

BE OUR GUEST – September 17, 2006

Preached by The Reverend Ruth E. Shaver at the United Church of Schellsburg UCC

The 14th Sunday after Pentecost

Stewardship 1 – Presence

James 3:1-12, Mark 8:27-38

When I tell people I'm a minister, I get a wide range of reactions. Most of the time, it's something to the effect of, "Wow, that's really cool. I myself don't go to church that often because . . ."

My favorite "because" of all time came from my friend Steve, who insisted that because he had stopped going to church the week after he was confirmed 30-plus years ago, the rafters would collapse in on the congregation if he did come to church and he didn't want to be responsible for a mass casualty incident. He gave me that excuse for almost 5 years – with the occasional hedge for funerals and weddings, of course. He even tried to use it again to get out of coming to my going-away service in Attleboro. However, I was able to point out conclusively that the rafters would not cave in when a person who had been almost completely absent from church began attending fairly regularly when I pointed out to him that my friend Bill had been in church at least 3 times since January and the building was still standing. Steve was at my going away service – so was Bill – and both of them will be here for my installation and for the service the next morning. Don't worry; these rafters won't cave in, either.

Most people who give me an excuse for not attending church regularly – not that I need the excuse, that's between them and God – cite church politics as the main reason for being turned off from regular attendance and participation. Have you ever visited a church and been able to tell without being told that there's a big battle going on amongst the congregation? That's the kind of church where, after someone has said, "BE OUR GUEST" and you've taken them up on it, all you want to do once you get there is run as far away as you can. No one, especially a visitor, really wants to go to a church where the tension is so thick you could cube it and use it as communion bread if it didn't leave such a nasty, foul taste in your mouth. Perhaps James was speaking to his own congregation as a whole as much as to individuals when he warned about the power of the tongue to commit evil deeds, because the worst of the politics in any church are generally caused by two or three intemperate tongues in the congregation which wag a little bit too much in the heat of the moment. The result of this poor stewardship of words is, naturally, factions, a drop in attendance, and possibly even a split of the congregation.

One of the reasons that this is such a pleasant place to attend church is that we are not rife with side-taking factions. I know that there have been incidents of intemperate tongues here, some recently – but for the most part, the time spent learning to listen to and talk with each other during the years immediately after the merger have served the entire church well in all facets of our community life. We have collectively learned to agree to disagree when issues threaten to divide us. Sometimes, the issues fade; sometimes, they linger, awaiting further insight and revelation to be settled in time. Whatever the case, at least we can feel confident that those we invite to “BE OUR GUEST” here won’t feel as though they’ve stepped into a family feud.

We’ve been invited to be the guests of the Penn West Conference of the UCC because our brothers and sisters in the faith are trying to avoid making a family feud worse than it already is, in fact. Many of you are aware that a number of churches have left Penn West and thus the UCC in the past year because they collectively disagree with a series of General Synod resolutions over the years that culminated in last year’s support of same gender marriage rights. A number of other churches are on the fence, trying to decide if they can live in a family where agreeing to disagree is the order of the day. I think we are uniquely qualified to speak about purpose and mission in a family like that, so I invite you heartily to join me in attending this dialogue next Saturday from 9-3 in Indiana (Pennsylvania). It’s probably the most important thing we can be present at between annual meeting this year and annual meeting next in terms of fulfilling our covenantal obligations to our fellow UCC members.

James knew that tongues “full of deadly poison” can do serious damage to human relationships. Such poisonous tongues can lead to misunderstanding, which can break a relationship so completely that people are no longer willing to be present with each other to try to gain understanding. It’s hard to have dialogue leading to understanding when we are absent one from another.

Peter’s tongue, “full of deadly poison” as it is in today’s Gospel lesson, is proof positive that presence doesn’t always equal perfect understanding, either. Peter has, after all, been present throughout Jesus’ ministry. He has witnessed the miracles and heard the teaching, yet all of this has led him to only a partial realization of who Jesus truly is.

When Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do *you* say that I am?”, Peter gives the A+, unabashedly perfect answer: The Messiah. The anointed one who will redeem Israel.

I don't know any more than the most vaunted academics do whether Jesus takes this as a sign of understanding or whether he just goes ahead with his explanation of what is going to happen to him even though it is highly probable that Peter and the rest of the crew will misunderstand everything he said. What I do know is that, predictably, Peter does misunderstand Jesus.

In a foreshadowing of the intemperance we will see again on Holy Thursday, Peter takes the extraordinary step of rebuking Jesus for daring to predict his own suffering and death. We don't know exactly what Peter says, but Jesus will have none of it. "Get thee behind me, Satan," he says.

The invitation Jesus issues next bears no resemblance to that issued by the dancing dishes and candlesticks of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*. When Luminiere and company welcome Belle into the Beast's castle, they do so with a promise of exquisite service and fantastic food:

Be our guest! Be our guest! Put our service to the test. Tie your napkin 'round your neck and we provide the rest. Soup du jour! Hot hors d'oeuvres! Why we only live to serve. Try the grey stuff, it's delicious! Don't believe me? *Ask the dishes!* They can sing! They can dance! *After all, Miss, this is France!* And a dinner here is never second best. Go on, unfold your menu, take a glance, and then you'll be our guest, *oui*, our guest, be our guest!¹ Jesus asks for service to the point of ultimate sacrifice when he invites his disciples to join him by taking up their crosses to follow him, a far cry from a seat at a beautifully decorated and food-laden table.

When we accept Jesus' invitation to follow him – when we become his guests, as it were – we commit to being present with him in all things. You see, when it comes to stewardship, presence isn't just about being here on Sunday morning. Stewardship is a lifestyle that begins with being present with Christ. Coming to church for worship once a week is just 1/168th of our responsibility to be present with Christ. Worship is the time at which we're called to be present with each other, as well – because, after all, the rafters won't collapse in on us no matter how long it's been since the least seen person in the congregation last set foot in the building – but we have 167 other hours every week in which we are called to be present with Christ as we live our lives outside of this hour of worship.

So how are you present with Christ in your life?

¹ "Be Our Guest" from Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*; words by Howard Ashman, music by Alan Menken. © 1991 by Walt Disney Music Co. and Wonderland Music Co., Inc.

Remember the children's message last week? We talked about doing good things because you know that God loves you and because you love God. It therefore follows that if you strive to do good works because you believe in that God loves you, you are present with Christ. Maybe that's helping at the New Paris Food Bank or volunteering as a literacy tutor. Maybe you give generously to the Salvation Army, to Love, Inc., or to another agency that works to keep people from falling through the cracks in the system. Perhaps you give your time within your own family, caring for a relative in need. Or your presence with Christ could be as a caring, ethical, diligent staff member or owner of your company.

We are not, for the most part, called to lay down our lives for our faith as those who first read Mark's Gospel were. In the United States, we are not under threat of arrest as our fellow believers in Vietnam, Eritrea, and China are – but you can rest assured that they are present with Christ even as they sit in prison waiting for a trial that might never come. We don't face angry mobs seeking to destroy our church as Christians in Uttar Pradesh, India, and Aceh, Indonesia have faced this month alone, but you know that they were present with Christ even as their churches burned to the ground. The pastor of the church in Aceh and his pregnant wife are still in hiding from the mob, bearing their cross in the presence of Christ.² One of my seminary professors suggested that it may actually be easier to be a Christian when circumstances are hard because the lines are so clear between "human" and "divine" things, unlike this culture, wherein theology and politics run intertwined and Christian ethics have been redefined over the centuries to meet the needs of the power structure in our "Christian" nation. Spoken, I can't help but think, like someone who has never faced persecution for his beliefs, or dealt with tongues "full of deadly poison" that bring hatred, persecution, and violence through misinterpretation of words and twisting of ideas even among people who use the exact same Scriptures, such as Protestants and Catholics in Ireland.

When we are constantly in Christ's presence, we need not fear tongues "full of deadly poison" from others. When Christ guides our thoughts and deeds, we can be good stewards of our own words, as well. We have been invited to be Christ's guests and have accepted the invitation to be present with him, here and now, out there and all the time. Let us find within us the courage and love to turn to others and invite them to "BE OUR GUESTS" as we live in

² Information from <http://www.christianpersecution.info/> on September 16, 2006.

Christ's presence, so that they also might hear and accept Christ's invitation to take up their crosses and follow him. AMEN.