I do.” Then he is asked if he tells her every day that he loves her, and he says, “Why would I do that. I told her on our wedding day that I loved her. Nothing has changed since then and if anything does, then I'll let her know.”

But we'll try this song the way it is supposed to be sung, with, “love, love, love” because that really is what it is all about.

(Golfer guy walks by, seems to be in a bit of a hurry, but is also curious about why all these people are in the park on such a fine Sunday morning.)

Golfer guy – Hello there. Pardon my interruption, but I was just wondering what was going on here. Is

this some kind of family reunion or something?

Becky – Well, actually, you could think of it that way. We are members of the family of Pecatonica Lutheran Parish, and every week we get together for worship. It really is kind of like a weekly reunion.

Golfer guy – I see. Don't you guys have buildings? Today is real nice, but in January I would think this would be a bit cold.

Becky – Yes, we do have buildings. In fact, we have four church buildings – there's York Memorial, Hollandale, Trinity, and Blanchardville. All four churches are in our Parish.

Golfer guy – Well now I'm confused. When you have four perfectly good buildings why would you want to be out in this park? I mean, I would think you would rather be in your buildings and then you could sing as loud as you wanted and you wouldn't have to worry about other people hearing you.

Becky – Ah, but you see, that's just the point. As nice as our church buildings are, and they really are all very nice, there are times when we like coming to the park and singing loud and we really want other people, like you, to hear us. In fact, if you want, you can join us. We even have a potluck picnic after this and you can join in that as well.

Golf guy – Oh, I couldn't do that. I didn't bring anything.

Becky – Don't worry about that. We're Lutherans, one thing we always have is plenty of food.

Golf guy – Well, I would like to, but I have a tee time and a bunch of fellas who are expecting me at the golf course. We have the same tee-time every Sunday morning. So I better be going, but before I go, I just thought of another question. And that is, Just what is it your are doing right now?

Becky – Oh, that's easy. This is our worship service and this is a special day when we thank God for teachers and students and for giving us the Good News of Jesus Christ. This is our Rally Day, when we start off all our education programs.

Golf guy – Oh. I guess I'm not really that interested in all that. Fine for you folk, I'm sure, but I can worship God in my own way. You know, being out in nature is really worshipping God, don't you think?

Becky – Celebrating God's creation is certainly a good thing to do. We can all see the handiwork of God in the plants and trees and rivers and hills and animals and everything else that God creates. Certainly that is part of worship, and part of the reason we are in the park, to worship God in God's creation. But there is more to it than that. There is Jesus Christ.

Golf guy – Oh, right. I totally agree with you. Jesus is great. I love Jesus.

Becky – That's great, so do we.

Golf guy – Jesus was a great teacher of moral conduct and right living. When he said to love your neighbor as you love yourself, well that is just so true. That is the way I try to live, that “treat others as you would like to be treated” idea.

Becky – Yes, indeed, he was a great teacher and he told great stories. One was the story we call the

parable of the Good Samaritan. It is all about this fellow who was beaten and lay on the side of the road and three people walked by him. The first two did nothing to help the beaten man, but the third man, who was a Samaritan, he helped the beaten man. If you have time we could tell you more of that story, but it is all about that idea that we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

Golf guy – So Jesus told a story about a good Samaritan? Wow, I didn't know that came from Jesus. Every year I make a donation to the Good Samaritan Nursing Home and Care Center. Good place, I just never knew where the name came from. Thanks for telling me that, like I say, I love Jesus, he was a great teacher.

Becky – He certainly is, of course, he is more than just a great teacher you know.

Golf guy – Oh right, he was also like a doctor. He healed lots of people. He had that healing touch. In fact, my wife is a nurse and people often tell her that she has healing hands like Jesus had.

Becky – She must feel honored to be told that. One way of thinking of what she does is that she is walking in the footsteps of Jesus. So, yes, Jesus is a great teacher and also a great healer, but there is more to Jesus than that.

Golf guy – You're right. Jesus also fed people, fed lots and lots of people. Always seemed to be looking out for people. Around Thanksgiving and Christmas we give to local food banks and sometimes we even help at soup kitchens in Madison. We know that doesn't solve all problems but at least it gives immediate assistance.

Becky – It's great that you do those things, and yes, Jesus does indeed feed a lot of people, but Jesus is still more than all those things.

Golf guy – Really, I thought I had them all – teacher – healer – feeder of people. I'm pretty sure that's it. Those are the reasons I love the person Jesus was.

Becky – And those are all good things, those are all attributes of who Jesus is, but you're leaving out one really big one.

Golf guy – What would that be?

Becky – Well, let's see if I can get some help here. (turns to the congregation) Ok everyone, we know Jesus is a great teacher, a great healer, that Jesus feeds us all, and the one other thing we all know about Jesus is.....(wait for responses).....Yes! Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is our Savior. Our Redeemer. Jesus lived, died and lives again and in his life we have life.

Golf guy – Wooh. I was afraid that was where you were going. The teacher, healer, feeding of many, all those things I agree with. But all that God talk. I'm sorry, I just can't go there. When I think of all the damage religion has done over the centuries. Churches seem to say one thing and then do another, and anymore they seem way too involved in politics. I really don't want anything to do with that.

Becky – Believe it or not, I understand that. I'm not always thrilled with the church myself. The church is made up of a lot of flawed human beings, most of whom, most of the time, really do try to do their best, really do try to follow Christ, but sometimes, even with our best efforts, we make mistakes. But without the church, without the people of God doing exactly what we are doing today, passing

along the faith from one generation to another, we would lose the whole story of God and we would lose the Good News of Jesus Christ.

But all that is a whole other issue. I'm really talking about Jesus being the Son of God. Jesus being as alive today as he was two thousand years ago. You always speak of Jesus in the past, at the person who was a teacher, was a healer, was a feeder of many. I speak of Jesus in past, present and future – Jesus is my teacher, is our healer, does indeed feed us and all creation, and was, is and will be forever our Savior.

Golf guy – Again, that's where you lose me. I really appreciate that you have that faith and I'm glad it works for you, but I just don't feel I need that kind of crutch to make it through life.

Becky – Excuse me – did you say, “crutch”?

Golf guy – Yea, some people are able to deal with all the events of life on their own and other people seem to need some sort of help, and so they turn to spiritual things like faith.

Becky – Oh really?

Golf guy – I don't mean to offend, it's just the way I see things.

Becky – Hmm, let me ask you a question. When you play golf, do you play with anyone?

Golf guy – Oh yea, there's a group of us. It's more fun playing with a group.

Becky – And do you play on a golf course, or do you just go off in some field and hit golf balls.

Golf guy – Of course we use an actual golf course. It would be silly not to do so. Just what are you getting at?

Becky – Well, let me show you something. Before you came we had a children's message, kind of a game. Could some of the children come forward? (let them come) Remember the game we played earlier with Pastor Mark? (follow the leader) Ok, let's show this gentleman how it goes. Who wants to be the leader? Ok, You lead and everyone else follow. (let them do that for awhile) Ok, did everyone have fun? Did everyone take part? How would you have felt if you were not in the game? Kind of lonely, kind of not part of the group.

(turning to golf guy) Are you getting the point?

Golf guy – Being part of the group is more fun than being alone?

Becky – It's more than that. When you say that you know Jesus you describe his teaching and healing and feeding of many people. We all agree with that, but when we add that Jesus is our Savior, we are saying that we are followers of Jesus. That Jesus leads us in our lives and carries us when we have burdens. It's more than just being part of the group, it is simply knowing that in Christ we belong to God. We see each other and we see you as our brother in Christ.

When I want to speak with Jesus, all I do is pray. When I want to listen to Jesus, all I do is be quiet in his presence. It's not just being part of the group, it is that connection that I have, that connection we all have, with Jesus – our teacher, our healer, the one who feeds us – and also the one who saves us.

Our faith is not just a crutch to get through life with. Our faith is our life – it defines who we

are, it defines our relationship with all God's people and all God's creation.

Golf guy – Wow, no one has ever explained it that way before. I just always thought it was just another thing you church people do and I simply didn't need another thing to do. But if I hear you right, you're saying faith is simply part of all of you, part of everything you are and everything you do. That Jesus is alive, right here, right now, as alive as he was two thousand years ago.

Becky – You got it.

Golf guy – Wow, if what you say is true, you shouldn't keep it to yourselves, you ought to be telling people. People really need to hear this. You have no idea how many people who have this emptiness in their lives. They try to fill it with stuff, or with relationships that sometimes work and sometimes don't, or with work, and what you are saying is that emptiness can be filled with Christ.

Becky – With Christ, and with the love of God. Remember you asked why we are in the park when we have buildings in which to sing our songs and no one else will hear us. Well, we come out here to do exactly what you said we need to do, to sing our songs out loud for all to hear.

Golf guy – Yea, that's right. Would it be alright if I stayed? I can play golf any day. What song are you going to sing now?

Becky – Of course you can stay, and remember, there's food afterward. You won't believe the song we are now going to sing. It is like, so fitting. It's called, "Love, love, love, that's what it's all about."

Golf guy – You've go to be kidding.

Becky – Nope, that's what we're going to sing right now.

Golf guy – I've go to join in on this.

Becky – We would love to have you. Oh, by the way, guess who really loves having you here.

Golf guy – Let me guess, would it be Jesus?

Becky – If I didn't know better, I would think that you are about to find your place in the choir.

(skit is over – time to sing – Love, love, love)

Sept. 6, 2009 – Time after Pentecost

Pastor Mark Gruner

text – Mark 7:24-37 and James 2:1-17

Take a Break

Prayer: May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen

Let's say you've got a long weekend coming up, kind of like Labor Day weekend. You have Saturday, and Sunday and Monday off already. Now let's say you want to stretch that out a bit, and so you add Friday to it, and so now you have four full days off and now let's say you try to make it as long a break as possible and so right at 5pm on Thursday, right out of the parking lot at work, you head home pack your bags, and you and a few close friends hit the road. You're going to have a bit of an adventure.

You've all decided to go to Milwaukee first, see a ballgame, go to a few museums, see the lake. You know eventually you'll have to head back for home, but why not go by way of Chicago? Spend a day or so there? Catch another ballgame, do some shopping, see the lake shore, go to Navy Pier. Really take it all in.

Now, let's also say that your profession, what you do for a living, is that you are a nurse. You know you work hard. A lot of double shifts, a lot of late hours, a lot of difficult decisions to make every day, life and death decisions. You always have to be on the top of your game.

Boy, this weekend trip is just what you need, a well deserved and a well needed break from the stress of your life and your job.

Alright now. You're at Miller Park, great game. Seventh inning, Brewers are behind by two runs, but they have the bases loaded with only one out and their best hitter is at bat. You can feel the home run coming, your team is about to be in the lead. You're sitting on the edge of the seat and yelling.

Suddenly, out of the corner of your eye you sense something is wrong. An elderly gentleman is clutching his chest and he slumps forward. His wife screams, "Harry, Harry, what's wrong. Oh no, not now, not here. Can anyone help me. My husband is having a heart attack. Please, can anyone help me?"

You look and for some strange reason she is looking right at you. No, you think, we are about to hit a home run. I'm not working. I'm off. No, I can't help. I don't want to help. All your friends are nervously looking around. They don't want to tell you what to do. They all know how much you need this break, but they also know that you can help.

"Please," the woman cries out. "Is there anyone who can help?"

Just as you hear Fiedler's bat hit the ball for a sure home run, you also can't believe it, but you hear yourself saying, "Yes, I can help you. I'm a nurse. Let me through, I can help your husband."

Very well, that day of rest and relaxation is over now. You did what you needed to do. Harry lives, undoubtedly because of your efforts. Your friends are impressed. They knew you would come through. They are proud of you. You're proud of yourself, but man, you still need a break.

So, off to Chicago. See another ballgame, see the shore and the lake. It'll be great. While walking around downtown Chicago at night, enjoying the nightlife of the big city, you and your friends are in a nightclub, having a great time, when all of a sudden everyone hears gunfire outside. Some gang related shooting has just happened. A young man runs into the club, he's got blood on his sleeve, he has all the markings of a gang member. He shouts out, "My brother's just been shot. I need help. He's bleeding out on the sidewalk. I need help."

Gangs, you think, I can't get involved in that. Good grief whoever shot him might still be around, or they might come back. I don't even know what this fellow did. Maybe it's a revenge shooting, maybe he shot and killed a member of the other gang. Who knows? Best not to get involved.

Even your friends tell you to stay put, don't go outside. The incident at the ballpark was different. This, this could really be dangerous.

But the man is frantic. "My brother's dyin' out there. Ain't there nobody who cares?"

Again, you can't believe it, but you hear your own voice saying, "I'm a nurse. Let me see what I can do."

You go outside. It's a mess. The man's brother is not the only one who was shot, there are two others and a crowd is gathering. There is nothing else you can do, you have to stop the bleeding, so

you take off your shirt, the shirt you just bought a few hours ago. You rip it into strips and you begin to tie off the man's leg to slow the bleeding.

He lives, the ambulance comes. Without you he probably would not have made it. Of course, now your shirt is in tatters. One of your friends gives you his sweater and you put that on. What a vacation. Tuesday morning you're back at work. Once again doing what you have been trained to do, caring for the medical needs of others. You know you should feel resentful for having lost that brief vacation, but you just can't feel resentful when you know you've done good. For some reason you were in the right place at the right time when you were most needed and you came through.

Ok, so why did I tell that story? Two reasons. First, this is exactly what Jesus did. He and his disciples went to Tyre. Tyre is not Galilee. There would be few Jews in Tyre. It was a coastal town, full of all sorts of people from all over the Empire. It was a great harbor town. One can just imagine the excitement of the place. It would have been a place to go to get away from it all, to see a whole different life, to lose oneself.

Tyre was well known for its glass works and for the making of dye, especially purple dye and cloth. Sailing ships from all over the Empire would come there. What a great place to be. Imagine the smells, the sounds, the excitement of it all. Jesus and the disciples went there for vacation. They literally went away and Jesus didn't want anyone to know he was there. He needed a break.

Then along comes this woman, this Gentile woman, this woman from Syrophenicia. There is absolutely no relation between her and Jesus whatsoever. There is no reason for Jesus to pay any attention to her, yet there she is, begging for help. You can sense Jesus' exhaustion, Jesus' unwillingness to get involved. He says, "Let the children be fed first." Who knows what the disciples thought of that. They had seen Jesus heal lots of people. They knew he needed a break from it all. But this must of seemed a bit harsh. And the woman would not let up. Her child was dying.

Jesus finally helped, he finally did what he knew he could do. So much for that first day of vacation.

Now you may think, "how do you know he was on vacation". Fair question, I don't know for sure, but here's a clue. It says that he returns from the region of Tyre to Galilee by way of Sidon. Hello? Galilee is southeast of Tyre and Jesus and the disciples are heading north, along the Mediterranean Sea. They are definitely taking the scenic route to get back to Galilee. Sidon is even farther away from where Jewish people would be. It would be like going to Chicago from Milwaukee to get to Blanchardville. It's the wrong direction.

Once there, what happens? A blind man is brought to him. Not only blind but he has trouble speaking. Oh my. Note that Jesus' healing of this man is messy. Puts his fingers in his ears, spits and touches his tongue. Now that's pretty intimate, that is real intimate. By Jewish law, what Jesus would have had to do after this to cleanse himself would of involved many steps. But he did it anyway and when he pleads with people to tell no one, they tell everyone.

Jesus does what Jesus does and when he returns to Galilee, to his people, he just carries on with feeding four thousand.

And so the nurse in the story did the same as Jesus did, kind of walked in the footsteps of Jesus, kind of like we are all told to do.

And that leads to the second reason for telling the story of nurse. In the letter of James, which we have been reading for a few weeks now, James really lays it on the line. In the 14th verse he writes, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?" Now, of course, for us Lutherans, this is where we all gasp, because we all know full well that Luther would say, at the top of his voice, "Yes, indeed, faith can save you. In fact, it is faith alone that saves you. No work can ever save you."

So that's why Luther had a lot of trouble and problems with the letter of James, way too much emphasis on works. However, having said that and realizing that we are indeed saved by faith alone, that really is the gem of Lutheran theology, having said that, what James says next is really worth

listening to. He writes, "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

If the nurse had just watched the ballgame, and cheered the home run hit and ignored the man with the heart attack and the wife's pleading, he would have been denying his profession, he would have been denying a central piece of what his life was all about.

If he had not helped the man shot in Chicago, that would have been easier to understand for most, but he would of known that once again he had denied who he was, and he couldn't do that and keep any self-respect.

To be people of faith is to actually be people of faith. There is no real vacation from it, no real holiday. We never know when and where we will be called upon to express our faith. We have one standard that we live by and James says it well in the 8th verse. He writes, "You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

To love God above everything and to love our neighbor as ourselves, that's our calling. It's our identity. When we don't carry it out then we simply are not living as we should. When we do carry it out, even and especially when we don't feel like it, well, that's when we now God is walking by our side, smiling upon us and encouraging us.

This is labor day weekend. We lift up all sorts of labor and celebrate all the gifts and talents God gives to us. Part of our labor is to infuse everything we do with our faith, with trust that God is with us, with confidence and Christ will carry us through. We really can do nothing else. Amen

August 23, 2009

Pastor Mark Gruner

texts – Joshua 24:1-2, 14-18 - John 6:56-69

Home

Prayer: May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen

So, we'll start with a poll. How many are of Norwegian descent and have been to Norway? How many to Germany? Or Switzerland? Or Denmark? How many have been back to the land from where your ancestors came, because after all, no one here has predominant ancestors who came from here. We all came here from somewhere else.

Now raising your hands indicates one very specific thing, and that is that you are here now. You didn't stay in Norway, or Denmark, or Switzerland, or Germany or wherever else. You went to visit and perhaps saw the generational homestead of the family and then you came back home, here, southwest Wisconsin. You came home.

We could do polling of other places, who has gone on vacation to Mexico, or Hawaii, or New England, or fished in Canada, or gone on an Alaskan cruise. And there would be a show of hands but the fact would stay the same, because there is a show of hands, that means you all came back. Wonderful to go visit different lands, different people, even hear different languages, but always great to come home.

Now that sense of coming home, and that tug that lies behind the saying, "home is where the heart is", is where the Old Testament reading in Joshua and where the gospel reading in John are at.

They are all about, where is home, where is your security, where do you feel safe, where do you get your identity, from where do you define your truth for life.

For Joshua, there is a tension among the people he is leading. They are in a new land, with new ideas and new people. It's all very exciting. Some are sensing that the grass might be greener on the other side and so they are straining against the fence of their traditions and their family and they are reaching for the new and different.

We all know how this works. Anyone who has had children knows exactly how this works. You raise your children from birth to around the age of 13, 14, 15 and then there comes the day when you wonder, "whose child is this living in my house?" because you simply do not recognize your son or daughter.

They are in the midst of change, pushing and pulling against you and family and trying to figure out who they are. Joshua, in effect, was dealing with a bunch of teenagers and so he offered them this challenge.

Who will you follow? The Amorites, whose land we are now living in, whom you are getting to know as your neighbors and your finding out they are not bad people but simply different with different ways and different faith. Will you take after them, will they become your family, your home, or will you stay with us, will you continue to worship the God who led us out of slavery in Egypt, crossed the wilderness with us and brought us to this new land.

It's a choice. Surely many left, but others said, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods, for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God."

They made a choice, and many said home was where their God was who had freed them.

In the gospel of John the same thing is happening. Jesus is proclaiming to the disciples and followers around him that he is the bread of life, and that with him there is eternal life. That he and the heavenly Father are united.

This is a challenging statement and bold claim. Jesus is not just saying he is a good teacher and a wise philosopher and a healer of those who are ill. No, Jesus is kicking it up a notch, proclaiming oneness with God. Two thousand years later, that bold claim is still a dividing line for many people. To claim Jesus as the Son of God is as bold a statement today as it was then.

And so, many followers had a decision to make. Could they accept what Jesus said or would they have to reject that and go somewhere else. Many left, many were deeply offended. But for those who stayed, Jesus asked this penetrating question. "Do you also wish to go away?"

Bold question – are you staying or going. You can't just kind of hang around and see how it all works out, you have to declare, are you going or staying.

The disciples who chose to stay said, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

Now that can be read two ways, I suppose. It could be read as sort of a painful cry of pity, "Lord, we have no where else to go, good heavens, we gave everything up to follow you, if we don't stick with you we would be lost, so yes, we stay."

That's kind of sad. It could also be read from a point of view of allegiance and fidelity, with boldness. "Lord, who else would we ever follow. We threw our lot in with you a long time ago. No way you're getting rid of us. We are with you forever, no matter what happens."

Now that way sounds a lot better and one would hope that the disciples stuck with that way of understanding their following of Christ. But there is a wide range between those two ways of thinking and probably the disciples covered the whole range.

I mean, when we think of home we think of "home is where the heart is" on the one hand, and

we think, “you can pick your friends but you can't pick your relatives” on the other hand. And at various times in life you may feel one way and other times you will feel totally the other way. That's life and that's family and that's home.

Now, having gone through all that, from the polling and showing of hands of where people have visited, to the story of Joshua and the people of Israel and of Jesus and the disciples, the whole point of all that is simply this.

Our faith home is with Joshua and the people of Israel. Our faith home is with Jesus and the disciples. I'm not sure where I heard this, I've been lots of different places during the past month, but somebody somewhere noted that the Bible is not simply a book about the people of God and about the disciples, and about Jesus, and about the prophets and Moses and David and all the rest. The Bible is our faith family tree. The Bible tells stories about our ancestors. Peter, John, Paul, James – these are not simply disciples of Jesus, they are also our ancestors. Moses and David and Solomon, they are not just great leaders of the people of Israel, they are our ancestors. Mary, is not just the mother of Jesus, but she is our ancestor, we are related to her.

The Bible is not simply a book of stories of faith, the Bible is our book of home and family.

There are lots of discussions today about, “what is truth” and about your idea of truth may be good for you, but my idea of truth is what is of value for me, and really, there is no way of actually defining truth. And one religion is as good as another, and all the rest of it.

A lot of that discussion is valid and worth having, and one can't simply lord it over another and beat another down with some “truth” one has. So as valid as all that is, when we are asked what our truth is, we have a choice to make. Do we stick with Jesus, or do we go somewhere else. Like the disciples, we can't just hang around and see how it all turns out. We can't just take the best parts of everything and put it all together for ourselves. Actually we can do that but then we would be in a different home, then we would be in a different family.

No, when Jesus asks us do we wish to go away, we can either go away or we can definitively say, “Lord, where would we go? This is it. This is our home. You Lord, are our family. Within you and through you we simply see everyone else as brothers and sisters in Christ. We can't do anything else for we have come to believe that you are the Holy One of God.”

Once the decision is made then all the discussions about what is true and what isn't, all kind of fade away, they become just interesting things to discuss. For our truth lands in the center of our faith home – love God above all else, love your neighbor as you love yourself. Know that Jesus is the Son of God, that in Jesus God became one with us, the Creator of all has become one with the creation, and that salvation is in and through that one, that in Christ we see how very much God loves us and our response is to love God in return and love and care for the creation and all the people of God's creation.

Some days it will be joyous thing to do, other days we'll feel like washing our hands of the whole mess, but this is our faith home.

So when we study the Bible, when we hear the stories of Joshua, of Ruth, of Naomi, of Paul, of Mary and Martha, of Jeremiah, we are not simply hearing stories of people long ago, but we are hearing stories of our ancestors, of those who have gone before. In and through God, we are related to each and every one of them and so their stories become our story.

That's why we gather together week after week, we are continually in the process of a big family reunion. This is where we receive our identity, this is where we touch base with home, and among the people here we know we are among the living body of Christ, and so all we can say is Amen.