

Sermon August 31, 2014

“Marching Orders”

Exodus 3:1-15 Romans 12: 9-21

*Children’s time: unsharpened pencils - God sharpens us to make us into “useful” instruments*

Years ago when I was preaching on the Romans scripture, I used the idea of a Monopoly game as the children’s sermon. In Monopoly, the players try to get as much property for themselves as possible, and as much money, so that finally the other players end up pretty much powerless, having to pay “Rent” to the powerful one/s. It’s too much like real life.

There’s a lot in life which can make a person feel pretty powerless. Big things, like earthquakes, droughts, and hurricanes, for sure; but also smaller, more constant, things, like hassles with one’s insurance, or long waits on hold on the telephone when you’re trying to straighten out your payments with a company, or a disintegrating relationship with someone you love... Being a patient in a hospital can force a person into a state of feeling powerless, and so can having a spouse or child with a challenging disease. Parenthood is another condition that can regularly make you feel like you’re groping in the dark...

Perhaps that’s why having a responsive car can feel so reassuring, or being able to control the television programs through the remote control feels “right.” Internet surfing can provide a huge choice of information, and when you’re tired, you simply click the “X” and you’re out. So unless your computer gets hacked, you’re in control! Even with these items, though, the sense of power is fleeting, because in most of life, we’re not very much in control.

We heard two lessons from the Bible this morning. They were very different, one being the story of Moses hearing God tell him to go to Egypt to serve as deliverer of the Hebrew people, the other Paul’s counsel about how Christians are to live out their lives in a difficult world. In each lesson, there is a discernable “path to power.”

Moses. We always hear about how great Moses was, and most of us can thank Cecil B. deMille for images of Charlton Heston standing up to Yule Brenner (Pharaoh) and decisively leading his people. But the Bible shows Moses as one who also struggled in life. Baby in the basket, sentenced to death but plucked from the river by none other than Pharaoh’s daughter, Moses had grown up in the Egyptian pharaoh’s household. Then one day he saw a Hebrew slave being beaten by an Egyptian, and Moses killed the Egyptian. After hiding the body, he thought he was okay, but then somebody told him they had seen him kill the man. So Moses ran away from Egypt to the hills of Midian, where he started a new life by marrying a shepherd’s daughter. Years passed, and then, in today’s scripture, God got Moses’ attention and gave him a job to do: Go back to Egypt, and lead the Hebrew people out of the harsh slavery conditions they were suffering.

Moses’ response to God: “But God, who am I to do this?” God offered him power through God’s promise of presence: “I am with you.” “But God, what do I say?” And God offered him power by revealing his name: “Tell the Pharaoh I AM sent you.” And later, Moses whined, “But God, I can’t speak, I stutter..” And God offered him the power of a solution: “Your brother Aaron can go with you and help.”

Power: Moses was given marching orders that would change his life from that of a murderer who had had to run away to that of a man who would not only lead his people but also end up being able to argue effectively with God himself! A powerful instrument of God!

When God calls a person to a purpose, even a purpose that seems impossible, the person discovers power for life that only God can give. God “sharpens” whomever God calls!

The other lesson was addressed to Christians who were having a rough time trying to be Christian in a harsh world, but it didn’t offer them an easy way out. An easy way out might have said, “Blend in, don’t get overly involved in things, leave your enemies alone; walk away from them...

One person listened to these verses and said, "Why, Paul was almost as crazy as Jesus was when he spoke the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount! Nobody could survive in today's world by taking those things seriously in ordinary life. That's okay for a monastery, maybe, but real life in the 21st Century? Forget it!"

More than 100 years ago, Friedrich Nietzsche looked toward the 20th century and predicted that it would be a time in which "God is dead." Nietzsche did not mean that there wouldn't be a God. He meant that humanity, because of its own drive for power, would "kill" God, kill God by living life as though God didn't exist. In this perspective, God has been "killed" by many persons and certainly by our general society even today. Unfortunately, even churches too often live our lives and move through our meetings as if God doesn't really exist. (pause)

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints, practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Witness to a living God! (pause)

An old story told that a rabbi and a soapmaker went for a walk together. The soapmaker said, "What good is religion? Look at all the trouble and misery still in the world after thousands of years of teaching about goodness, truth, and peace- after all the prayers, sermons and teachings. If religion is good and true, how can this be?"

The rabbi said nothing. They continued walking until he noticed a child playing in the gutter. Then the rabbi said, "Look at that child. You say that soap makes people clean, but see the dirt on that youngster. What good is soap? With all the soap in the world, that child is still filthy. I wonder how effective soap is after all."

The soapmaker protested and said, "But Rabbi, soap can't do any good unless it is used."

"Exactly," replied the rabbi. "It is the same with religion. It is ineffective unless it is applied and used."

I think of the parent of a young boy who was often picked on in school. The parent was a Christian, and really struggled with how to help his son when the boy came home with torn pants and blood on his shirt. Fight back? Get Karate lessons? Or "Do not repay anyone evil for evil...?" Which offers a young boy more power for life?

Paul told the struggling Christians to march the higher road. "Never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God..." And, in fact, step out further with loving deeds: "If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink...for by this, you heap burning coals on their heads..."

Paul challenged Christians 2000-plus years ago and we who are Christian today to SEE the power that God has put within our grasp. We have the power to choose whether to act out of revenge and hatred or out of love. We have the choice. Every day, as life throws stuff at us (good and bad), we have to choose how to react. The Bible would have us understand that GOD should be our goal, not "winning" a battle, not overcoming an enemy, not having all the property when we come to the end of the game.

I share with you the story of a young man called Sweat, who was from a little backwoods town in Tennessee, who was drafted into the army. "We were all scared, and scared to admit it," writes Sweat's bunk mate. The first day was designed to scare us silly, physicals, meeting our sergeant, learning that all the things we did were wrong. That night we were scared at lights out. And there was this noise, we all listened, it was Sweat saying his prayers, on his knees, by the bunk. And we all laughed, and made jokes, and teased him that night. But he continued the next night, and there were fewer laughs, and fewer catcalls. The third night there was only one comment. The fourth night we all waited for Sweat's prayer, when it was over someone said, amen. It became our ritual, every night. Sweat's prayer became our prayer. One man won us over by doing what was right. After 12 weeks we had to vote on best cadet. Sweat wasn't a very good soldier, he wasn't strong or all that bright---but when we voted he was elected unanimously---and to this day I don't think our sergeant knows why. But we will never forget that he was the most courageous of us all." (Adapted from William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 27, No. 3)

Do not be conformed to this world, love your enemies, do good to those who persecute you. This is what the kingdom of heaven is all about.

So, what's the Word?

Moses: Notice the God whose hand has been active in your life since the day you were born, and step out in trust to do God's work. By so doing, your life will be filled with power.

Early Christians: Live your life by different standards from those of the harsh and hard world in which you live... You MAY, because God loves you and has already saved you.

Folks who sit in a pew in Winsted UMC this morning, August 31, 2014: Give attention to the God who loves you as much as he did Moses and the early Christians... In our society, so filled with “Monopoly Game” mentality and addiction to material comforts, choose higher ground, better marching orders: seek to know and to love God apart from favors or safety or tickets into heaven. Find your own way to really love God. By this, you will love others and yourself and you will discover power in your life. Amen.