

Simple Words from a Fisherman

I Peter 4:8-11

July 6, 2008

The Rev. Patrick Day

First Presbyterian Church

Lake Forest, Illinois

One of the final pieces of the ordination process for those seeking to become Ministers of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church USA is to sit with the examination committee of the Ordaining Presbytery for an oral exam where they ask you questions about theology, polity, worship, and sacraments. Eleven years ago I sat through that exam, it lasted about three and a half hours; I made the mistake of wearing a blue shirt under my suit coat, which after my nerves kicked in mean I could never take that coat off for the rest of the day. At one point, Sam Ervin, the son of Senator Sam Ervin, was sitting across the table from me, looked at me and said, “Could you tell me the difference between the minor prophets and the major prophets?”

I said, “well, you see, when you consider the profound nature of the theological concerns that some of the major prophets, such as Isaiah...”

He just looked at me, waved his hand and said, “Son, do you think it might have anything to do with the fact that the books of the Minor Prophets are shorter than the books of the Major Prophets?”

I said, “There is that.”

Sometimes, simple works. My older son asked me one time as we were getting ready for bed, if there was food in heaven. I said that I didn’t know and we’ll have to pray and ask God about that.

So he looked up and said, “Heaven, you got food up there?”

I didn’t hear anything, so once again I began and said, “You have to understand that sometimes when we pray, the responses are not in words, it’s more like...”

He again just waved his hand at me and said, “Nope, I heard. There’s food.”

Simple works. That’s what we have in our scripture today: simple words. Simple words from a fisherman: maintain constant love for each other, be hospitable to one another. Peter does not give us the pros, the detail or the in depth arguments that we get when we read the letters from Paul. We get simple words, rather simple ideas, but it is important to remember that these are not just the words of a fisherman; these are the words of a witness for Peter lived with Jesus. Peter followed Jesus; Peter saw the works of Christ. Peter saw Jesus reach out to the lost, to the lonely, to the people that no one else had time for. Peter saw Jesus walk on the water and dared to try it himself. Peter would have been there when

the lawyer was trying to trick Jesus, instead Jesus quoted the Old Testament saying that the greatest commandment is this: to love the Lord, your God and to love your neighbor as yourself. Peter sat at a table with Jesus and heard the words come from his mouth: love one another as I have loved you. Peter firmed his faith in Christ; Peter was the first one to say: you are the Messiah, the son of the living God. Peter affirmed his faith, Peter promised Jesus that he would die with him, and Peter let him down. Peter was welcomed back.

Given that, let us read the scripture again, this time think about the person who wrote these words. Think about everything he had seen, everything he had witnessed, everything he had been apart of. Think about the grace that he had received.

*Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with that strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.*

Through God's prodding, Peter widened the circle of Christ's family in reaching out to the Gentiles. God continues to widen that circle to include each and every one of us. In a few moments, we will gather around this table remembering the night that Peter and the other disciples spent with Jesus around that table. We will gather for similar reasons, not because we deserve to, not because we have volunteered enough, not because we have said and believe all the right things. We will gather around this table because God practices this radical hospitality in welcoming us home. We gather because even when we have failed, God's love has remained constant and has never failed us. So let us receive God's hospitality and in doing so let us remember the simple words from this fisherman that we might be made ready to go out into this world, practicing God's love and hospitality and being God's people so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. For to him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.