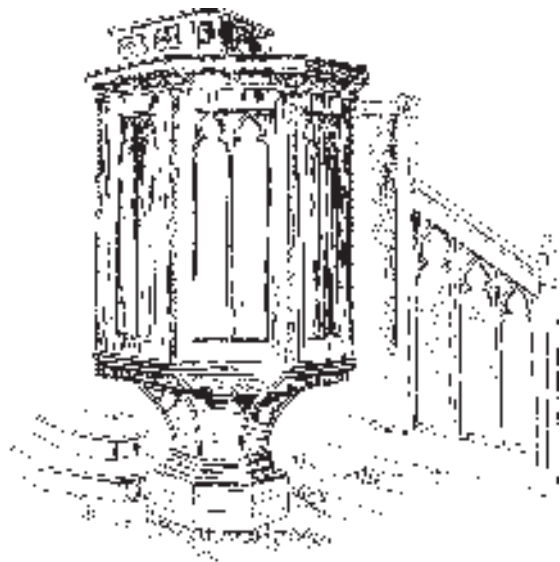


May 9, 2010

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

An Honorary Degree
by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Matthew 28:16-20

A young mother had an unusual experience while taking care of her 2 ½ year-old son, Ryan. Ryan was an extremely active toddler and this particular morning was like many others. All had been going pretty well when Ryan's mom suddenly noticed that the house had grown **too** quiet. Going into the family room she discovered that Ryan had managed to get out a door on the other side of the room. She followed a path of destruction through the living room calling for Ryan, but there was no answer. Up the stairs through two bedrooms—still no Ryan and no answer to her calls—no sound, period. By this time she was beginning to get worried. Down the back stairs into the kitchen—no Ryan. Then she noticed the back door ajar. Looking out the kitchen window, she saw him.

At age 30 months he had somehow managed to open the back door, go outside, and climb into the back of a pickup truck that workers were using to haul their supplies. Ryan had somehow crawled into the bed of the pickup and was now holding onto the tailgate—with his arms extended. There was more than a foot drop, which Ryan knew was too much, yet he wasn't strong enough to pull himself back onto the platform. Without saying a word, Ryan's mom ran out the door and up behind him. Ryan, who didn't know his mom was behind him, was still holding on, saying in a soft voice, "Somebody help the boy!"

"Somebody help the boy." How many times have we prayed that thought? And why not? So often in the Bible God fosters the hope of help by the promise of help: "Ask and it will be given you; seek, and

you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Luke 11:9). Or this verse: “The Lord whom you seek shall suddenly come.” But, God doesn’t come. At least not often enough nor in the way we expect. All the advertisements of God’s help sit squarely against a constant landscape of situations in which no help ever comes.

So...if we are to try to believe God in spite of the evidence, how on earth do we do it? The Episcopal priest and a favorite author of mine, Robert Frarar Capon, offers an analogy which I think is useful. When we say that a friend “helped” us, Capon suggests two meanings are possible. In the case where our need was for a band-aid or to borrow a ladder or to unplug a drain, we have in mind **mechanical** help; help for times when help is at least possible.

But when nothing can be helped, when a child dies from a birth defect or a teenager doesn’t walk away from the scene of a car accident, or a beloved parent is lost to cancer, what do we mean by telling a friend how much help she was to us in our need? She wasn’t able to save them. Still, we are glad of her; we protest that without her we would never have made it. What we thank her for is **personal** help. It was her presence, not the things that she did, that made the difference.

And so it is, I think, with Jesus. In a world where victimization is the reverse side of the coin of being, His help consists in His continuous presence in all victims. A personal help rather than a mechanical help. That is how it seems to be with Jesus. When we are helpless, there He is. While He does not offer protection; He gives no end of support. Stuck in a snow bank on a winter’s day, He doesn’t start your stalled care for you. He comes and sits with you. You can object that He should have made a world in which cars don’t stall; but, you can’t complain that He doesn’t stick by His customers.

We are fast approaching one of my favorite times of year—graduation. Besides the excitement of graduating seniors, I think it’s fun to see who gets honorary degrees. They used to be limited to Heads of State like Churchill or scholars like Einstein or preachers like Hugh Ivan Evans. Now they are given to politicians, authors, pro sports figures, celebrities and entertainers. It’s curious how this academic honor has evolved.

Back in 1856, David Livingston, the well-known missionary, received the Honorary Doctor of Laws degree from the University of Glasgow. The occasion was Livingston’s first visit back to his native England after 16 long years as a missionary in Africa.

At Glasgow in those days, the recipient of the honor is usually subjected to some banter at the hands of the students. But, when Livingston rose, bearing upon his person the marks of his struggles and sufferings in darkest Africa, he was received in reverential silence. He was gaunt and haggard as a result of his long exposure to the tropical sun. On nearly 30 occasions he had been laid low by the fevers that stream from the inland swamps, and these severe illnesses had left their mark. His left arm, crushed by a lion, hung helplessly at his side. A hush fell upon the great assembly as he announced his resolve to return to the land for which he had already endured so much.

“But, I return,” he said that day, “without misgiving and with great gladness. For would you like me to tell you what supported me through all the years of exile among people whose language I could not understand, and whose attitude towards me was always uncertain and often hostile? It is the word of a gentleman of the most strict and sacred honor. The word was this, ‘Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.’ On those words I staked everything, and they never failed.”

In telling the good news, Matthew begins and ends with the same message...that God is with us. He

begins in the first chapter with Jesus' birth. "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and His name shall be called Emmanuel" (which means God with us). (Matthew 1:23.) He ends in Chapter 28 with Jesus' resurrection and Jesus' promise, "I am with you always." I find those among the most comforting words in the whole Bible. Words to remember when stuck in a snowdrift or in any other kind of trouble.

But, those words are true in another way also. Christ is with us, too, in the sense that His image is implanted in every human being. His face is seen in the face of every one we meet.

All of which reminds me of another honorary degree. In the spring of 1981, Bryn Mawr College, presented to every citizen of a small, insignificant French village, an Honorary Doctor of Humanities degree. It was an unprecedented academic gesture. Bryn Mawr gave honorary degrees to people who had never been to college, **all** the people who lived in a town most of us have never heard of. Why? The story is retold in a book by Phillip Hallie entitled *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*.

The village is called LeChambon. In the center of the village is a small French Reformed Church. This village is made up historically of the Huguenots (the French Calvinists) who had fled to the mountain region in the south of France centuries ago as a result of religious persecution. The village is famous for one thing: 50 years ago, during World War II, when France was occupied by the Germans, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Jews found secret hiding places there, carved out of basements. These French Presbyterians risked their lives to save the Jews in an underground railway which led the Jews across the Pyrenees to safety in Spain. The book tells many heroic stories, but one in particular stands out.

On a Saturday afternoon, a brown German occupation bus pulled into the square of LeChambon with one passenger on it. All the citizens had been gathered by the police. In the center of the square stood two Reformed pastors who knew that by the end of the afternoon, as a result of what they refused to reveal to the Gestapo, they would be arrested and sent to a concentration camp. A search was made of every house, but not a single Jew was found. Hours before, they had been hidden in a secret prepared place in the woods. On the bus sat one small, lone Jewish man, who had been captured in another village. He was elderly and his head bent down.

As bitter tirades were directed to the people standing in the town square, and as the two pastors were being led to cars to be taken to a concentration camp, a little boy standing in the crowd watching that lonely Jewish figure reached into his pocket and pulled out what must have been then a very precious commodity, a chocolate bar. He took the chocolate bar, walked past the armed guards, and extended his hand through the window and gave the chocolate bar to the Jewish man. And suddenly, unpredictably, one after another, those who stood in the crowd came forward, one woman removing her cross and extending it through the window, and another, a crust of bread. They gave whatever they had until their gifts were all around him.

Twelve years later someone asked the little boy, then in his 20s, "Why did you give him the chocolate bar?" After a pause he answered, "Because in the face of that old Jew I saw the face of Jesus, and I didn't want him to go to the cross alone and believing that nobody cared."

In each of us there is a gift of the image of God. Surrounding each of us is the personal presence of God. The Christian gospel is an invitation to a rebirth of wonder in what God has done for us and our world in Jesus Christ. It is a much needed rebirth of wonder so that we may rediscover in the face of every man, woman, and child the image of God, who is our Lord Jesus Christ. I invite you, therefore today, to meet and greet everyone as a bearer of Christ's image.

