

SERMON FOR SUNDAY, OCTOBER 18, 2009
ST. PAUL'S CHURCH – MICHIGAN

I bet that it would be an interesting evening some time if we could all sit around the guild hall, having enjoyed one of our pot luck dinners where no one goes hungry, and we placed the chairs in a semi circle and we just used a few lights, so as to create an atmosphere that is intimate. The reason that we would want to create an atmosphere that is intimate is so as to have a good conversation and an honest one. The conversation that we might have is one about friendships and the friends that we have had during this lifetime. We might speak about the friends that have come in and out of our life and we might speak about friendships that stood out for one reason or another and that something made them distinct over other friendships. Talking about those friendships, there would likely be some deep sharing and some new insights and some recollections. I would also venture to say that in the things that would be said around the room about various friendships and various relationships we would hear of what could be called the best of what a friendship is and we might hear of what the disappointment of a friendship is and we might hear of what we never understood about a friendship as hard as we tried and we might hear of a friendship that made a difference when nothing else could make a difference. If we were to have an evening such as that here, I have no doubt in saying that it would be an evening not easily forgotten and that would be remembered for a long time. Stretch your imagine if you would please and let's imagine that we really did have such an evening here at the church and we invited Jesus to be physically among us and not just to be the silent observer but rather to participate and to join in the conversation. I wonder....I wonder what Jesus might say as part of the conversation about friends and friendships? Do you suppose that in speaking that evening, Jesus might have a story to recount that had some resemblance to the story that Mark recounts in the Gospel for this week? Maybe in words different than the words of Mark, Jesus would say something along the lines of.....and then there were two

men that had been faithfully following me and I thought that they were getting what it was that I had to say and despite the opposition and the frustration of those who just did not believe that I was the son of God, these two were there and I thought that they had got it....the part of serving and the part of suffering and the part of sacrifice. And then they asked of me a favour, and if you could believe it the favour that they asked for had to do with them and nothing less! One wanted to sit on my left and the other on my right in glory. They hadn't got it. But when I explained more to them and went into some depth, then they said sure, that is alright with us. This morning I wish to say a few words about James and John, those two men that had been faithfully following Jesus and also I might say something about Jesus.

Firstly, what might be said about James and John is that as hard as they may have tried and as faithful as they may have been and as much as they may have believed with all of their heart in who Jesus was and what his life and ministry was about, there was still something that kept them from being all that they could have been and that was ambition. Perhaps Jesus thought that they had got it.....until the point when their ambition showed through and they said, in the words of Mark, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you", or in other translations, 'we ask of you a favour'. Please let one of us sit on your right and the other on your left when you arrive in glory. In the evening of conversation Jesus might share that there he had been speaking about sacrifice and suffering and serving and then before you know it the two who had been close and the two that one might have thought should know better, blurted out something that was so offtrack and missing the mark totally. There is something in that story....there is something in that story which is so true and so helpful. So which one of us have not been there? Which one of us have not been there in the person of James or John. When I say which one of us, I don't mean necessarily which one of us have not brought to our faith or brought to our relationship with Jesus a desire for ambition...but

which one of us have not brought to our faith and our relationship with Jesus something that is just a piece of the stuff that we are still working with or in other words, something of our own issues? They asked of Jesus, after following him around and after hearing him speak and after watching and observing...they asked of him “we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you” or ‘we ask of you a favour’. Times in my own spiritual life and in my own faith and in my own attempt to be faithful and to serve I have said some things or thought some things or done, and then afterwards I have asked myself, what was that all about? What was that all about because it reflected none of those things that I know about faith and being a Christian and following in the footsteps of Jesus. Have you ever been there? I bet that you have if you are at all human.

Secondly, the way that Jesus responded probably was not by scolding, and not by shaming, and not by belittling, but instead by listening and then challenging. Sitting around the guild hall we continue our conversation about friendships. Some incredible stories are told. The question is asked by one person if they have ever had a friend that did something really stupid. What they did that was stupid might have had to do with a business dealing or it might have had to do with a family relationship or might have just been a decision of bad judgement and nothing thinking. And the person asking that question then goes on to ask further....as a friend how did you respond. We know that if we can say yes to the first part, then we hope that the way we responded to that friend was not by scolding or shaming or belittling but instead by listening and then challenging. This journey of faith that we are on is not one marked by our perfection but rather along with our attempts to be faithful and to do the things that Jesus would do and have us to do... it is marked by our faults and where we just don't get it or don't always get it right. Thank goodness wouldn't you say...thank goodness wouldn't you say that the way our Lord responds to us is not unlike the way

that he responded to James and to John and instead of scolding and shaming and belittling, he listens and then he challenges.

Thirdly, in that Gospel there are two sentences which are about hope and the heart. After having asked Jesus for the favour of being able to sit on the left and the right, Jesus tells them that they don't know what they are asking. Jesus then goes on to issue them a challenge, albeit it a tremendous challenge and he asks them "are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with". James and John replied "we are able". They went off in a wrong direction and at that moment what was heard through their question was ambition....can one of us sit on your left and the other on your right, and then having listened to them and challenging them, there was just something in the heart of James and John that was going in the right direction and even if they did not fully understand what lay ahead for Jesus...suffering and sacrifice and death....even if they didn't fully understand it, they answered Jesus by saying "we are able". So we sit around the guild hall talking and sharing on a deep level and after hearing of some friendships that had hiccups and bumps along the way, we also hear those familiar words...'and you know, she or he is a good person'. I love to hear those words of James and John because they are words that speak of my heart and my intention on my own journey of faith...just as it spoke of theirs..."we are able". Where there are those three words, we are able, there follows after that always, hope and despite ambition, despite what is murky, despite whatever it is which reflects that we didn't quite get it right....much that God is able to work with and much that God does work with.

Returning back to where we began, we sit around the guild hall speaking of friendships and how they have touched our lives and how they have run paths parallel to ours and other times diverging from ours. And then only a few feet away in the church come Sunday we sing that hymn What A Friend We Have In Jesus. Thank goodness that in the face of those moments when our

words or our actions speak of the fact that we have yet a little ways to go and that we haven't yet arrived, what God hears with equal voice and what reflects the hope that is within us'we are able'.

Rev Glenn H. Stone