

ASH WEDNESDAY  
MARCH 1, 2017

FIRST, MARSHALL  
PASTOR SCOTT FULLER  
Psalm 5:1-8; Luke 9:51-62

*Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

*Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we believe and in believing we obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.*



Is it just me, or does our Gospel lesson for this evening paint kind of a prickly picture of our Lord? The images we're used to like: the Good Shepherd, or...the Prince of Peace, or...the Friend of Sinners seem to have been **replaced** with something a little sharper in **tone**, more frustrated with **foolishness**, and a lot more...**precise** in the **points** Jesus wants to **present** to his **disciples**.

Actually, a good friend and colleague by the name of Mike Keys, liked to talk about how Ash Wednesday always signals a change in the tone of Jesus' message: he calls this the time of the *cranky Jesus*. True, from his first sermon until chapter 9, the Lord's focus has been on both *comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable* (<http://www.dictionaryofchristianese.com/god-comforts-the-afflicted-and-afflicts-the-comfortable/>).

But, now that he's turned his face toward **Jerusalem** (which means towards his *death*), Jesus takes-**off** the gloves and prepares to bare-knuckle-fight his way, with words, to the cross.



To date, the **only** ones who've suffered the stabs of his censoring statements are the *hard-hearted Pharisees* and the *self-satisfied scribes*. Then **seven times** here in chapter 9 of Luke, Jesus' *frustration slips*, and not **once** is it directed at **either** of those past favorite targets.

**Instead**, the bulk of those who experience the sharp shards of his latest sharings...are the **disciples** – his closest friends, his staunchest allies, his well-coached team.

The trouble is that Jesus *gets it* about what's going to happen, how **his future** will be *cut short*, how his **life** will *brutally end* – you can't dare to criticize those in power without knowing that they'll stop at nothing to use that power to protect what they have – including murder.

So here's a thumbnail sketch of these “teaching moments” (or *spiritual spankings* if you will!) from chapter 9:

The feeding of the 5,000 – it's evening, it's been a long day, the disciples are tired and hungry, looking out at a crowd of thousands who are **also** tired and hungry. They tell Jesus to send everyone away to find shelter and something to eat...but Jesus turns to them and says, ***YOU give them something to eat!***

Well, we all know how **that** story ends, right? When the disciples hold up 5 loaves and two fish, and say, *Yeah, that's gonna work!*...Jesus takes matters into his own hands – ***literally!*** He blesses the fish and loaves... then shows the disciples how to treat everyone as if they were guests in their home...by feeding them all – as much as they want – and more!!

Jesus drops his **next** bomb on the disciples by telling them that *The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day rise*. Then, as if that's not unsettling enough, he hits them a **third** time when he says, *If any want to follow me, let them DENY themselves, take up their cross **daily**, and follow me*.

A few verses later, another time of testing occurs – right on the heels of the TRANSFIGURATION. Pr. Julie just preached on this last week when Peter, James and John ALL see Jesus transformed AND see him speaking with MOSES and ELIJAH, AND hear God speak from the cloud!!! A RED letter day in ANYONE'S calendar, right?

Yet the very next day, when these spiritually empowered disciples come down from the Mount of Transfiguration...they cannot even save one child from a demon who torments him. Jesus shakes his head and says, *You faithless and perverse generation... how much longer must I be with you and bear with you???* OUCH!!!!

Then Jesus shares with them a second time the terrible secret he's been carrying inside his soul: *The Son of Man will be betrayed into human hands...* Well, the very next thing we hear is that the disciples are arguing about which of them is the greatest follower of God!?!? The Lord settles their immature argument by putting his arm around a little child and saying, *whoever lives like this child, is the greatest of all* (v. 48).

Later, the disciples brag to Jesus about how they had **prevented a stranger** from **casting out demons** in *Jesus' name*...because he didn't belong to their group!! I can only picture Jesus' response when he says...*whoever's not AGAINST you, is FOR you...*

These striking events provide the set-up, the pre-story, the prologue to today's drama...but the theme remains the same...



As the Lord is on his way to Jerusalem, this nasty sub-plot continues with the centuries-old animosity between Samaritan and Jew. It means that, for the former, anyone going *through* their territory toward **Jerusalem** is an *enemy*.

The Samaritans snub Jesus...and that show of disrespect doesn't sit well with the disciples, James and John, *the Sons of Thunder*, who're not about to take an insult lying down. So, they offer to sear those Samaritan so-and-so's with a blast of fire from heaven...teach them a little respect!!

Once again, though, Jesus *rebukes* **them** – a very strong and negative response... He rebukes his very own disciples...**WHY???**

Anyone/Everyone in this world has the power to destroy life, to seek vengeance, to claim an *eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*. But in the end, that's just perpetuating the power of death. And the more we give-in to that power of death, the stronger its hold grows on our hearts.

And so, as a lesson to those hot-headed brothers (and to the rest of us as well!!!), Jesus rebukes them: reprimands, reproaches, and reproves them...

I know I've told this joke before – I just can't remember if I've shared it in a sermon – but it fits well here so I'm going to tell it again.

Actually, it's a cartoon that shows a picture of Jesus sitting on a rock after a hard day. Like the image on the screens, he's got a frown on his face, his head leaning on his hand, and the disciples are looking kinda sheepish. Then one of them says to the Lord, "Do you ever feel like just saying *to hell with it all???*"

I'm thinking that this was one of *those* days for Jesus...and it's not over. As they're walking away, three people come up and express an interest in following Jesus...but they all seem reluctant to make a commitment.

The first wonders about **where** they'll live, the second is concerned about **honoring** the **dead**, and the third is worried about his **loved ones**... **all** of which are legitimate concerns, right? Yet Jesus answers each with a harsh and cryptic reply that sends them on their way...

### Why does he do that? Why does he turn them away?



One thing occurred to me: each of the concerns raised by the three would-be followers has to do with the theme of *home* – the **area** where we live, the **shelter** in which we live, the **people** with whom we live, and love, and have our being...Again, all of which are good and virtuous matters... Yet Jesus knows that even these can become false gods, empty idols, distracting deities...

In a sense, I think Jesus is saying that if our heart is at home anywhere else than in the good news of God's love for all people, then no matter how correct the cause, how noble the notion, or how important the issue, the result will always be the same. Unlike Jesus, *our* prayer would then become: *Not thy will, Lord, but my will be done...*



And when **that** happens...

-when we'd rather seek vengeance on our enemies than forgive them;

-when we care more about our **pleasure** than about those who live in **pain**;

-when we focus our attention on wholesome values but value **not** those families who are in need,

then our **homes** – **and** our **churches** – become our **castles**...and **we** become more interested in **protecting our kingdoms** than in **proclaiming the kingdom of God** to those who have **no spiritual sanctuary**, **no home** for their hearts, **no shelter** for their souls...

**So what does it mean, then, to have our *home* in Christ?**

\*It means that we look for our security more in the good news of Jesus Christ than in the good news of the economy.

\*It means that we find more of a sense of acceptance and belonging in God's love than in any other relationship we have.

\*And it means that we find a sense of purpose in life...

It's a purpose that calls us:

-to find our joy in being grateful to God for what we've been given,

-to pursue our happiness by pursuing the happiness of our neighbors,

-to live to serve...rather than live to **be** served.



A giant in the history of the Christian faith, Martin Luther's favorite theologian, was a man by the name of Augustine who lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century. He embraced a very worldly lifestyle until he heard God's call...then he became the very voice of every human being who longs for a deeper relationship with God.

One of his short, but powerful prayers seems a most appropriate way to end. He wrote:

“Our hearts are restless, until they find rest in You (O God).”  
*Augustine of Hippo (354–430), in Confessions*

*May our restless hearts...  
hearts that are restless...  
to find home, love, and security...  
find their spiritual home...  
only in You,  
O God of grace and hope.*

Amen.