

**Grace Episcopal Church, Galena Illinois
September 16, 2012**

**Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.
Texts- Proverbs 1: 20-33, James 3: 1-12,
Mark 8: 27-38**

What a week it has been in our world! Post-both Republican and Democratic National Conventions, the heat is turned up. The noise becomes more and more relentless, the voices more urgent as election day approaches. "Look at me, look at what I can do for you." "Look at the other candidate – he will lead this country to destruction." "Vote for me."

And, as if that is not enough, this week brought death and violence. A voice denigrates the prophet Mohammed and fuels an international incident-- protests and counter protests and grief for our nation and an ambassador's family.

The message from James is timely, it seems. Of course, we must bring it up to date a bit. James lived in a world of oral tradition – the spoken word. For us, the tongues of fire must be expanded to include all manner of media – media that has the power to incinerate with its speed. Videos that go viral, e-mails and facebook posts that fly around the world at exponential speed. Messages that can be taken out of context and images that can be photoshopped to change meaning to the very opposite of what was intended.

Today, the old saw "sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me" is even more untrue than it ever was. Words can hurt. Words do hurt.

Earlier this week, a favorite author of mine posted such hurt on her blog. Anne LaMotte reported that she had been viciously reviled in public. She did not explain the details. Perhaps it was something from her newest book that set the person off. But it was bad enough that Anne slinked home to lick her wounds and comfort herself with what she called "chemo for the soul" – a favorite magazine and 5 red Tootsie pops. Sadly, Tootsie pops will not soothe the ambassador's family.

Even earlier in the week there was a gathering at Fordham University – 3,000 students to hear the unlikely pair of speakers: Father Timothy Dolan and Stephen Colbert talking about their faith and its impact on their lives. Colbert deplored the misuse of religion these days, especially in politics. He calls that "Christ as cudgel."

Lady Wisdom, crying out like a street preacher, in the midst of the people, where they live their lives sounds a lot like some of our political messages. But her message, as brash and as loud as she may be, is oh so different. It is a warning, to be sure. It is a call to listen, it is urgent, and she has been calling for a long, long time. What she offers is the safety of relationship with her. Following the ways of Wisdom saves us from the terrible predicaments we get ourselves into when we wander on our own. It shows us a rhythm to

life that is not just knowledge, but insight and new perspectives that give us ways to deal with the challenges that come our way.

In our Gospel reading today, Mark takes us to a new place in Jesus ministry – a turning point. Jesus has healed and taught and fed the multitudes. He has attracted attention. And now, he asks the big question, “Who do the people say that I am?” When the disciples answer, John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets, he changes the question. “Who do you say I am?” And, Peter the bold says, “You are the Messiah.”

Peter has the right answer, but it becomes clear very quickly that Peter’s concept of what the Messiah is, is not at all what Jesus means. Because Jesus goes right into the suffering that will come – for himself and for those who truly follow him. At this point, Jesus calls the crowd to join him and the disciples and tells them about taking up their crosses – the cost of discipleship. And just like Lady Wisdom, warning those who do not listen, Jesus warns those who are ashamed of him and his words. This is hard to hear, and I wonder how many in that crowd stayed to listen. How many found that they had an urgent errand to attend to elsewhere.

At first glance, we might think this passage is simply about how we behave in this life so that the *next* life will be what we hope for. We may think it’s about being martyrs for Christ, literally dying for Christ. Or giving up life as we know it and removing ourselves from the world by going off to a monastery or an ashram or to devote our life to the poor like Mother Theresa.

There are also ways that this message has been misused and misunderstood. Here is where Stephen Colbert’s “Christ as cudgel” comes in. It is not about glorifying suffering for its own sake. That cudgel has been used very effectively against women and minorities. “This is your cross to bear” or the ideas of suffering in this life and being rewarded in the next has been used to keep people in their place and oppressed – in relationships of abuse, in situations of injustice.

Maybe Jesus’ message makes want to join those who ran off from the crowd! But, not so fast! It’s much more than these understandings. It is about *choosing* life or death. Listen once again:

³⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

The “losing life” is a death of sorts, but one in *this* life: a dying to one’s self – one’s self-interest, one’s belief in being independent, in control, able to handle any of life’s challenges by oneself. This is about acknowledging vulnerability and need and choosing to love God and walk in God’s ways or to turn away and serve other gods.

The message is not meant just for first century admirers and followers. It is not just a history lesson or a vaguely interesting relic of biblical times. It is meant for us, too,

right here and now. What is it that holds our greatest loyalty? Is it achievement and success, material possessions and wealth, comfort, or even self-fulfillment? Each of us can get a clue or two by turning on the iPhone or iPad. By looking at the calendar that hangs on the refrigerator – or our checkbook register or credit card statement.

Whatever it may be for each one of us, Jesus is clear that it must take a backseat lest it become an idol. A different translation of this text says it this way,

Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to saving yourself, your true self. What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for?

We are given the ability to choose but there is nothing easy about choosing life. It doesn't mean that life will instantly become easy with no pain, no struggle. It is risky business. So, we may wonder, is it worth the risk? Maybe things are good enough without aspiring to discipleship, without taking this Gospel stuff too seriously. Maybe we can get by, enjoy life well enough without making such a commitment. Those people we see on Sunday mornings at Starbucks, the ones on bicycles or in their running clothes, they look happy enough, don't they? Why should we get ourselves all wrapped up in costly commitment and discipleship if it might hurt?

But everywhere we look we see evidence that just getting by is not enough. How many are just existing rather than living – breathing and eating, working and paying bills, falling into bed exhausted and waking up to the same the next morning. We see countless people searching for meaning, for fulfillment, buying the latest self-help books, signing up for today's popular 10 step program to a meaningful life. We see an enormous market for mind numbing drugs, or medication for depression and anxiety. What is the point of this, this existing and not living?

We are able to choose a life that is not just about getting by, just being good enough, but a life that is abundant. A life that may not be easy or free of difficulty but that brings blessings at every turn. Abundant life is God's gift. But we have to be free in order to receive it. We cannot be booked solid with other engagements, filled up so full that there is no room for the gift. The good news is that if we can – and will – choose the gift of abundant life, we don't have to go it alone. God will provide resources and the grace to work toward this life that is more than showing up for church, signing a pledge card and being reasonably nice to others. A life that involves giving our all, being trans-formed, and totally changing our priorities.

We have everything we need. We have this community of faith and the space we need for spiritual growth. These are here just for the asking. They are here in worship, in existing groups – and in the opportunity to expand our Bible study,

discussion groups, in prayer and meditation gatherings, outreach and service. All ways for us to develop wisdom rather than just knowledge, tongues that bless rather than curse.

Next week, we celebrate new ministries. It is not just about clergy – installations and ordinations. For those are placed in the context of the whole Body of Christ. The ministry of the baptized. And we will welcome a brand new Christian through the waters of baptism. And seven others will make public commitments to deeper relationships with God and with this community of faith. And each of us will have the opportunity to reaffirm our own faith and baptismal promises.

What will you choose? In light of Jesus' message this morning, will you take the risk of the costly path of discipleship, yet the risk of choosing abundant life, knowing that you may not be able to do it on your own? But knowing that with God all things are possible?

Amen and amen.