

Date: Sunday September 27, 2009

Scripture: Mark 9:38-50

Title: “The Kingdom of God”

The Message of Scripture (Sermon Thesis): Jesus shares a lesson with the disciples about discipleship and welcoming and accepting all others just as they are in His name.

The Sharing of the Good News (The Sermon Purpose): Today’s good news is that the kingdom of God does not need perfect poster children but rather children with hearts that might held together by band aids and duct tape but are still open to God.

(Remember, it’s all about God!)

Charlie had not been attending Pilgrim UCC church very long, but had been going there long enough to know the pastor and a few other people. Now Charlie had some experience on the stage, not Broadway or anything like that, but was experienced as an actor, playwright, and musical performer. When the pastor found this out, she said that she was thinking about having a drama during worship over the course of a few weeks and with this drama a different character would show up and speak to the congregation about their particular place in the world. The first character she wanted to have in worship was the prophet Isaiah. She asked Charlie if he would play that role. He enthusiastically said, “Yes!”

Well, a few weeks later Charlie was getting ready to portray Isaiah. He had been rehearsing with the pastor and besides for a few other people no one knew what was going to happen. Charlie had decided to give ole’ Isaiah a twist and instead of dressing like we might expect to find Isaiah in the ancient time of the first century, Charlie chose to dress in a skull cap with a scarf, an old pair of blue jeans,

a t-shirt, and a tattered jacket. His makeup gave him the appearance of being pretty dirty. With costume complete and lines all memorized, Charlie was ready for the role.

Sunday morning and the moment came for him to walk into the sanctuary after worship had begun. He went through the back door and started up the center aisle. He got about half way up when Uri the usher stepped right in front of him. “Uh oh,” thought Charlie, “I wasn’t planning for this.” Uri said, “Good morning, may I help you?” Charlie paused for a moment and then mumbled something out loud as he stepped to his right. Uri stepped right in front of him. “Uh oh,” Charlie thought, “I really hadn’t planned for this.” He took a big step to his left. Uri stepped right in front of him. Charlie mumbled something more out loud. He took another step back toward his right. Uri stepped right with him. This time Charlie looked up at Uri hoping Uri might recognize him since they had meet once or twice. It was immediately apparent Uri didn’t recognize Charlie. Charlie did congratulate himself on the great job he had done with the make-up and the clothes. But he needed to figure out a way to get past Uri and to get on with the show. What Charlie saw next warmed his heart. With a big smile Uri said, “Welcome to Pilgrim UCC, let me help you to a seat,” taking Charlie by the arm and leading him to a nearby pew. After being seated, and when Uri had walked away, far away, Charlie got up and quickly headed to the front, carrying on with the drama. Now this occurrence at Pilgrim UCC happened in the days before the God is Still Speaking campaign which makes it that much more powerful as a genuine lesson of welcome

and acceptance (Aries).

In today's scripture from Mark, Jesus offers a lesson to the disciples about the challenges and expectations of following Jesus. He is quite clear that he does not expect anyone to put a stumbling block in front of anyone else, even in front of a small child. He does expect his followers to be welcoming and accepting. Jesus gets quite graphic as he describes the best way to live life. It's not about having the perfect appearance but it is about committed discipleship. It's not about how we look but how we care.

There are probably several stories and movies that capture this idea of living for Christ and accepting others in the name of Christ however and wherever they may be on their journey. I watched one such movie this week and want to share a brief recap.

“There are 90,000 homeless people in the city of Los Angeles.” That's a statistic quoted in the film, The Soloist. Perhaps you have seen the movie. This is a film based on a true story about one man, Steve Lopez, a newspaper writer desperate for a story played by Robert Downey, Jr. In this movie, actor Jamie Foxx gives a riveting performance as Nathaniel Ayers, a homeless man who has a love and talent for music.

The film begins with Lopez in the newsroom of the Los Angeles Times lamenting with other employees about the lack of interest in newspaper stories. This conversation leads him on a hunt for some fresh and compelling material for his column. In one Los Angeles area park, near a statue of Beethoven, Steve Lopez

notices Nathaniel Ayers. Like many homeless people, Ayers has his grocery cart of worldly goods but unlike others he is performing for “Mr. Beethoven” on a violin with two strings. In his rambling conversation with Nathaniel, Lopez learns that among all the things that may or may not be true of Mr. Ayers, there is no doubt that Mr. Ayers loves music and especially Beethoven. Lopez’s curiosity is tweaked even more by Mr. Ayer’s claim that he once was a student at the world renowned musical school of Julliard.

Hoping for a story that could move the masses to buy a newspaper, Lopez calls Julliard, only to hear that they have no one by that name among their graduates. With hopes for an exceptional story dashed, the reporter moves on to something else. But then another call comes from Julliard. Nathaniel Ayers did not graduate from Julliard, but he most certainly did attend and was one of their most promising cellists. The school lost track of him years ago. Now the reporter has his story. He writes a column about a homeless musician who once played for the best academy and now plays for Beethoven’s statue in the park on a two-string violin.

Those who read the story were intrigued and moved. One woman sent the reporter her cello with a note that says she can no longer play due to arthritis but asks if he could get it to Mr. Ayers. This begins a friendship that changes the lives of both Steve Lopez and Nathaniel Ayers.

Steve gets Nathaniel to stay close to the homeless shelter so that he and the cello will be safe. Steve learns more about Nathaniel’s struggle with mental illness and his journey from a loving home to Julliard to the streets of LA. Steve tries to change Nathaniel’s life into what he and the audience think would be best for

Nathaniel, but Steve becomes aware that Nathaniel is who he is, just as he is, and that is enough for their friendship to grow (Miner). Together, they help each other identify the obstacles they struggle with and stumble over in life. They also learn that it takes a lifetime to know another person and to truly know ourselves.

It's an important lesson to remember that we cannot be all things to all people. As humans we often want to be problem solvers, the ones who fix every situation that needs fixing. On this stewardship Sunday it is important to remember that we each don't have all the resources needed to make the world a better place. But together, we each have a resource that when shared with the resources of others will help move the world closer to the Kingdom of God. Stewardship is about each of us sharing what we can as we give thanks to God for how God's goodness is shared with us. Stewardship includes what we give, but it is more about how we live.

This is precisely what Jesus is talking about today in Mark. When Jesus says, "It is better for you to enter life maimed than have two hands . . .," (Mark 9:43, NRSV) and, "It is better for you enter life lame than have two feet . . .," (Mark 9:45, NRSV) Jesus isn't talking about punishment or trying to eradicate sin from our lives all by ourselves. He's talking about traveling into the kingdom of God aware of the blessings we have and acknowledging the hurts that happen along the way. Jesus is talking about living so bravely that we forget to harden our hearts against one another. Jesus is talking about looking around the realm of glory and not seeing everyone looking scrubbed and ironed but instead seeing the truth of wheelchairs and limps and burns and missing hands and feet and mental illness and having less and doing more, all signs of a people who answer the call to take up the

cross and follow him; All signs of a people who willing give their hearts away every day and do not count the cost of forgiveness or faith.

When Jesus says “It is better for you to enter life maimed than have two hands,” and, “It is better for you enter life lame than have two feet,” he is saying, “I would rather you choose to love and enter my kingdom not quite whole, having given away part of yourself.” You see, today’s good news is that the kingdom of God does not need perfect poster children but rather children with hearts held together by band aids and duct tape (Rice). The kingdom of God does not need those who would keep us from the truth but needs those who help others to seek the truth and embrace the truth all the while helping themselves to live the truth. The kingdom of God does not need those who keep others from a seat in church but those who help others to find a seat in church; for together, through our caring and our sharing, through our discipleship and stewardship, through our friendship and love, through our welcome and acceptance of one another, together we are, we all are, the Kingdom of God. Let us pray.

Lord,

We give you thanks for every child of your creation. Lead us as your disciples so that we welcome and accept all others right where they are just as they are and that we can trust in our being welcomed and accepted by others. While we can’t change the world, we can be in the world just as you created us and that will make all the difference. So we pray in Jesus name. Amen.

Offering: A little girl wrote to the pastor and said, “I can’t put more money in the plate at church until I get a raise in my allowance. Could you have a sermon on raising allowance?” I give you all permission to raise your allowance. The ushers will please . . .

Dedication: Dear God, bless this allowance that we offer. As you accept it and us, we pledge to use this money and our gifts for the acceptance of others in your name. Amen.

Benediction: God of grace and God of glory welcomes us here, blesses us here, and sends us out of here and is with us, all of us, wherever we go. Thanks be to God.

Amen and Amen.

Sources:

Aries, Cliff (Reverend); Missouri Mid-South Conference – UCC: Person’s in Ministry Retreat; Resort at Port Arrowhead, Lake of the Ozarks; September 2009.

Holy Bible – New Revised Standard Version; Harper Bibles: San Francisco; 2007.

Miner, Virginia; Lectionary Homiletics; www.goodpreacher.com; 2009.

Rice, Whitney; Lectionary Homiletics; www.goodpreacher.com; 2009.