

Sermon Text for March 23, 2025

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Hosea 13:14 and Matthew 20:17-28 ***The difference between being served and serving***

It has been a full week for the confirmation class. Last Sunday we began by doing a mock exam for when they were going to be meeting with session to be examined. They then met with session on Wednesday evening and after 30 minutes of being grilled they were all received into membership here at First Presbyterian Church of Strasburg. Youth Sunday will be the Sunday after Easter and they will be coming into the church on that Sunday and they will each be making a profession of faith in Jesus Christ their Savior.

It was fascinating how each of these young women expressed in one way or another the role that the church plays in their life. Most of them, not all of them, but most of them have spent nearly a decade in this church and have grown up feeling protected and cared for and prioritized and they expressed that in terms of the church being a place of refuge where they know that they can always find people who will strengthen them and support them in their faith. It was awesome to hear, church, you have done well.

I was just coming back from a pretty intense week in the south on a civil rights tour, a topic that I have not shied away from and one that I may highlight more than most. You are going to hear about it in bits and pieces over these next few Sundays. But after the exam I began to wonder what is our role as the church. I just said good job, and I mean it, but what is our responsibility here as a church in regards to these young women, and in regards to all of us. Is our primary responsibility to keep them safe and happy? Is it our primary responsibility for them to feel like they are being served.

I came up with the answer as being no, our responsibility for these women is to teach them the way of Jesus which today and other days we read may place them in danger and in harms way and may even cause suffering. We went to Birmingham and met a woman who just a few seconds before a bomb went off in a church which killed four little girls the age of our confirmation class kids, had been in the bathroom with those girls but then headed up to the sanctuary and was thrown to the ground by the bomb.

She talked about the civil rights movement in Birmingham and how as a 13 year old girl her pastor had talked to her and hundreds, event thousands children just like her to take the lead in the movement. She skipped school and went to the church, the church, along with hundreds of

other children and walked peacefully through Birmingham and as a result the city brought out dogs and fire hoses against them to teach them a lesson. But who was telling them to do this? Their pastor, their churches. The church was teaching them that this is the way of Christ and it may require sacrifice, and danger, and suffering, but it is worth it. 7th graders taking the lead as they marched in the face of dogs and fire hoses. On the other side of the dogs was Bull Conner, who was an elder, or deacon in the Baptist Church and taught Sunday School, and so I'm sure that white kids saw the example that he set and thought that this is what the church ought to do, ensure that people stay in their lane and the church is given the responsibility to do that.

The church is called to set the standard for itself and for culture and society, to do the right thing even if it means a loss of greatness and status and priority. We have one today who sets the standard on what it means to serve, even as he was a ransom for all so that our salvation could be secured. Let's read in Matthew.

READ

On Friday we marked the 60th anniversary of the third march from Selma to Birmingham which took place in 1965. Two weeks before that march there was another march on March 7, which was called bloody Sunday when black men and women had decided to march from Selma to Birmingham, the capital of Alabama to protest segregation and they were met at the base of the Edmund Pettis bridge with violence and bloodshed and horses. The police horses even rode up the steps of the First Baptist church and officers went inside and beat up the marchers, in the churches themselves. As a result the marchers and MLK Jr. called upon pastors from all over the country to join them in a March.

My dad was a pastor in Wilmington, Delaware at that time and head the call and approached his session and asked permission to march with MLK and others on the 21st. His session said no, you are not allowed to march, he responded by saying that it was actually a request from the Presbytery to go on the march, so I am going. I gave you a chance, church, to do the right thing, you did not do it, but that will not stop me from doing the right thing. My dad joined thousands of other marchers crossing the Edmund Pettis bridge and by then national guardsmen were lining the route to allow them to march.

This story has been in our family history ever since I can remember, but I didn't know any of the details. So I was texting my mom before I walked over the bridge and asked her what did dad say about the march, do you remember anything? She responded by saying, yes, I remember his saying that the march started right when all the churches were getting out. All of

the white church people lined the road as they marched on the other side of the national guard, and spit on them and threw things at them and yelled at them and insulted them all the way across.

Today Jesus tells his disciples the role that the chief priests and scribes will take as Jesus is condemned, the role of the church is one that it must decide to take, does it play the role of the chief priests and scribes, the role of those lining the streets and spitting and mocking. Or does it play the role of the servant Jesus walking to his death, or the marchers demanding justice and equality for all as a real sign of the kingdom of God. The church has a choice in this matter and historically it will be split in deciding both good and bad, both righteousness and sin.

In Matthew, Jesus and his disciples have a long journey on foot ahead of them. They are headed from Galilee to Jerusalem and Jesus calls them together and gives them a timeline of events that are about to take place, a type of table of contents for what comes next: he'll go before the chief priests and scribes, he'll be condemned to death, the Romans will take him and mock him and torture him, he'll be crucified and then he will rise from the dead. That's what's next and we are beginning that journey now into Jerusalem where all of this is going to happen shortly.

The disciples don't even react. Maybe it is because this is the third time that Jesus tells them these things. He tells them in Matthew 16 and Peter gets upset to the point where Jesus calls him Satan, the second time he tells them is in Matthew 17 and the disciples are greatly distressed. So maybe this third time we'll just pretend we didn't hear it, so we see no reaction to this at all.

Then the mom of James and John, we think her name is Salome, approaches Jesus and asks a favor right after he tells the disciples that he is about to undergo this tremendous suffering. She asks that her boys could have the place of honor in his kingdom. Now, before we come down too hard on her, she does kneel before Jesus so it is obvious that she loves Jesus and that she is a follower of Jesus. In fact, at the end of this Gospel we see her as one of the few women around the cross as Jesus dies. So we shouldn't take her loyalty into question, she just didn't read the room and simply got it wrong.

In fact, Jesus uses this as an opportunity to teach his disciples about the foundation of his ministry and how who he is ought to make a difference to whom they are and who they become. He uses this mother's desire to see her boys safe, protected, in a position where they can advance in society and culture and say, no that is not what we are about. We are about the opposite, we

are about serving others. Let me give you an example, Jesus says. Look at vs.25, the world understands a good leader as someone who is a tyrant and is strong and comes down hard in doing what he wants to do. He gathers and tells them the world sees strength in a tyrant who is over their workers and over all who are under him and treats them under him as objects in order to get what he wants, in order to arrive at a predetermined end result.

The world sees strength in tyranny, applauds it, welcomes it, and considers it great. Jesus uses the terms great and first repeatedly to describe the way in which the world thinks. He then says in vs.26 – you are not to be that way. It is not this way for a follower of Jesus. Jesus defines the kingdom of God through the lens of righteousness, and serving others, and not through the lens of tyranny, and whimsical power displayed through decisions that affects thousands and thousands of people and disproportionately affect the poor and the powerless. We are not to be that way and we are not to support that in any way shape or form, Jesus says. I mean, you can't make this up.

He asks the two whose mom wanted them to be first, if they thought they were able to put others ahead of themselves, even be willing to drink this cup of wrath that Scripture describes as put before us as followers of God that is a part of our normal everyday Christian walk. They said they would be able to. Not everyone is able to keep the hand on the plow, and some have to get out because safety and protecting our own self interests seems like the logical thing that we ought to pursue. But it is not the way of Christ. When we were in Mississippi we went to the headquarters of SNCC and they had in 1964 what was called freedom summer where they invited college students from all over the world to come and work with them to raise the awareness of segregation.

You had to apply and then be accepted and hundreds of college students from Ivy Leagues, to students at Penn State and others applied and were accepted. We were able to see these applications and one of them was from a young woman who was accepted and then wrote a letter backing out and used the term: I am sorry but I have chickened out to do that which I have applied to do, I am sorry. It isn't for everyone, but it is the way of the Lord and sometimes we just know that we are not doing God's will, but the sacrifice we feel is too great.

The world has always watched the church to see what it will do next, just like our confirmation class kids and all of our youth and children pay attention and notice what we do as a church. I believe that the church has lost much credibility today because it has sided with the powerful and has used language that would be anathema to Jesus. When a church agrees with a

Christian Nationalist perspective, even those two terms together are jarring, and that there is some divine order in being first or great, this is directly going against Jesus' wishes and desires and it is heresy, at least how I read today's Scripture.

I Corinthians 9:19 Paul states I have made myself a servant of all, II Corinthians 4:5 he states We are servants for Christ, Galatians 5:13 we read Through love we ought to become servants one to another. Romans 12:10 Paul tells us to outdo one another in showing honor, and finally in Philippians 2:3 regard others as better than yourselves.

The kingdom brought by Jesus defines greatness in an entirely opposite way than what we expect. This way is foreign to the world and to human nature, yet it is the way of Jesus. Amen.