

First Presbyterian Church

Cheyenne, Wyoming

May 16, 2010

Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: Preparation Pays

John 17: 20-26, Acts 16: 16-34

The Boy Scouts have a motto I like, "Be Prepared." The idea behind this motto is that a good scout has developed survival skills along with emotional, spiritual and physical strength to deal with what life might bring us. This motto can also describe how we are to be prepared as Christians for the challenges that come to us as we witness our faith in Jesus Christ to the world. The preparations I learned as a scout and continue to learn as a Christian have paid off many times over.

Can we become as prepared as we need to be of our own strength? Absolutely not. This is why the scouts have experienced leaders who help and guide them as they learn to be prepared. As Christians, we are blessed to have God working in a partnership with Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit to help and guide us to be prepared.

If we were to take the time today as a gathered congregation to read together John chapters 13-17, we would gain a comprehensive picture of how Jesus prepared his disciples then and those of us today, for our journey of faith in him.

In a quick summary of these chapters on preparation, a Rev. R. Craig MacCreary notes that we find ten ways Jesus prepared his disciples then and now. First of all we read that Jesus called his disciples to gather in one place with him. He continues to do this as he calls us together for worship in his presence each week. (2) He washed the disciple's feet as an outward sign of his love for them and to set an example of how we are to humbly serve one another. He continues to call us to such service. (3) He fed them a meal we call the Lord's Supper where he promised them and us forgiveness of sins and his everlasting presence with them and us at the cost of his body and blood on the cross. He is present with us today in the Spirit when we celebrate the same meal.

At this supper gathering, where Jesus was preparing his disciple for his death, and carrying on his mission after he bodily left this earth: Jesus gave the disciples, then and now, (4) "words of comfort, encouragement, and challenge. He told them and us not to let our hearts be troubled (14:1). (5) He told them and us if they asked anything in his name it would be granted (14:14). (6) He reminded them and us we would never be abandoned or orphaned (14:18). (7) He told them and us that he would send the Spirit to teach and remind us of all we needed (14:26). (8) He promised them and us that, despite it all, at the center of the storm of our lives there would be a great peace — the peace of God (14:27). (9) He gave them and us many words to think about and he said: 'I have said these things to keep you from stumbling'" (16:1). "Emphasis," May 20, 2007

And as we heard in our text for today, Jesus reminded his disciples then and now that he and God are one as he (10) prayed for us. "Jesus, 'the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart,' prayed that God will be present in the life and mission of the faith community. In this prayer, Jesus has entrusted the church, (you and me) to God's protective care and loving kindness." Our future as the church, Christ's gathered

disciples “does not depend on or derive from the church’s own work,” no matter how prepared we are, “...our future rests with God and his sovereign grace. It is interesting to ponder how the Christian community’s self-definition would be changed if it took as its beginning point, ‘We are a community for whom Jesus prays.’” TNIB Vol. IX, pg. 797-8.

From Jesus’ conversation with God, we learn that prayer is the most vital part of our preparation as disciples of Jesus Christ. In his prayer, Jesus taught the disciples, then and now, how to pray. We can approach God as directly, honestly and intimately as he did. In the other gospels he taught this way to pray to his disciples then and now in what we call the Lord’s Prayer.

In today’s text, we hear the “central part of the last will and testament” Jesus left us. In this preparation through prayer, Jesus prayed we might be one as he and God the Father are one, and that through our unity, the world might believe in him.

The passage from Acts gives us a sample of how important this unity can be in a world that challenged a couple of the early disciples; and how all of this preparation by Jesus of his disciples paid off in very interesting ways. Paul, and Silas were in the Greek city of Philippi to spread the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed. What faced them tested every ounce of preparation they had been given. They had to stay in touch with God and be united as Christ’s mission workers.

As we heard in the lesson from Acts, Luke wrote: “One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, ‘These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.’” At first, this may have been a helpful thing to them. It is ironic that this mentally ill woman recognized and proclaimed the truth of God faster than many “normal” people did. However, as Luke continues, “She kept doing this for many days” which annoyed Paul to his limits of tolerance. Finally Paul “turned and said to the spirit in her, ‘I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.’” And it came out that very hour.” At this point two blessings came to this woman; she already knew of salvation in Jesus Christ and she was healed of her sickness. Unfortunately, she was still a slave to her owners, but she was freed in Jesus Christ. Paul could not have done this without unity with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and good preparation in his faith, preparation that paid off.

However, it seems that no good deed goes unpunished by this world. The self-centered owners of this slave woman were really angry over this woman’s healing. They saw that their hope of making money was gone. To them, this woman healed by the Spirit of Jesus was now damaged goods. ‘They seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities.’ But, instead of admitting to their selfish financial loss, they accused Paul and Silas before the magistrates of trumped up charges of violating Roman culture and ‘disturbing their city. “The crowd joined in attacking them and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.” It

seems that no good deed goes unpunished by this world, so good preparation as a disciple of Jesus Christ is vital to face the challenges that come our way.

Such negative reactions to healing and our spiritual health occur today. "The late Edward Friedman, family therapist, told stories of his mentor, Murry Bowen, who found that the visit of family members to mentally ill relatives often made their sick relatives worse. He found that from time to time when one member of a family got better another member would manifest the symptoms of the same sickness. It seemed that a family needed at least one sick member to talk about, to blame for their problems, and to divert from doing the hard work of developing healthy patterns amongst themselves. Healing of mind, body and spirit almost always opens up challenges in one form or another. It is hardly surprising that the reactions of the slave girl's handlers are less than enthusiastic." Despite whatever the reactions of others may be, we must be well prepared to remain unified with the Lord who first prayed for and made preparations for US. "Emphasis," May 20, 2007.

As part of our preparations for working for the Lord, we need to be reminded of how often in the Bible God turned a bad situation or person around for the good, including the resurrection of Jesus that came out of his crucifixion. In the midst of a passage on suffering, Paul said it best in Romans 8: 28, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." Paul knew this to be true as we heard in the rest of the passage from Acts. Paul turned the prison time into a midnight revival hour.

He and Silas "were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened." The jailer who was responsible for all the prisoners and who would have been punished if any escaped, "woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped." Paul shouted out for the Jailer not to harm himself proclaiming..."we are all here." The jailer fell down trembling before Paul and Silas as he released them. He asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" We do not know if he was asking how to be saved from the punishment he might receive from his superiors or from the earthquake? But being well prepared in their faith and turning a bad situation into a good one, Paul and Silas saw it as an opportunity to share the good news. "They answered, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.' They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house." The jailer cleaned up Paul and Silas; wounds from their having been beaten, and fed them. In return Paul and Silas baptized the whole family. What a great story about how being united in the Lord, and being prepared in the knowledge of his ways paid off.

It is my prayer that the youth from our church, who are graduating from high school have been well prepared by their families and this church to face the challenges to their faith that they will face in the world out there. I pray they will continually turn to the Lord in prayer, to the written word of God for guidance, as we heard in the ten preparations from John 13-17, and be united with the Lord and fellow Christians often

in worship. Most of all may they, and we, their families by blood and in faith remember that Jesus continues to pray for our graduates and us, and constantly prepares all of us to serve him as one people.

I think modern pastor and author, Samuel Hahn paraphrased well what Jesus has had to say to us today in John and through Paul, Silas and Luke in Acts:

“Wonder of wonders, O Can it be

That Jesus truly prays for me?

The prayer to be one without division

Over all truly He has dominion.

So that the world may know how wondrous and great

Are the promises I, (Jesus), have shared and relate.

(Abba God,) I made known to them Your name,

I and the Father are truly the same.

The Glory you have given me,

I have given to them to see,

So that (all) the world may (come to) believe.

To be a channel of your wondrous love,

The Love with which you have loved me,

Will be the force binding all together in love.

Wonder of wonders the answer is Yes!

Prayer as a fortress, God’s powerful Yes!”

Emphasis May16, 2010