

“THE THINGS WE KEEP”

Sermon Preached by the Rev. William H. Critzman

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Scripture References: Mark 8:27-38 & James 2:14-18

I had a hard time writing this week. Call it resistance to change, or my not wanting to get to a final word, but it was hard writing this sermon while thinking of all of you. I'm not quite sure I want to give it this morning. For those of you who are joining us for the first time this season, welcome back! If this is your first time at First Church, welcome, I know you will find a hearty and warm welcome. If you haven't been paying attention to church emails or if this is entirely new to you, I'm going to spoil a punchline in order to ensure we're all on the same page. This is my last time in this pulpit and with you all as I will soon be leaving First Church to go on to a new call.

I have so much I want to tell you; and yet, there's nothing I can say that you haven't already heard or known from this pulpit or from people far wiser than I. What does one say when one is about to “go on”? What does one say to those who will “go on” themselves? The psalmist tells that though the course of our lives may be 70, or if we are lucky 80 or 90 or more years, the best of our days are but trouble and sorrow for they pass quickly and away we will fly.ⁱ While my pastoral instinct is to tell the psalmist to take heart, it's not that bad, tomorrow is another day, I am no fool to think that life isn't hard. And yet, I am also enough of a fool to know that we can live in joy and peace when we live together in the companionship of one another. “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace” and “all of our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death.”ⁱⁱ And what is the way to dusty death if it is not the living of these days? These days, this day on which we, on which I, on which you, on which Jesus goes on.

The story I read for you from the community named for the disciple Mark begins with the phrase, “Jesus went on,” before continuing to tell the familiar story that we've just heard again. Now the writers of Mark wrote one story, a continuous narrative, a short biography of this man Jesus of Nazareth and his closest followers. They had no idea that many centuries later some other writers, editors really, would come along and chop up that singular narrative into the periscopes we now hear each Sunday as part of the Revised Common Lectionary. The lectionary—in serializing snippets of the full text—slows down the telling of the tale; it gives pause when the original has no need for one. This creates an editorial problem my 10th grade English teacher would have chastised with a red mark of “V.P.” in the margins. V.P. here stands for vague pronoun, and it was her way of teaching us to write clearly and to ensure each word has meaning. A pronoun, too far from its antecedent, causes confusion for the reader and slows the pace of the narrative. Vague pronouns create questions. The lectionary, when it picks up mid-story, it's like a vague pronoun in that moment of pause from what we hear this week from what we heard last week to what we might hear next week. This is why one of my preaching professors insisted that any text on which we preach requires the preacher to read the full book from which the portion comes each week. This might have something to do with my preference for the relatively short Gospel of Mark and some of my more general skepticism on addressing, say, Numbers or Isaiah. I like for us all to be clear about where it is we are in the story today, from where we're picking it up, and what's being foreshadowed for tomorrow.

“Jesus went on,” the story picks up today. Where from? What was he up to in the moments just before today’s story? If you were to turn your Bibles back a page, you’d see that in the verses just before we begin today, Jesus had arrived in Bethsaida, after a rather frustrating conversation with the disciples who can’t seem to get anything right. Earlier in the day, they’d been arguing with some Pharisees, and not long before they had fed about 4,000 people with seven loaves of bread and a few small fish. Do you have more of a sense now about where we are in the continuing story?

In between the feeding of those 4,000 and the walking and naming we hear today, there’s a little story about Jesus healing a blind man. You may know it. It’s the story of a blind man coming to Jesus and he - Jesus, that is - lays hands on him and cures his sight. It’s the story where he tries to restore sight on the first try but all the people look like trees; so he tries again. The first attempt nearly gets there, and then Jesus the optometrist tries something else, “better like, or like this. A or B.” “B,” the man says, and he could see everything clearly. As usual, that encounter ends with Jesus telling the man not to tell anyone, not even to go into the village. It is from here, from a second attempt, that Jesus goes on.

Now try to put yourself in Jesus’s shoes—I know they’re big ones and who are we to untie those mighty sandals, but he has walked in ours so it’s O.K. if we try to walk in his. What might Jesus be feeling in this moment as he walked on with his friends? Might you have a little doubt somewhere? Might Jesus’s divine character be a little at odds with his human one? Jesus, fully God, is perfect and can do no wrong. Jesus, fully human, is human, which is to say capable of a great many missteps in need of an even greater number of second chances. Jesus, of course, gets all things right, but he doesn’t bat 1,000—not in the gospel of Mark. And there’s a reason for this; it’s for you, and for me. Jesus fully human, fully divine is the Child of Humanity who has come to fully know us. What could be more central to who we are as humans than that we make mistakes? Mistakes are at the very core of being human. Jesus in order to be fully human must have made a mistake or two, maybe even just to know what it feels like, to know what *we* feel like when we err. In the workings of God, what this means is that to fall short, to fail flat out, or to completely miss the mark, to need a second chance, is not just human, but also divine. Here in this moment of having restored sight to a blind man on a second try, Jesus goes on with his disciples. Can you see how he might have been a little shaky? How the second attempt may have earned him an A-, which is still an A, but dang it, just not quite perfect? Can you feel how that might gnaw on you a bit? How you might need a bit of bolstering from your friends?

So Jesus turns to his disciples and asks them to talk to him about who the people say that he is. Communities, families, lovers, we do this for each other. All of us do this—we name the people in our lives not just Michael or Sally, Betty or Larry, but also by all sorts of other attributes, nicknames, and titles: teacher or doctor, friend or sweetie. This is what Jesus asks the disciples to do here, and they offer many answers; none of which are right. He turns to Peter, and Peter knocks it out of the park. A+, gold star, good job, Peter! So perfect, so true, yet so impossible to grasp. After all, we are human, as was Peter, and our eyes are often set on human things rather than the divine ones. How often do we need a second chance to see something clearly?

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if we have faith but our actions do not demonstrate it? What good is it if we are religious people on a Sunday morning, faithfully coming to church to pray and sing and listen but not in the daily actions of our workweek? What good is it if we share the “Peace of Christ” to our neighbor in the pew, but not our neighbor on

the street? What good is the Peace of Christ on a cold night without also offering a warm blanket, or cup of soup? When we go on from this place, will we remember where it is we have come from? And what will we take when we go? What will we keep?

Will we keep faith in all that we do? What about hope, can you keep hope alive in the kind of dark days the Psalmist knows? Will you keep watch with one who weeps when that's all there is to do? We keep time, like the ox and lamb and shepherds did so long ago. We keep our memories, we keep our word, we keep our promises. We gather these attributes of faith so that we can go on with each new day; go on doing the work we can do to help heal the world. Go on in being the one body of Christ wherever we are and whatever we do. One body with many members all over the world, many communities, different churches, yet knit together in the love and work of Christ. How? It's a mystery. A holy, wonderful, merciful mystery that each of us can keep in our own way and ponder in our own hearts.

Today, I too will go on. Even more importantly, today you will go on. Together as First Church, you will go on learning and telling and sharing the stories of our faith. Your works will be the proof. Let your faith be your guide. There will be young ones to baptize, and lives to remember. Together, you'll have meals to share, teenagers to confirm, and years and years of life still to come. Take none of this for granted. Make the most of these dusty days, they are all too short and even the greatest of lives is but a blink in the eternal eye that sees all clearly. Thank you for sharing these years and this time with me. Thank you for ministering with and often times to me. Thanks be to God for each of you, and for your children. Keep on holding to the things which you have heard and seen that are true and good. Be not ashamed. Keep on, keep the faith. There is One who keeps us all.

ⁱ Psalm 90:10

ⁱⁱ *Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 5