

“The ‘S’ Word”

Most all of you know that I served as a Chaplain for over 15 years in the Presbyterian Retirement Community in Easley but someone asked me recently where I served before that and I realized that there is a lot that you DON'T know about me. If I were smart, I would probably keep it that way. But here goes.

I was old when I went to Seminary – 34. My children were 5 and 9, so it took me five years of commuting to Erskine before I finished my degree. I had a lot of help from my husband, the grandmas, sister-in-laws and nieces who were willing to babysit, make lunches and drive carpools AND the prayers of many friends. The Women in Christ class at my home church, John Knox, prayed me through Hebrew. If they had not, I would have had to become a Methodist.

I left Seminary fairly certain that God would call me to chaplaincy. I was terrified of preaching – in fact, I still find it very daunting – so I was sure God would work it out so that I could be an ordained minister who never preached. Well, you know what the country song says, "If you want to hear God laugh, tell Him your plans!"

You see, God DID call me to be a Chaplain at Presbyterian Community, where we worshiped at 5:00 in the afternoon. This freed me up to fill in on Sunday mornings for people who were on vacation or sick or churches with vacant pulpits. So some Sundays, I actually preached three times in one day. That God!! And while I truly loved working with older adults, after a while, dealing with grief and loss EVERY DAY began

to take its toll on me and I feeling God nudging me to listen for another call. And here I am!

But I will be honest and tell you that, every fall I would listen to my colleagues in ministry talk about what they were involved with, and I would try to hide the smirk on my face and secretly thank God that I did not have to deal with the subject at hand. I am referring to the ‘S’ word. In my ministry at Presbyterian Home, I didn’t have to say the ‘S’ word, think about the ‘S’ word and certainly not preach on the ‘S’ word! Of course, I mean STEWARDSHIP!!!!!!!!!! But this year, serving in a parish, I guess the Lord is giving me a new challenge because here I am, preaching about Stewardship. And frankly, I had no idea where to start.

Then I came across this passage in 1 Chronicles that really spoke to my heart. The story revolves around King David and the transfer of power in the kingdom of the Israelites to his son, Solomon. The verses that we just heard are David’s way of letting the high ranking officials in the kingdom know that, not only will Solomon be the new king, but that he will take over the temple project and see it through to its completion.

But the great thing about the passage, the reason that it spoke to me as a way of dealing with the ‘S’ word, is the tone that David sets. In verse one of this chapter in Chronicles he states: “the work is great; for the temple will not be for mortals but for the LORD God.” After that, all of David’s words give glory to God as he reminds us that EVERYTHING that we do should honor God because it belongs to God and came from God as a gift to us! All our possessions and all our abilities. God is the true owner of everything we have and do. It is even God who gives us the ability to produce wealth.

Now, Presbyterian ministers are known for preaching sermons that contain three points and a poem! But to help us consider what this passage means to us and how it applies to our call to be good stewards for the Lord, I would like to ask three questions this morning. You may even want to jot them down in your bulletin!

The first is this. **HOW BIG IS YOUR GOD?** The Chronicler says clearly that all the earth and the heavens and everything on the earth are God's. Specifically he says that power, glory, victory, majesty, riches and honor come from God. They *are* God's. So how big does that make him?

There is a movie that was made once called *The Bear*. It is the saga of a tiny bear cub whose mother dies. The cub survives, but the viewers know that his long-term chances are nil. Then the unexpected happens. The little cub gets more or less adopted by an enormous Kodiak. This giant bear is always watching over the cub. He protects him from a mountain lion that has been stalking him. He teaches the cub how to be a bear. Everything the father does, the cub imitates: he waddles in a stream and stabs at a fish like the daddy bear. He stands on two legs and scratches his back against a tree as he has seen the father do. And as you watch, you are filled with hope that the cub will live after all.

But one day they get separated. The little bear can't see his father anywhere. The mountain lion has never forgotten the cub and now he sees his opportunity and comes swiftly, face-to-face with the cub and is about to spring. So the little bear does what he has seen his father do: he rears up on his hind legs, lifts his paws and tries to growl fiercely. Of course, what comes out is a frightened squeak! The mountain lion is not convinced and the cub, the attacker and the viewers know that the cub is about to die.

Then the camera focuses on the mountain lion, whose face suddenly registers a look of fear. He stops snarling, turns and slinks away. The camera turns to the cub. He is as surprised as we are. How could that tiny growl have worked so well? But then the camera pans back, and we see what we did not know was there. We see what the little bear cannot. Behind him is the great Kodiak, standing on his hind legs, poised to save his son with a single swipe!

That is how big MY God is. The God of power, victory and majesty is standing behind me ready to defend me. Ready to go to bat for me. Ready to protect me and claim me and deliver me to safety.

Which leads to my second question. HOW MUCH DOES YOUR GOD CARE? How do we *know* that God will protect us, save us and deliver us to safety? Well, simply put – the answer can be found in one verse of Scripture. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life!” For me, and I am sure for many of you, this is the first verse in the Bible that I learned from memory. I heard it early in Sunday School or in Vacation Bible School and I guess because I have heard it so long, I thought I understood it. But I did not. Not until the moment that my first child was born.

As soon as I laid eyes on that beautiful little, black haired girl who had been so much trouble to get into the world, I remember thinking: So THAT’S how much God loves me! He loves me enough to give up his CHILD for me. And in an instant, I knew that I could never love anyone that much. To give up my child for you is a thought that would NEVER enter my mind. But it entered God’s mind. And that is what he did for each one here in the person of Jesus Christ. My God cares enough to willingly let his

child die so that I can live. That is a love beyond reason. That is the love of a very big God.

And that leads me to my third question and the one that I hope, will finally address the ‘S’ word? HOW CAN YOU SHOW YOUR GRATITUDE? HOW CAN I? HOW CAN WE ALL? David says that his work, that is the building of the Temple, is a response to all that the Lord has done for him. In other words, he says that we cannot really give anything to God because everything we have is already His. Our minds, our hearts, our resources, our time, creation, even those precious children that we all agree to help raise when we witness a baptism are simply gifts that God has lent us. We are God's caretakers of all the riches of life.

In our New Testament lesson Paul emphasizes this thought as well. He tells Timothy that the riches that we have received have been given to us by God for our enjoyment. Then he says, “They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous and ready to share.” In other words, our God is BIG. Providing all that we need and all that we have. But God’s work can only continue into the future if WE continue to respond thankfully, generously, graciously and joyfully to the love and protection that we have received. God needs our responsible stewardship of each gift that we have received as disciples – our resources of time, talent and money.

Now, as I have mentioned before, I was once described as “refreshingly candid”. So in order to live up to my reputation, I am going to be refreshingly candid now! And by the way, that is just code for “I’m going to tell you what you might not want to hear.”

This church family is blessed in so many ways. Beautiful, historic facilities. Lovely, well-kept grounds, including our notable cemetery. A wonderful music staff and

volunteer musicians that lead us each week in music that I believe rivals any church I have been in. Youth parents who have stepped up to the plate to fill the gap while we are without paid leadership for our Christian Education department. Solid, faith filled leaders on our Session. We are dedicated disciples who work and worship and learn and live and agree and agree to disagree in love and friends, there are not many churches around that are so blessed.

And we are blessed financially as well, with endowments and investments and through the giving in this church. I was told by an Elder that, historically, any time there has been a need here at Nazareth and the need has been made known, people have graciously opened their hearts and their wallets. But as a church, we still have to address the day-to-day costs of running a church, like it or not.

Each week, you see printed in the bulletin the figure of what we need financially for this to happen reported against what we receive. I pulled the bulletins that I had access to for the first 6 months of this year, 18 bulletins in all. Of the 18 weeks that I looked, the amount collected was significantly behind what was needed on 11 of those weeks. Therefore, in the remaining 11 weeks of this year, including today, we will need to collect \$9, 342 EACH WEEK, just to make this year's budget. This may not be something that you are comfortable hearing from the pulpit and I am not asking anyone to give more than they are able, but I do believe that God calls us to give sacrificially and not just what is convenient.

During the Stewardship Season, every family at Nazareth Presbyterian Church is being asked to prayerfully consider your pledge for the coming year. You will be receiving a packet soon that contains a pledge card as well as a time and talents card.

And friends, this is your opportunity to answer the questions, “How big is my God?”
“How much does God care?” “How can I show my gratitude?”

You may not like my refreshingly candid news, but I really felt called as your Interim Minister to ask you to make the ‘S’ word a big part of your prayer life in the next few weeks. The great Reformer Martin Luther once said, “People go through three conversions: their head, their heart and their pocketbook. Unfortunately, not all at the same time.”

Let us all pray for that third conversion. The one that helps us answer the questions: HOW BIG IS MY GOD? HOW MUCH DOES GOD CARE? HOW CAN I SHOW MY GRATITUDE? Then, let us respond faithfully to the gifts that have been given to each of us here so that the Good News can continue to be told in this church, in this community and in God’s world! The world really needs some good news right now! And by our commitments to be faithful and generous stewards WE can be the ones to tell it! Amen.