

First Presbyterian Church
Marianna, Florida
Sunday, May 20, 2007
Sermon by Huw Christopher, Pastor

Scripture Readings: Ephesians 1:15-23

Acts 1:1-11

Sermon Title: “Sharing the Victory of Jesus Through Our Powerful Witness”

Sermon Text: Acts 1:8: But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Earlier this month I had the privilege to hear retired Colonel Westanna Harvey Bobbitt as she delivered the commencement address at Chipola College. It was obvious from what she said that she was proud of this College which she had attended and grateful for the opportunities that had been given to her by our local College. I feel sure that if she was giving that address today she would have even greater pride in the accomplishments of this College, with four State championships in the major sports that are played there, and then yesterday the first national championship for the Women’s Softball team. This championship gave the College its first national championship in many years. As I was listening to Colonel Bobbitt’s opening remarks I was reminded of the challenge that so many people face at this time of the year. She did not put it in these exact terms but as I thought about it she was affirming the way in which she and people like

her who are asked to give Commencement addresses at High Schools or Colleges at this time of the year are faced by what I would term the M and M challenge. The M and M challenge is of saying something that will be both memorable and also that will be meaningful. In accepting this M and M challenge most commencement speakers are seeking to answer the two basic questions faced by those who are graduating and anticipating a time of transition and of change in their lives. Joshua Blighton whom we recognize today as he anticipates his graduation from Marianna High School may well have answered one of these questions as he looks forward to studying civil engineering at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. For many High School and College graduates, though, and indeed for people of whatever age who are going through times of change and uncertainty in their lives two questions that often come to the surface are, “What am I going to do now?” and “How am I going to be able to do it?” As commencement speakers accept the M and M challenge in so many ways they are trying to address those two basic questions of the uncertainty that many feel at the time of graduation from one experience of life and their commencement of a new experience.

I do not know what you may have thought when you saw the introduction to our reading, “Jesus gives his commencement address to his disciples.” I am not sure that I had even thought about his words in this way until I was reflecting on them recently. Unlike Joshua and most people who are honored as graduates at this time of the year it is doubtful that the disciples saw this event as their graduation exercise. It is very unlikely that “Pomp and Circumstance” since it had not even been written at that time was playing in the background of these events. In the same way neither Jesus nor the disciples would probably have been wearing academic regalia. Indeed their question, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” seems to highlight the fact that they did not anticipate that very soon they would be thrown into the new experience in which

the resurrection appearances of Jesus to them would come to an end, and they would be faced with the reality of life without his physical presence with them. Clearly, though, Jesus recognizes that, like all graduation times, this is going to be a time of transition for them. As he leaves them this is going to be the time when they will be faced by the questions faced by graduates and by all people as they think about transitions of their lives, “What are we going to do now?” and “How are the going to do it?”

As we listen to his words we see how Jesus responded to the M and M challenge by which he was confronted at that moment. As he sought to say something that will be both memorable and meaningful to these who have been his closest followers he seems to try to answer their second question first. He says, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.” How were they going to be able to do whatever Jesus may expect of them in the future without his leadership and without his physical presence with them? Jesus makes clear that he does not expect them to do it in their own strength and in their own power. Before seeking to answer their question of “What are we going to do now?” he gives them words of encouragement and of assurance.

In the words that Paul wrote to the Christians in Ephesus, that we heard again this morning, he makes very clear that the promise that Jesus made to those disciples in his commencement address was not just meant to be memorable and meaningful just for them but it was meant to be a promise that would bring assurance to all who would become his followers and who would hear his words in the future. Paul says that his prayer for those to whom he is writing is that they might come to know the immeasurable greatness of God’s power for all who believe. This, he says, is nothing less than the power that God revealed as he raised Jesus from the dead and seated him in the heavenly places far above all rule and authority and power and dominion. Paul would say this is the power that has changed my life and has enabled me to do all that I have done from being a

persecutor of the Church of Jesus Christ to being one who was ready to be persecuted in order to proclaim God's love in Jesus Christ. Paul's words remind us that Jesus would want Joshua, and all of us, still today to hear his words of promise and assurance, and to claim the immeasurable greatness of God's power in our own lives. It is easy to feel powerless even as we confront the personal issues of life today without even thinking about the global problems. Jesus would say to us, as he said to those first disciples, remember I am not asking you to do anything on your own. The promise of the gift of my power, which we will celebrate next Sunday at Pentecost, is yours to claim and to know in your own lives.

It would appear that Jesus knew that his answer to their first question of "What are we going to do now?" would not be an easy one for them to hear. It is because of this that he first gives them those words of assurance and of encouragement as he says, "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you." It is only with that assurance ringing in their ears that he then seeks to answer their first question of "What are we to do now? He says, "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Here Jesus is telling them what he expects them to do as he prepares to leave them. The rest of the Acts of the Apostles, and indeed the rest of the New Testament, bears testimony to the way in which they, and those to whom they witnessed, took seriously these words of instruction from Jesus. Today we have not had the privilege personally of hearing the witness of Peter or John or James or even Paul. We are here this morning, though, because down through the centuries there have been those who have been faithful as they have been empowered by the Holy Spirit to witness to the love of God in Jesus Christ. They have given testimony to the fact that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is his victory which affirms that he who as the Lamb of God in love died for us is now the King-all glorious. In our own experience we can be grateful for parents, or grandparents, or friends, or teachers, or camp counselors, or pastors who by their words or by

their actions have witnessed to us of the love of God in Jesus Christ, and have enabled us to come to know the assurance of that love in our own lives.

Whether or not Jesus was conscious of accepting the M and M challenge as he spoke these words to his disciples we do not know. We do know that for them they did become both memorable and meaningful words as empowered by the Holy Spirit their lives found meaning as they gave themselves to being his witnesses wherever they were. What happened as they witnessed and other people came to accept their witness was that those people who came to believe came to hear these words of Jesus as speaking to them about their lives as well. Their experience reminds us that for us too there is that power to claim, and there is that task to be done. Ours is the privilege still to claim that power that raised Jesus from the dead to enable us to witness to his victory and all that it means to us and to the whole world.

Today Joshua may not know about all that he will study at the University of Alabama, and he may not see clearly what his chosen career will become as a result of these studies, and where that chosen career may take him. The experience of all who have taken seriously this commencement address of Jesus has been to recognize, though, that wherever their careers may take them and whatever they may be doing they still have a vocation as a Christian. This vocation is to be empowered by the Holy Spirit to witness by word or by deed to the fact that the love of God seen in Jesus Christ is a love that excludes no one but extends to the ends of the earth. In a world of so much hatred and violence they have found their vocation to be that of being empowered by the Holy Spirit to witness to the fact that love is the most powerful force in the world, and is indeed the real hope of the world. In a world of so much human need they have found their vocation to be that of being empowered by the Holy Spirit to witness to God's love and compassion in Jesus Christ as they have reached out with practical love and concern assuring people of God's love and care as they have shown their own.

As he accepts his M and M challenge Jesus was prompting his followers then and now to hear those memorable words “you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you,” and to remember that at all times and in all places that power is available in each of our lives. He was also prompting his followers then and now to find their true vocation, and to remember that true meaning in life is to be found in whatever we are doing as through our words and our deeds we witness to the love of God which by his life, death and resurrection Jesus had come to show.

Joshua, with Paul, we would pray that in wherever your future may lead you, and in whatever you may be doing with your life you might know that immeasurable greatness of God’s power at work in your life enabling you to live out your vocation of showing forth the love of God which you have come to know through your family, and through this congregation.

Today as we would make that prayer for Joshua let us claim that power of God for our own lives that we might live out our own vocations as we share the victory of Jesus through our own powerful witness. Let us do this using the words of affirmation printed in the bulletin. Let us stand and affirm our faith together...

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH *from the Brief Statement of Faith of the
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*

In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom and peace. In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives, even as we watch for God’s new heaven and new earth, praying, “Come, Lord Jesus!”