

## Incongruity

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on September 18, 1994, the 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time. Scripture Lessons: Proverbs 31:10-31; Psalm 1; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

Incongruity! It's a pretty big word. It's a word I hardly ever use. In fact, I had to look it up in the dictionary to make sure I understood what it meant. Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary says that "incongruity" means "the quality or state of being incongruous." That wasn't much help so I looked up "incongruous". "Incongruous" means "not harmonious: incompatible... inconsistent within itself... lacking propriety." That's kind of what I thought it meant: incompatible, inconsistent.

Here are some examples of incongruity: Nero fiddled while Rome burned. Nero's actions were incongruous. They were incompatible and inconsistent with what was required of him. He should have grabbed a fire hose. Instead, he fiddled. That's incongruity. Recently on the Tonight Show Jay Leno read a newspaper clipping which said, "Due to unforeseen circumstances today's horoscope will not appear in the paper." Excuse me but aren't astrologers supposed to foresee things like that? Unforeseen circumstances are inconsistent, incompatible incongruous. <sup>with a horoscope</sup> Here's still another incongruity. I saw a poster at the Solanco Fair Friday evening showing that Americans spend the least percentage of annual income for food than any other nation, 12%. Food is relatively cheap in the U.S. Then I remembered something I heard on a film publicizing the CROP Walk for world hunger on October 16th. It said that one out of five children living in the United States grow up in

poverty with inadequate diets. That's incongruity. How can this be? How can well fed Christians tolerate such incongruity?

Now St. Mark, in our Gospel lesson, tells a story that has at least two incongruities in it. Jesus is talking to his disciples about his death and how it's going to happen. "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise." This is heavy stuff. If you've ever been betrayed by a loved one you can imagine how Jesus felt when he shared these foreboding thoughts with his closest friends? Betrayed! Double-crossed! Stabbed in the back by a close friend! Oh, how that hurts. What scars it leaves on our memories when we're betrayed.

And then Jesus says, "I'm going to be killed!" Not only betrayed but murdered! His life stamped out! And after three days rise. Imagine the agony Jesus felt as he shared what he knew was going to happen to him? How much Jesus needed his friends to comfort him, to listen to him, to understand or, at least, to try to understand what he was feeling?

How would you respond if a loved one shared with you what Jesus shared with his friends? Wouldn't you say up front, "I don't understand what you mean? Help me <sup>please help me,</sup> understand! What do you mean, you're going to be betrayed and killed?" But the disciples were afraid to ask him about it. Instead they started talking among themselves. And here's where the incongruity comes in. They began to talk among themselves about who was the greatest. Can you imagine that? Jesus is talking about his approaching betrayal and murder and they're arguing about who's

the greatest. That's incongruity.

Mark and the other Gospel writers want us to know that Jesus chose disciples who had a lot of incongruities in their lives. Jesus spent three years discipling these people and they still didn't understand. Jesus didn't choose courageous, sensitive, understanding people. He chose people who had serious character defects. They didn't understand Jesus. They were afraid to ask him questions. These are the people Jesus chose to bear witness to his love grace and mercy. These are the people Jesus sent out to cast out demons and heal people and forgive sins. People in many ways like us.

Jesus still chooses people like that, people like you and me. People who don't understand a lot of times very well what we read in the Bible. People who, too often, are afraid to ask questions. We sometimes use those incongruities to excuse ourselves from worshiping with God's people, from bearing witness to God's love, grace, and mercy in Jesus Christ, from serving others in the name and for the sake of Christ. We say, "Oh, I can't do those things. There's too many things in my life which are incompatible with worshiping and witnessing and serving Christ. It would be hypocritical for me to go to Sunday School or church on a regular basis. I'm not good enough or spiritual enough to bear witness to Christ

or to serve others in his name." *we may try, usually unsuccessfully to root out those incongruities so we can worship, witness & serve without feeling hypocritical. More like we just learn to live with the incongruities.*

But the incongruities in our lives are no excuse. It's as we worship, as we ask questions and seek understanding that we begin <sup>see it</sup> to overcome these incongruities. It's as we bear witness and serve others in the name of Christ that

the incongruities in our lives become resolved. There will always be incongruities in our lives. Nevertheless, God, in Christ, calls us to serve him, to bear witness to him, to learn from him, to worship him.

*we don't overcome these incongruities through a level, struggle against unwanted additional things in our lives*

But there's another incongruity in what St. Mark tells us. When Jesus heard that his disciples were arguing about who was the greatest he said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all. Then Jesus took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.'"

There's incongruity for you. We don't think of greatness in terms of being last. I never heard anybody say of the Phillies this year, "There the greatest."

Last year, yes, but not this year. When we think of greatness we usually think of a first place time, a topped ranked athlete, the leading authority; we think of the chairmen of the board, not the janitor. And when we think of greatness, we don't usually think of a little child or one who welcomes that little child in the name of Jesus.

When you think of great people who do you think of? Mohammed Ali? Yes, I used to watch him box and it was beautiful to see him float like a butterfly and sting like a bee. He was the greatest boxer I've ever seen. When you think of greatness do you think of the Beatles? John Lennon, Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr, George Harrison. Yes - I think the Beatles were great. The Sergeant Pepper album is probably the greatest album ever produced.

But what does Jesus think of when he thinks of greatness? He thinks of

service. He thinks of those who let others go first, the one who lets the other go first at a stop sign or at a check out line in the super market. When Jesus thinks of greatness he doesn't think of great generals or great politicians or great athletes or great musicians or great movie stars. He thinks of a little child and those who welcome little children in his name. That's greatness. But in the eyes of many people, that's incongruity. *to think of greatness in terms of service,*

But I think I know what Jesus meant. When I think of greatness I think of my mom and dad who never went beyond fifth grade. Their pictures never appeared on the front page of a newspaper. They worked in relatively low paying jobs, earning money to put food on the table, to buy clothes (nothing fancy), staying together through thick and thin, spending time with me, gently disciplining me when I got out of line, and above all loving me, welcoming me home from school, taking me to Sunday School and Church, praying with and for me. That's greatness.

When I think of greatness, I also think of a single mom or dad trying to do the best they possibly can, in the face of tremendous obstacles, to raise their children to know and serve Christ and to be decent, law abiding citizens. They work, not just one, but two or even three jobs so they can buy special tennis shoes or a special dress and so they can put a little money in the bank for college someday. That's greatness.

When I think of greatness I think of a story Garrison Keillor told on the Prairie Home Companion. Helen Krebsbach is an eighty year old widow. She has lived in Lake Wobegone all her life. Every night she walks the streets of Lake

Woebegone, by the homes of friends and neighbors. She passes the home of a man who just lost his job. She passes the home of a couple who just separated and it looks like they're going to get a divorce. She passes the home of a family who just brought home a healthy new baby girl. And as she walks by these homes, she prays for the people inside. She knows these people. She loves these people.

She walks by Billy's home. Billy is a pretty typical teenager. On his bedroom walls are large posters of great movie stars, great musicians, great athletes - posters of Cindy Crawford, Mick Jagger, Michael Jordan. Wealthy people! Famous people! Great people! People, idolized by millions. In Billy's eyes, they're the greatest. But when Billy had appendicitis and spent several miserable days in the hospital Cindy Crawford, Mick Jagger and Michael Jordan weren't able to visit him. They never got around to mailing a get-well card to him. They didn't telephone or come over to see how Billy was recovering.

But old Mrs. Krebsbach did. She prayed for him every night. She sent him a get well card. When he got home from the hospital she dropped by with Billy's favorite apple pie to help speed his recovery. If you put Helen Krebsbach's name on a list of great people, like Queen Elizabeth or Roseanne Arnold most people who don't know her would say, "That's incongruous. How did she get on the list? But in the eyes of Jesus, she's the greatest.

Incongruity - something that's inconsistent, incompatible - like disciples talking about who is greatest when the One who loves them most is deeply hurting in anticipation of his betrayal and death. Incongruity - like thinking of greatness

and service at the same time.

Incongruities in our lives don't disqualify us from bearing witness to God's grace. Incongruities in our lives don't excuse us from serving in his name (like participating in the CRDP walk or sponsoring a walker). Incongruities in our lives are overcome as we worship and bear witness and serve in Christ's name.

As followers of Jesus we're called to greatness. Greatness! Not greatness as the world sees it in terms of power, wealth, and doing anything to be first - but greatness in terms of service... greatness in terms of welcoming, in the name of Christ, the least powerful and most vulnerable among us.

Let us pray: God the Father of all, you have willed that the last shall be first, and you have made a little child the measure of your kingdom. Give us that wisdom which is from above, so we may understand that, in your sight, the one who serves is the greatest of all. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.