

**15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – 2009**  
**“The Invitation to Transform our Lives”**

TEXTS: Proverbs 1:20-33; Psalm 19; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38  
 Given at Knox Presbyterian Church, Victoria – September 13, 2009  
 Sarah Donnelly, BA, M.Div.

Using resources written by:

Brent A. Strawn, Associate Professor of Old Testament, Candler School of Theology, Emory University *Atlanta, GA*

Dr. Philip W. McLarty, Pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Hope, Arkansas

Ron Rolheiser omi, The Oblate Seminary, San Antonio TX

Loving God,  
 You have led us to this place,  
 not to shield us from heartache  
 and the pain of human life,  
 but to heal us and inspire us,  
 to gently redirect us,  
 till we see the world as you do  
 and love it with your love.  
 Amen.

On August 30 my husband and I celebrated our 6<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. I was thinking about today’s readings as I was making my lunch one day last week, and I noticed on our fridge a cartoon that we cut out and taped to that fridge several years ago. It was during the first year of our marriage, we were slowly getting to know each other – really know each other – and gradually noticing with both humour and alarm that our personalities were disturbingly portrayed by two well-known Peanuts characters: Charlie Brown and Lucy. Scott – on a bad day – is Charlie Brown; forecasting doom and gloom, clinging to hope but often feeling duped as the metaphorical football is taken just before he makes his touchdown kick. I am – on both good days and bad days – Lucy. I am bossy, often controlling, and am convinced that I always have the best ideas. In fact, the cartoon on our fridge reads like this...

Lucy: If everyone listened to me, this would be a perfect world!

Lucy: Just think about it..wouldn’t you love to live in a perfect world?

(Linus puts his blanket over his head)

Lucy: **Well, why not?!**

Now this IS funny, and I think that there is a certain amount of good psychological health in acknowledging and accepting *all* of our characteristics and personality traits – the healthy as well as the unhealthy – but the readings that we heard this morning compel us to go beyond self-acceptance. They encourage us, invite us, even challenge us to go deeper, to stretch ourselves, to discipline ourselves, to *transform* ourselves.

We began by listening to the Book of Proverbs. In this first chapter we hear two voices – a male voice, which is the voice of a teacher, figured as a father speaking to his son, and the voice we heard this morning - a female voice – Wisdom herself – personified as a virtuous wife and mother. Wisdom is a woman, and a prophet, and she speaks plainly – even sharply – in public places where she can be heard. She calls to the “simple” (who don’t know better), to the “scoffers” (who take pleasure in cynicism) and to “fools” (who despise knowledge) – all of those people who reject wisdom. She pleads with them to change their ways, but they refuse to do so.

So she names the result of their behaviour – that they will reap what they have sown, and they will suffer because of the decisions they have made. This is “Dr. Phil” and “Judge Judy” for our ancient ancestors.

I don’t know about you, but I felt very uncomfortable when I first read this chapter in Proverbs. It’s not that these words are unfamiliar – in fact, most of us heard them quite often in our lives as we grew up. They came out of the mouths of frustrated parents, teachers, mentors, older siblings, counsellors and law enforcement officers – all those people in our lives who are older and wiser than we are, and can see where our thoughtless or selfish behaviour is leading us. I can accept those words from them, but feel uncomfortable hearing them coming from the mouth of Wisdom. Perhaps I would prefer Wisdom to speak more like a gentle, non-threatening self-help book: *“10 Easy Steps to Becoming a Wise and Humble Person.”* But she doesn’t – she comes out thundering like the prophets of old, holding our feet to the fire until we appreciate how seriously we must take ourselves, our decisions, our lives...

Psalms 19 continues this theme, putting our lives in sharp perspective. “The heavens are telling the glory of God,” and we are called to live in right relationship with our God. “Clear me from my faults” we prayed, “Keep back your servant also from proud thoughts; do not let them have dominion over me.” The “Lucy” in me continues to be disturbed.

The reading from James provides no detour from this direction. The author of this book is writing to an established Christian community, who struggle with the same issues that we continue to struggle with today: the tensions between the rich and the poor, and how we can best get along with each other. Chapter 3 of this letter begins with a very serious warning for anyone who feels called to teach or preach – that we are held to a high standard, and we must watch that we do not misuse the responsibility we have been given. Then his concern widens, and embraces us all as he warns us about the power we have been given in the gift of free speech. He uses wonderful images here – our tongues are like the bit of a bridle that guides the direction of a horse; our tongues are like a small rudder that gives direction to a large ship; our tongues are like a small fire that can spark a large forest fire – a reality that we have been so conscious of this summer here in BC. With our tongues we can both bless and curse. This is a great responsibility, and at times a heavy burden.

Peter knew that blessing and curse – he stumbled over his tongue more times than we can count, I’m sure, but at times his tongue also served him well. In the gospel reading from Mark Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” and Peter gets it right. But when Jesus begins to spell out his understanding of what it means to be the Messiah, Peter’s tongue becomes active again, and gets him into all sorts of trouble. In a matter of seconds Peter goes from top of the class to being called by his best friend “Satan.” Harsh words from someone you have given up your life for. Have you ever wondered why Jesus used such harsh language? Was he fed up, at the end of his rope, or just hungry after another busy and demanding day? Perhaps, but remember the last time Jesus had heard the words that Peter had just said to him? It was toward the end of his time of fasting and prayer in the wilderness, and the very same words (“you can be the Messiah and avoid vulnerability, loneliness, betrayal and suffering”) were spoken by Satan – by the voice of deception. In the short conversation that Jesus has with Peter Jesus is essentially saying to him, “You know Peter, I have heard that voice before, and you don’t want to know whose voice it was.”

Jesus then turns back to the whole crowd – a crowd I can imagine with feet shuffling in dirt, muttering to each other and looking generally worried and confused – and says to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit

them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" Hardly words of comfort for this confused and fearful group.

What does it mean, for us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus? I would like to end this sermon by briefly looking at five insights.

We must remember that while God's grace is always given to us freely, it is never bestowed cheaply. It comes at a price – Jesus paid a price for the decisions he made, and we pay a price for deciding to be Christians – people who surrender our lives to God in gratitude and faithful obedience. But in concrete terms, what does this involve?

First, it involves the loss of our old identity. I may be a "Lucy" by nature, but I am a Christian by choice, meaning that I am called to act in a manner that reflects my values and the religious tenants of my faith. St. Paul told the Corinthians:

*"If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation;  
everything old has passed away;  
see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor. 5:17)*

Is there an aspect of your identity that you wish to surrender? Is there a characteristic trait that you would like healed or made new?

Secondly, the cost of discipleship involves the sacrifice of personal freedom. Does this mean that we are slaves? No! But what we need to remember is that freedom in Christ is not freedom for us to do our own thing, but freedom to choose Christ over the ways of the world. This is what all the readings have been teaching us this morning – that the choice is ours, and at times it is difficult to choose to say or do the right thing.

A third cost of discipleship is freely giving up our old prejudices. It's no secret, prejudice is passed on from one generation to the next. Those growing up in the Southern United States in the late 40s and 50s thought black people to be inferior to white people. And I don't think those prejudices have completely disappeared. At that time there were separate restrooms, dining rooms and schools to keep people segregated from each other. In your past, some of you were probably taught not to socialize with Catholics, or Jews. Today we are seeing a great backlash against Muslims around the world. What are some of the prejudices you learned as a child? What prejudices do you hold today? What needs to be healed for you to grow more fully into a disciple of Christ?

Another cost of discipleship is the letting go of personal wealth. The truth is, as Christians, we have no assets of our own. All that we have belongs to God. Our job is to be good stewards, not owners, of the possessions with which God has entrusted us.

And finally, the greatest cost of discipleship is the losing of our lives in devotion to Jesus Christ and his kingdom on earth. There are no two ways about it. Jesus said,

*"For those who want to save their life will lose it,  
and those who lose their life for my sake,  
and for the sake of the gospel,  
will save it." (Mk. 8:35)*

In order to live, first we have to die. That's the ultimate cost of discipleship.

And so this is the Good News: When we're willing to pay the costs of discipleship – when we're willing to give up our identity, whether we are “Charlie Browns” or “Lucys”, when we are willing to sacrifice our personal freedom, to let go of our prejudices, to loosen our grip on our material wealth – when we're willing to die to ourselves, in other words – then we shall experience new life in Christ and share in the promise of his resurrection from the dead. Charles Everest understood this perfectly when he penned the words to the hymn we will sing shortly:

*Take up your cross, the Saviour said,  
If my disciple you would be;  
Deny yourself, the world forsake and humbly follow after me.  
Take up thy cross and follow Christ,  
Nor think till death to lay it down,  
For only those who bear the cross  
May hope to wear the glorious crown.*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.