



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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Poland, Ohio 44514
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18th Sunday after Pentecost
September 27, 2015

Mark 9:38-50

The Rev. Robbin Del Nagro

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John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

“For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

“For Such a Time as This”

“It was the best of times. It was the worst of times. It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.” Those famous opening lines from “A Tale of Two Cities” describe a time of great upheaval and transition in the social order of two then great nations, England and France. It was truly a terrible time when distrust ran high, yet in the midst of the horrors of the French Revolution we see the power of a daughter's love to restore one man, Dr. Manette, to life. The

character, Mr. Lucey, seems to have a minor role in the story yet he is the character who is placed in the role of the one who brings about profound change in the lives of others. He seems to always be in the right place at the right time.

In the story of Esther which Elinor read, the Hebrew people find themselves in one of the worst chapters of their collective life. Do you remember when the Jews returned to Jerusalem after captivity in Babylon; after Babylon had been conquered by Persia? Well, they didn't all return. Some stayed behind in this land. But they remain there as marginalized people whom some of the Persians wished to see destroyed, in this case a high official of the king named Hamen. Esther, a Jewese, was a beautiful woman and because of her beauty she was chosen to be Queen to King Ahasuerus. The King personally chose her, probably because of her beauty and intelligence. And he was kind to her. But she was still a woman and an outsider and her position was precarious at best. Meanwhile, Esther's guardian, Mordecai, refuses to bow down to Hamen which infuriates Hamen and leads him to plot the destruction of all the Jews in the kingdom. Mordecai comes to Esther and tells her of this plot. Esther was not just a beautiful queen, for God had chosen her for this specific time in history to come to the aid of her people. God chose Esther, but Esther must respond to God's call. To save her people, Esther must speak out to the King, which was not an easy thing to be called to do. If the king became offended at this and chose to stand by his appointed official, Hamen, it's curtains for Queen Esther and the Jewish people. It will take both wit and courage for her to make her petition to the king. It takes something else, tho, that is far more important. Queen Esther must have faith because the king's actions rest in God's hands. Queen Esther must have faith in God.

We know that her words do save her people and Hamen is hung rather than Mordecai. There is rejoicing in the land and Esther goes down in history as the one who has saved her people. I would say, tho, that it was not Esther alone, but God who saved these people.

It is a privledge for anyone to be called by God to carry out a particular task at a particular time for the welfare of God's people. Who knows who or why God calls particular people for particular times? Throughout Old Testament history we see the prophets being called to speak a particular word from God to the people of God at a particular time. Moses was called for a special time and task. Mary was called for a special time and task. And God continues to call to those who would serve God's particular purposes even to this day. But it is not about "who" is called. God already knows the right person for the right task. It is about the response of those who are called. It is about faith. For the carrying out of God's plan is in God's hands, not ours. We are simply instruments.

The 12 disciples we are so familiar with were not the only disciples that Jesus called. They thought they were, but in our gospel reading another group is casting out demons in the name of Jesus. These people are disciples too. The twelve are offended at this, but Jesus tells them that those who speak in his name and who have been called to do works of healing are on the same side. They, too, have stepped out in faith to answer the call of God.

We can't second guess who is called by our own determination of “in and out”. Consider the Lutheran pastor, Nadia Boltz Webber, who leads a diverse congregation of homeless, former addicts, and colorful characters in Denver. She is a woman with a history of hanging out with the wrong people, a woman who is covered with tatoos and who doesn't always use “churchy” language. But people, this is the 21st century, not the 19th and this woman has been called “for such a time as this” to preach the gospel message in a way that will be heard by those who have been marginalized by that message in the past.

You can't help but hear about Pope Francis' visit in the news this week. I really like Pope Francis and so do millions of Catholics and other believers. We are at a time in our global history when we need a global religious leader to step forward. And God has provided Francis for such a time as this. What has Pope Francis done but to faithfully answer God's call by simply preaching and living the gospel as he has received it – without fanfare or frill – a simple, humble, gospel of love for all people. And it is irresistable. It is not Pope Francis who is particularly irresistable – it is the gospel message. The Pope is, and I think if asked would agree, only a faithful servant responding in a faithful way. He touches people, both physically and emotionally. He genuinely seems to love everyone, even the least. When the camera closes in on Francis the one thing that is always consistent is that he is always smiling. You get the impression that he is really happy to be doing exactly what he is doing in the present moment. You get the impression that Pope Francis is fully alive. You get the impression that he has been salted with the fire of the Holy Spirit.

It really doesn't matter who is called. What really matters is the salt. If you want to preserve meat, you need salt. It won't last very long without it – meat will turn rancid and rot, but with salt you get ham. And ham lasts through the season when meat becomes scarce. The salt that Jesus is talking about in our gospel reading is the salt of fire – the fire of the Holy Spirit. The fire of the Holy Spirit. This is the fire that causes us to hear the voice of God calling and to respond. This is the fire of faith. It is the fire that brings the gospel story to life, no matter who is preaching it.

You have known this fire. You have been salted. The disciples knew it as well and so have old testament prophets and disciples of Jesus throughout history.

I was called to this church to minister to this congregation at a particular time in your history – not because of any special gifts I possess – but because I had been salted with fire. Brent has been called here to lead you through a particular process at a different time. His call and his time here are for a different purpose than mine has been. He, too, has been salted with fire. And when the time is right God will bring another leader to you who will come for another time in your collective life together. Don't be surprised if that leader doesn't fit your own pre-determined mold. Don't be surprised if that leader shocks or surprises you. For you are moving into a new time. God is providing for you a leader for “such a time as you are about to enter”, the mid 21st century, not the late 20th century or any other time that has ever been before. When that leader comes you will know that he or she has been salted with fire for you will taste it and you will feel the heat radiating thru this place.

We can't live as people of God if we live in yesterday. If there is anything keeping us from living in the present moment, it is keeping us from being fully alive. Get rid of it! (Those are Jesus' words) If we try to live in yesterday the salt will wash away. Salt is for today. Fire burns only in the oxygen of the present moment. The present moment is always the best of times and the worst of times wrapped into one awesome whole. Be faithful to the present moment for it is life-giving and in this moment God is present. God is faithful and has lead us through a difficult time together but the difficult time has also been marked with some of the best moments possible. God is faithful and will continue to lead and guide this congregation. Respond faithfully, then, to God. “Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.” Amen.