

1 Peter 3:13-22

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

“Whose Responsibility Is That?”

March 1, 2009

Rev. Charles Schuster

I don't think that I'm ready for Lent. I don't think that I'm ready to preach it. I doubt if you want to hear it. Next week, we turn our clocks ahead, which means we lose an hour. I don't like that Sunday, and it's going to be dark. There's just so much that we've got to carry, added to the social chaos and the economic shock. We've been sub-primed, we're down-turned, and there's no bailout for us, and Walt Kelley has it right in the cartoon “Pogo,” saying, “We have faults we've hardly even use yet.” So, given the burdens that we carry, a lot of which stem from our own sense of guilt. Lent comes to us with its imperatives, adding weight to the heavy-laden, which we all are, and about the time we think we can escape it, we hear those words of Scripture which, if they hadn't been read this week, they would have some other, reminding us how Jesus suffered for us and our sin, once and for all. Jesus suffered for us and our sin, once and for all, and given that, the least we could do is give up chocolate or be a little righteous or pick up some cause, maybe a small one, some minimal effort, being polite when we'd rather not, perhaps settling for less when we could have taken in more. After all, Jesus died for us and our sin.

I like how Alison Elliot put it, the first woman moderator of the Church of Scotland, elected at the General Assembly. I lived there a year, that's incredible. Finally, the Church of Scotland woke up. “Most of us want success,” she said, “and so achieve nothing. Jesus humbled himself, made himself nothing, so as to achieve success.”

“Most of us,” she said, “suppress our past, and so pretend a future. Jesus was prepared to sacrifice his future to give us hope for our past. Most of us are tempted to use people and

lose respect, Jesus won respect by being willing to let others make use of him.” Good for Jesus. Bad for us. We feel a little like the artist standing in front of his canvas in a gallery, blobs of paint-splattered patterns on canvas, red drips, orange circles, purple streaks. The young woman said to him, “I just don’t understand your painting,” and he said to her, “It’s simple. I paint what I feel inside.” And she said to him, “Have you considered Alka-Seltzer?” Paint blobs on the wall, we’re standing beside our life’s work and Lent is here and it’s been a tough year and we’re heavy-laden and now comes Lent with its imperatives, and Jesus who died for us, and I’m here to tell you to take responsibility. Take more responsibility, the first imperative of Lent. This morning, the first imperative of Lent, to take responsibility. The question is, how do we do it? and I’ll tell you what, we’re going to do it just the same way Jesus did. First thing he did, we’re going to do. He took a step back. We take a step back before we take on responsibility. We take a step back, and when we think about it, that is precisely what he did when he came into Jerusalem, when he faced the biggest challenge and the biggest crisis of his life, when he knew that he could be killed if he did what he knew he had to do. He didn’t just face it, he took a step back. He caught his breath. He needed to be with his friends for a meal, and he took a step back.

Tuesday night before Lent began. Ash Wednesday the next day, Ash Wednesday service was wonderful. I got to just be in the service, and try to behave myself, which isn’t easy. Pam Everhart does such a good job, it was beautiful. But Tuesday night, before Wednesday and Ash Wednesday began, Shrove Tuesday we stepped back. We caught our breath. Fellowship Hall, if you were here, full of people. When they gave the prayer before the meal, A. J. Bush gave the prayer, a CSU student, they applauded the prayer. Tuesday night children made masks and we had a parade and pancakes and syrup and sausage, celebration. Shrove Tuesday, Mardi Gras. The fun began, before it got sober. We caught our breath, before Lent began.

This past week Michael Billington came to our staff meeting to help us deal with stress. He couldn’t have come at a better time. It was Tuesday, the day before Lent, and we as a staff took a step back. We talked about stress. It’s a staff full of stress. For some of us, it’s in our shoulders and for some of us it’s in our back, and for some of us it’s our stomach, and for me, my eye twitches. Every Lent, it starts again. My eye twitches. And Michael helped us with this. Take a step back, breathe deeply. One staff member’s going to buy a drum, put my picture on it. I’m not sure what that’s about. Some of us are going to go on long walks. Some of us are going to try to meditate more often, take a step back before we take responsibility.

Richard Carlson and Joseph Bailey have written a book, *Slowing Down to the Speed of Life*. They remind us that, you know, you’ve got to be truly present to people, or you might as well not be at all. They tell us that we’re in danger if we feel like we’re always rushing, but we never catch up. Anybody else feel that way? If we’re doing more but enjoying it less? If we live the frantic pace and the pressures of modern life, we’ve got to step back and see what’s being asked of us. The great theologian Dolly Parton had this observation. She said, and I think she’s right, this is interesting, she said, “The people who come see my concerts, they don’t come to see me, but they come to see me be them,

and then they can see what they want to be.” And Tex Sample, gosh, I hope we get him here, Tex Sample elaborates on that. “To see ourselves, to see our heroes, to be the star, it all begins with the people we look up to, we need them to be one of us. We think about the people we admire, we consider what they are able to do, and we think about the life we have and the facts we hold and it hits us. If we have a mission, we will find a deeper meaning. If we have burdens, then we have potential to carry them. If people have expectations of us, that means they think we can do it, and they believe in us.”

We step back. And then, at some point, we do something else. We step up. At some point, the imperative of Lent will get our attention and it will move us, and we'll step up to the plate and take a swing at a pitch. Or we'll step up to the line and wait for the race to start. We step up. And if we step up, we begin to know what we must do. Bob Kaelher is a colleague, he's a United Methodist pastor in Utah. He's written a book entitled *Come to the Manger* - obviously, a Christmas book. But he's got a story in here that fits our occasion. It's not about Christmas, it's about a friend of his who has two churches in Appalachia, and they have this tradition in one of the two churches, that on Pentecost Sunday they go down to what is called a deer pool in a crick, you have to have grown up back there to know what a crick is, and they will baptize people by complete immersion. It's done on Pentecost Sunday, which can come in June, and sometimes in late May, and often when it comes, the water's a little high, and the snows been melting, and the water is sometimes a little cold. During one of those services, an older man waded out into the water, and the pastor dunked him under the frigid stream, using the traditional liturgy, I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and before he could finish, the man shot up out of the water, spitting and sputtering, and said, “Man, that shocked the devil out of me.” And the pastor, who was quicker than I am, said to all who were there, “Well, that's the point.”

Shock the devil out of us. There comes a time when we see it, and it's obvious, and we hear it, and it's clear. To shock the devil out of us. To see the goodness in us and do it, to see the God-likeness in us and live it, to discover the Christ-spirit in us and let it shine. There comes a time in life when it is so clear what has to be done, and seeing that, we know that we are the one to do it. There comes a time in life when it seems that there is a call to destiny, and it has our name on it. That's the point of it. When it happened to Jesus is evident. He stepped up when he took the bread and broke it and gave it to his friends. When he took the cup and offered the New Covenant in his blood, it was, it seems to me, clear to him, he got the point. “This is my body, I give it for you; this is my blood, I shed it for you.” Body and blood given, that's the point.

Leonard Sweet said, “The issue is not what do I want, but what is wanted of me. The issue is not, what are my needs, but the issue is, what does God need me to do.” Our church has a crisis now. The trustees meet Tuesday. The crisis is frankly more serious than when the furnace broke, when it was 10 below zero - remember that, in December, remember that? And it's more serious than the day they forgot to bring the doughnuts for coffee hour. The problem is in the parking lot. The basketball goal is broken. It has one of these handles, and you can pull it up to ten feet or let it drop to four, and the handle broke. And we tried to get the part, which I thought was a mistake, we tried to get the part

because what we're going to have to do is what I think we should have done in the first place, to solder it so it stays at ten feet. I know I'm a purist about this, but I tell you what. If you don't shoot a basketball at a basket that's ten feet tall when you're six years old, when you get to the NBA your shots are going to fall just as short as they did last night at Moby Gym. You've got to aim high to hit the target, and our kids, and some of us old people, we will rise to the challenge, but we've got to step up. We must step up. In the parking lot and in life.

Finally, after we step back, after we step up, then we're going to step out. The most important part of the Last Supper, it's something found in the Gospel of Luke, and the Men's Bible Study found it. They found it. I think it's the only thing they found, but they found it this past Friday. It's in Luke's Gospel, and it says there's a point in Luke's Gospel where the writer no longer calls them disciples but calls them apostles, and that's huge. If you're a disciple, you're almost ordained. You're a student, if you're a disciple. If you're an apostle, you're sent out. You're one who has authority to act. An apostle is one who steps out, and they were stepping out in his name. And all of a sudden they realized that Eucharist has less to do with the forgiveness of their sins and their past, and more to do about Thanksgiving for the job that they're going to have to do. Because God was with them, they were apostles, and it took them until Pentecost to step out.

Last night several of us went to the CSU-Mexico men's basketball game, double overtime, the Rams lost, the Lobos won, it was Senior Night and Mascot Night, and there was an Air Force Falcon mascot there, and some ice hockey team, and their mascot was a polar bear, and there was this big blue bird mascot, I don't know what that was, and then there was this mascot that looked like a piece of cheese, and that was from a pizza company here in town. Some of us were thinking that the church ought to have a mascot. We could be the First Church Flaming Hearts. Our hearts are strangely warmed, you know. Or we could be the Quarreling Quadrilateralists. None of that seemed to catch. And then I got it. This past week I went to the doctor because I've got this bump. It's on my palm. This big bump came up about, I don't know, a couple of months ago, and so I took it to the doctor, and when I was checking in, they said "What are you here for?" I said, "I've got an anomaly on an appendage." She wrote it down. The doctor said it was a contracture, and he went on to say it's very rare. It appears in people who have Viking blood. Usually happens when there's been a trauma to the hand. He wanted to know if I'd been jackhammering some concrete, that caused the trauma. I said, "The only trauma I have is, once a week I grab onto this wooden thing and I hold it tight and I yell at people for twenty minutes." I'm a Viking. I'm tough. I pillage and plunder, I wear hats with horns. I'm a Viking vicar. Wow. That could be our mascot. We could be the Stover Street Vikings. All of us could be Vikings. It's almost as good as being an apostle. Vikings, all of us at the table.

Stepping out, we find depth. In the narrow path, we don't turn back. When the going gets tough, we just get more Viking-like, because we can handle it, whatever it is. Because we can respond when asked, because we're able, and it's a privilege. We will step out in faith believing that God, the one we worship, will be with us every step we take, and we

will seek to live the adventure, because we know you don't inherit God's kingdom by proxy, and you can't fulfill your destiny by default.

I'm sure many of you noticed that James Dobson has retired. I think he lost his focus when his family theory gave way to religious doctrine that lapsed into political power, and people were hurt, and lines were drawn, and instead of stepping out, he's asked us to step off the path to a time of repression and fear. That's my opinion. Others probably don't see it that way. You don't have to agree. But I wonder if you'd agree with this. At least for me, in contrast, Paul Harvey, who died yesterday, will always be an inspiration to any of us if we're willing to keep looking for the rest of our story, knowing that stepping out means keeping on keeping on and striving to make life what it ought to be, no matter how it seems. Paul Harvey always asked, what Paul Harvey always asked and will be missed because he helped us ask it, is the rest of your story. Interesting contrast, Paul Harvey's death.

Who's responsible? For us the question is, what needs to happen? For us the answer is, we are stepping out. We take responsibility because we know with God's help, whatever is needed, we are able to respond. For years it was said, "Do this in remembrance of me."