

**“Making Sense of Things”**  
**A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRode**  
**The Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**October 18, 2009**  
**Scripture: Mark 10:35-45**

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION:** *Gracious God, as we gather here this morning to hear and think about your Word to us, we ask that you might help us grow to appreciate the wonder of your plans and the call you place on each of our lives. Amen.*

As many of you likely know by now, when I have a chance to watch television, the shows I choose are of the CSI and NCIS variety. In fact, if you were to ask Dusty, he will tell you that I am happy to watch each one over and over and still be surprised at the ending!

The other night we were watching a NCIS rerun – one even I admit to seeing a couple of times. It was at the end of the program when the camera focused on a young man and woman at a train station. The young man, who those of you who watch this show know as Jethro Gibbs, was in uniform, as he was on his way to basic training. The young woman is the girl who ended up being his first wife.

You can tell by watching them, that they are each attracted to the other. When they realize that they are heading toward the same destination, he suggests that they sit together. She, however, seems to be a bit uncomfortable with that idea. But then she says, “Well, maybe it would be okay, because you aren’t a lumberjack.” (Yeah, you are looking at me, exactly as he looked at her.) But she went on, “Rule number one, or maybe it’s rule number three says I should never date a lumberjack.”

Gibbs responds, “So do you have a rule for everything?” And she says, “Everyone needs a code they can live by.”

As I was watching that show the other night, I had already begun to think about my sermon for today. As you may or may not

realize, I have been asked today to introduce – or roll out the new mission statement which will serve as the blue print for us as we move ahead with the plan to grow in membership and discipleship. As I have heard and read, and I am sure you have too, “you can’t get where you need to be, if you don’t know where you are going.”

In a book called, “The Critical Years”, Sharon Parks writes about going to Harvard as a new chaplain and ending up at a faculty reception where she felt nervous and out of place. She was sitting in the corner when an older, well-known faculty member came and sat down beside her. He started a conversation and soon they were talking about his son who had just started college in another state. He talked about how hard it was for him to let the boy go off to school and how much he worried about him. Parks found herself saying, “Oh, well, don’t worry. Whatever the worst thing is that you’ve imagined might happen to him, won’t. It will be something else.”

As she looked back on that exchange, she realized it might have been a stupid thing to say, but he jumped on it right away. “Good,” he said, “because I’ve already decided what the worst thing would be.” “Oh, really?” Parks answered. “And what is that?” “The worst thing,” the man answered, “would be for him to come to the place where it was no longer possible for him to make meaning.”

Parks uses that conversation to launch a long discussion about the ability to make meaning, something which she calls “faith”. We all have some way of making sense of the world in which we live – some framework of understanding on which to hang our experience. If we step outside and a bird flies past, we say, “Yes, that’s right. Birds fly.” We hang that experience in its proper place on the framework. But, if we step outside and a cat flies past, we don’t know what to do. We either 1) reject the

experience out of hand (“That didn’t really happen”), 2) invent a sensible explanation (“That cat wasn’t really flying. Someone just threw it across my field of vision”), or 3), reconstruct our framework of understanding to include flying cats. But in each case, our brains work to make sense of something which seems to be nonsense. We have to do that, because when we can no longer make sense of our experience, we can no longer function in the world.

When Sharon Parks uses the word, “faith” to identify this meaning-making ability she uses it in a broader sense than we usually do. For her, “faith” is the framework – the blueprint – by which we see the world and by which we live.

The faith by which the disciples lived was based on their shared history which told them that God had been an active agent in their lives, and that “when the time was right,” he would send the “Messiah.” That’s the way in which they made sense of things. The reason they were so excited to be with Jesus is that they believed Jesus *was* the Messiah. As they followed him around, as they witnessed his mighty works, they become more and more convinced that he was, in fact, the one for whom they had been waiting. And, they believed that there would be places of privilege for all those who had stuck with him through his long campaign. There would be thrones to his left and thrones to his right.

Can you understand how – if this was your framework of understanding – your code for living – that you would have no place to hang the idea of a crucified Messiah? When Jesus announced that he was going to Jerusalem, you would think, “Yes, yes! Jerusalem! The Royal City – where the throne of David is! – where the Messiah will begin his reign!” It all makes perfect sense. But when he began to talk about being handed over to the chief priests and scribes – when he began to talk about being condemned

to death, when he began to talk about being mocked, and flogged, and killed – well – It would be like watching a cat fly past. The disciples had to 1) reject the comments out of hand (“He didn’t really say that – or at least he didn’t really *mean* that.”), 2) invent a sensible explanation (“It’s just a figure of speech”), or 3) reconstruct their framework of understanding to include a crucified Messiah, something they just couldn’t do. So they went forward with their assumptions of impending glory.

We need to be careful not to judge them too quickly or too harshly. It is a difficult thing to alter the framework of your understanding, and it is always a risk. Picture yourself reaching across and empty space to put a new girder in place – you have a wrench in one hand and a bolt between your teeth – the whole thing could collapse at any moment. But if you don’t take the risk, you often lose the ability to make sense of things. Then every experience becomes a “flying cat experience.”

It was under this sort of circumstance that James and John come to Jesus just after he has told them for the third time that he is going to suffer and die. “Teacher,” they say, ignoring his last comment, “when you come into your glory, can we have the thrones on your right and left?” No matter what Jesus said, or how many times he said it, they just don’t “hear” him. As Jesus continued to pull down the framework by which they had lived, and put up a new one in its place, they feared they will never again be able to make sense of the world. But Jesus continues to build for them a new framework, one which is upside down from the framework in which they had lived, “Whoever wishes to become great among you,” he says, “must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”

As the disciples feel their old framework trembling, they fear they will never be able to make sense of their world again. And yet, as

they look into Jesus’ eyes, they wonder if it is they – not he – who have gotten it all wrong.

As many of you are aware, First Church for the past eight years or so, has used as a blue print for our ministry, a mission statement which says, “The Mission of the First Presbyterian Church of Dunedin is to invite, share, celebrate and send the Christian Faith by word and deed to the community and the world.” While the words are wonderful, and the statement seems to reflect who we currently are as a congregation, there is no clear-cut direction for living out the mission statement and there is no clear-out direction for moving forward.

Recognizing that, our Session recently approved a new statement of purpose for First Church – a statement which we believe defines our core beliefs and is the foundation of our growth initiative. These, my friends, are our guiding words, “The mission of the First Presbyterian Church of Dunedin is to worship God joyfully, love all people genuinely, help those in need selflessly, and share the gospel of salvation freely.”

While this may be your introduction to this new mission statement, please know that it is not the last time you will hear it. In fact, in the next few weeks you will not be able “not” to hear or read it everywhere around here. In addition to the approval of our new mission statement, Session also appointed a Growth Task Force, the members of which represent many different facets of First Church. This morning, you will help me to commission that team, and you will be asked to support and pray for them in the months ahead.

Just as Jesus challenged the disciples with whom he walked and worked and prayed, so, too, he challenges us. Our challenge in this world in which we live is to share with those who may not know God, the love and grace which we have come to know. May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

*Thanks to Jim Somerville for his sermon, “The Nerve!”*,

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