Sermon, October 20, 2024

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton Maine

Delivered by the Rev. John Balicki

In his book "Let Your Life Speak", Quaker theologian and author Parker Palmer tells how he was offered the presidency of a small educational institution. He wanted the job, and thought he should take it. Nevertheless, given his Quaker tradition, he assembled a "clearness committee" of some trusted friends. Their job wasn't to give him any advice, but instead to ask him honest, open-ended questions, so that Palmer could discern his vocational call for himself.

Halfway through this three-hour meeting, a friend asked Palmer what he would like most about being president. He mentioned several things he would not enjoy, like wearing a tie, at which his friend pointed out that he wasn't answering the question. Palmer paused, thought a bit, then he writes how he "gave an answer that appalled even me as I spoke it: 'Well,' I said, in the smallest voice I possess, 'I guess what I'd like most is getting my picture in the paper with the word 'president' under it.'"

He concludes: "I was sitting with seasoned Quakers who knew that though my answer was laughable, my mortal soul was clearly at stake! They did not laugh at all but went into a long and serious silence — a silence in which I could only sweat and inwardly groan. Finally, my questioner broke the silence with a question that cracked all of us up — and cracked me open: 'Parker, can you think of an easier way to get your picture in the paper?' By then it was obvious, even to me, that my desire to be president had much more to do with my ego than with the ecology of my life." The clearness committee had made things clear, he withdrew his name from the search, and the clarity of their few responses made Parker look in the mirror and reflect on who he was and who he was callled to be.

Two of our scripture lessons today also feature people confronted with some plain truths relative to the grand scheme of the universe. Let's turn back to our friend Job whom we talked about last week. Job has endured 37 chapters of God's silence – 37 chapters that's a long Quaker meeting – 37 chapters where Job and his friends continually banter among each other and pose questions to God about the nature of human suffering. Is Job innocent as he contests or, as his friends claim, must Job be guilty of some moral violations which result in all the bad things that happened to him and his family? And God finally shows up – God comes in a whirlwind which is a

rather dramatic and not very pastorally sensitive show of power to someone who has lost ten children who were all killed by a tornado. But God still does not answer Job's questions, isn't going to answer each of Job's questions as to what he might have done wrong to deserve this - instead the Lord says "Who is this" more with a tone of "How dare you?" or "Who do you think you are?" and instead of giving answers to Job fires questions at him using vivid imagery describing the greatness of God in creation – no human could have envisioned such a scenario much less claimed to understand or taken part in it. And then concludes with a passage on wild animals – who has designed a world where animals find their food? Job is left speechless – for his answer tune in next week.

There is similar questioning in the gospel. James and John ask for a special favor – to sit at the right and left of the Lord. They are still thinking of the Kingdom of God as a career ladder – the places at the left or right as the ultimate promotion – or perhaps the fine retirement party with the gold watch. Jesus responds by asking if they are able to drink the cup he is to drink – which means to share in his sacrificial death. James and John too quickly reply that they are; yet, at the time of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion they will have deserted him. And further those seats at the right at the left – at the crucifixion it is two thieves who will be at the right and the left. After James and John get in a scuffle with the other ten, Jesus talks to all of them about the status of true leadership. In a society of power, status and honor (no different now than then), the disciples are called to take a path of servant leadership – The heart of discipleship is service and not privilege - and those who do such service do it with no thought for recognition.

So it seems the question of the day, for Parker, for Job, for James and John is "Who do you think you are?'. Job is called to reflect on his smallness today before the grandeur of God and the wonders of the design of creation; the disciples are called to rethink what it means to be truly great.

And "who do we think we are?" As we come to this more serious time of year, when summer warmth and fun evaporate as quickly as that first hard frost, we come to our own time of stewardship – "the careful, responsible management of something entrusted to our care". Taking a page out of Job, we are called to be stewards of creation – it's a magnificent enterprise and what is our role in it? Taking a page out of the gospel – we are stewards of a tradition of discipleship – What is our role in it? Who are we called to serve? And finally we will come to the stewardship of our own little spot in the Kingdom – St. Luke's Church. Who do we think we are? In this time of rapid

change of the place and role of religion in this world, what and how is my role at St. Luke's and what is our role in proclaiming the gospel in this area?

More questions than answers –like God before Job – but questions for our discernment as both individuals and the people of St. Luke's. One thing we can be certain about is that the path is not about trying to get our picture in the paper, have all the right answers or sitting at the right or left of the throne of Almighty God. What it is about is humble servanthood. I close with the poem, "To Be Famous" by the Russian novelist, Boris Pasternak,

Creation calls for self-surrender,
Not loud noise and cheap success.
Life must be lived without false face,
Lived so that in the final count
We draw unto ourselves love from space.

So plunge yourself into obscurity
And conceal there your tracks.
But be alive, alive and only,
Alive and only, until the end.