What Have We Got to Lose?
A Sermon by Avena Ward
St. Pauls United Church of Christ
Chicago, Illinois
September 16, 2012

Text: Mark 8: 27-38

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said 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? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

It’s not an enticing image, an exhausted man in his underwear, dripping sweat and blood, weighed down under the weight of a couple of timbers nailed together in the shape of a T. A man carrying his own mode of execution, marching to his inevitable death.

The image Jesus laid out for his disciples that day isn’t pretty. I don’t know about you, but it makes my stomach lurch. So I can only imagine how his disciples must have felt as Jesus graphically described for them what awaited him. And then he invited them to follow in his footsteps. It wasn’t really an invitation. It was more like a dare.

Not me. No thank you. I would not have taken the dare, would you? I would have just slipped quietly away.

I wouldn’t have had the courage Peter did, either. The courage to confront Jesus when he started talking about that stuff. About having to suffer rejection and be tortured and killed. I’m pretty sure I would have decided this was not the kind of messiah I wanted to put my energy behind. I would have begun looking for someone else. Someone more appealing.
Peter had seen Jesus work miracles, though. And so when Jesus asked: “Who do you say I am?” Peter had affirmed that he saw Jesus as Messiah. God’s anointed one. Clearly, Peter and Jesus were not on the same page. Peter was thinking of a Messiah along the lines of Israel’s King David. Someone who would be a powerful organizer AND a gifted general, someone with superhuman powers.

So Peter was taken off guard when Jesus began to explain the path he would travel. Peter reprimanded Jesus. We don’t get to hear the exact words he spoke, but we know it was a “rebuke.” Jesus came right back at Peter, essentially telling him he had his head in a dark place.

Then Jesus gave that paradoxical teaching that has been so often repeated: Those who would save their lives will lose them and those who are willing to sacrifice themselves to bring good news to others will find life. What kind of talk is this? I agree that it’s NOT human wisdom. It is the kind of self-sacrificing wisdom that drove fire fighters and police up the stairs in those burning twin towers eleven years ago. This kind of wisdom isn’t born out of thinking and strategizing about how to survive. It’s a compassionate outpouring that comes from somewhere in the center of the heart, the place where divine wisdom is felt more than known.

But you have to have Jesus’ eyes to see it. This is divine wisdom and it points us to the kind of life to which God calls us.

But I’m with Peter. As Matt said last week, most of the people Jesus talked to, the disciples included, didn’t see they weren’t truly living the life to which God calls. They didn’t notice they were dying a little bit every day, without truly living. And they certainly didn’t think they were in a burning building. Because, like a frog placed in a pot of luke-warm water on a fire where the temperature is gradually increasing, they weren’t noticing the heat coming up.

But Jesus did. Jesus came so that they might have a chance at the true life and have it abundantly. That mission takes us first noticing there IS a threat to life.

Jesus knew that we have that divine wisdom in us. When we see a threat the natural reaction – I would the divine reaction wired into us -- is to jump in with passion to save. Without evaluating the risk to life and limb. At that moment when Peter argued with him, Jesus saw that Peter and all the rest were like frogs.

Here’s another way to look at it: When people are being asphyxiated by carbon monoxide they don’t really notice it happening. In fact they lose consciousness, fall asleep, as the life-giving O2 molecules are replaced by heavier single oxygen molecules. To save folks who are being asphyxiated, you have to startle them out of that sleep that’s making their bodies and their minds heavy.
Jesus startled Peter and the rest of the disciples with his talk about Satan. He got their attention, when he accused Peter of playing the ultimate devil’s advocate. And Jesus needed to startle the disciples. He needed them to be awake. He needed followers who clearly understood what this project would take. If they (and we) are going to buy into Jesus’ mission we must first let him save us from the sleep that leads to deadness if we are to bring good news to others.

Last week Pastor Matt challenged us. He challenged us to imagine what we could accomplish at St. Pauls Church if we let Jesus wake us up, and inspire us to open our eyes and expand our vision beyond what we’ve seen before.

As we move into this new phase in our life as people called by Jesus to be a congregation, Matt invited us to look at our world and our church’s place in it -- not the way we always have -- but the way Jesus would. And this lesson today invites us to put on Jesus’s glasses so that we can see the burning buildings, the people crushed by earthquakes, and washed away by floods. Not just literally, but also figuratively.

If we’re willing to allow Jesus to encourage us, as Peter did in last week’s gospel, we may find ourselves making room in our church for more people than we’ve ever seen before. And that’s going to take something from us.

This past week I was thinking out loud with Matt and Jeff about the miraculous things this church has done in the past. When we opened our doors almost 30 years ago to let in homeless people off the street, we were responding to the world with Jesus eyes and heart. And back then it took something from us.

It took volunteers who were willing to give up a comfortable night’s sleep in their own beds, to sleep on the floor, to be here with the guests. Because many of them weren’t the easiest crowd to be with. Sometimes we had to keep them from hurting each other as well as themselves.

Over time, it took imagination to figure out how the shelter could more effective in helping these people so the same people were there, night after night. They needed a program to move them from homelessness to housing, from joblessness to being self-supporting, from illness to health. It took generosity to hire more professional staff to meet the special needs of the guests. And St. Pauls chipped in, gave of its budget to help hire social workers and staff to work with those people who needed more than volunteers could give. It took something.

Housing the Shelter here took something from our building, too. Having those guests in the Oscar Mayer Room night after night, required that the floors be scrubbed with soap and bleach. And bleach water on the tiles, day after day, hastened the inevitable deterioration of the floor tiles.
Over time, the Oscar Mayer Room began to look worn and battered. It not only looked worn, it was worn and deteriorated. But isn’t that what Jesus was warning us? When he said those who would follow him would have to be willing to lose their lives? He was saying to live into God’s dream for the world takes something. And in the end, if you survive, you often look like the Velveteen Rabbit, in that beautiful children’s book, having lost ears and eyes and who knows what else.

The Oscar Mayer Room is our Velveteen Rabbit, worn and damaged, but a symbol of a kind of compassionate life. A symbol of the kind of life that Jesus was talking about. A life of love poured out for others.

But, remember? When Jesus laid out the path that he would take he also spoke of resurrection. When he was talking about what would happen to him, he said he would be tortured and he would die, but he would rise again.

And today we have a resurrection of sorts, in this building. After worship I invite you to witness it. Go down to the Oscar Meyer Room and see how it has been restored, under the leadership of Bev Petrunich and Don Curtis of our Facilities Committee. The tile has been replaced. The lighting fixtures have been cleaned up, rewired and rehung. Those tracks that were in the floor from the old folding doors -- they’re gone. Some of the walls are new and all have been repainted. There’s even a new air conditioning unit in the room. And when it’s totally finished, it will have state of the art communications capability.

It looks so good we might be tempted to try to preserve and protect it from the scars that will inevitably come with use. But, whatever we imagine God is calling St. Pauls to do and be in the coming years, it will probably involve our building. Our building is part of our life. It is a symbol of our inclusive welcome.

Well, Jesus warns us to be open to the fact that letting our building be part of our ministry pretty much guarantees it won’t stay as pristine and beautiful as it is today. Not for long. Not if we let it be used to follow Jesus.

I’ve often read these words from Mark’s gospel, the ones that we read today, as applying to the lives of people. But as I prepared for this week’s sermon I heard them speaking more broadly, about all the things we people cling to. We all could probably name what those things are for us. And I invite you to think about what they are for you. If you have ever gotten a new car you can remember how you tried to protect it from that first ding. But it came, inevitably.

Life is messy and we don’t get out of it alive. Jesus acknowledged that. In fact, he lifts that up as a mark of the sacred life. It’s almost a dare. Jesus dares us the way the poet Mary Oliver does at the end of her poem called “A Summer Day”. She defiantly asks: “What will you do with your one wild and precious life?”
Today Jesus challenges us -- both individually and as a congregation -- to look at the places in our lives where we’re feeling protective of our things, or where we’d rather fall asleep in order to avoid the pain or boredom of living.

Those places, if we look around and talk to our neighbors, are the places others are suffering, too. Jesus challenges us to wake up and do something, together. That’s how we’ll find the purpose and meaning of life.

He gives us a key here: A life that is truly worth living is about letting go of fear. And, it is about giving of our lives so that others may live. But life-giving love is messy. It takes something from us. When we love like that we’re likely to end up looking like the Velveteen Rabbit. Or the old Oscar Mayer room.

So, I encourage you to do the homework Matt gave us last Sunday. For those of you who weren’t here last Sunday, Matt gave us an assignment. There was a post-it note in every bulletin. And we were each invited to write on that piece of paper the visions and dreams we have for St. Pauls as a community following Christ in this city, in this time. Matt asked us to turn in our suggestions in the offering plate, or by email or snail mail. If you haven’t already done so, write yours down and get it in. We will use them to work together to dream the future of St. Pauls.

Today’s gospel assures us if we follow Jesus -- whom we’ve been taught to say is the Messiah, the anointed one -- we will be used. And we will be startled about how we’re used. We’ll be startled by the miracles God wants to do in our lives and in the life of this church. But, we can expect it to take something from us. In giving that life away (whatever form it takes) we will find life. More life than we ever imagined.

Amen.