

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for Boy Scout Sunday, February 5, 2012
Lessons: Jeremiah 22:11-19 and I Corinthians 13:1-13

RIDDLES

My earliest memory of a riddle comes from the beginning of my year in first grade. “What’s black and white and read all over?” And the answer was, “A newspaper.” The riddle works only when spoken because its solution depends upon the coincidence that r-e-d and r-e-a-d sound the same. The riddle was useful because we were learning to read, and English is a tricky language. Of course, someone quickly undid the word trick in the riddle by changing the answer to “a blushing zebra,” but even then, we were still learning at our first grade level the complexities of reading and understanding English.

The most famous riddle in the Western part of the world may be the one that comes from the sphinx in the Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex*. The man, Oedipus, is trying to run from his fate, but a monstrous creature called a sphinx blocks his way and forces him to answer a riddle. If he answers correctly, the sphinx will let him pass; if he answers wrongly, she will kill him. She asks Oedipus what goes on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs in the evening. He saves his life by answering correctly, “a human being,” who as an infant crawls on all fours, as a youth and younger adult walks on two legs, and as an older adult uses a cane.

Riddles can be fun but not so much when we are forced to realize that life itself is puzzling and that other people, including those we love, are riddles to us, and truly we remain throughout life riddles to ourselves. Who is that man I see reversed in the mirror? I shave his face without having to think about what I’m doing, but how am I to understand him, discover or recover his hopes and dreams, trust his beliefs, and find meaning in his life? Can I? Or must he always be to me a riddle with conflicting clues?

The apostle Paul writes two angry but also desperately caring letters to the Christian church in the city of Corinth, and our well-known “love chapter” comes from the first of those angry letters. The Corinthians are on a high, and it’s a religious high. They are pumped up with pride in their newfound religion and the feelings of comfort and power it has been giving them. They feel great, and now they have taken to feeling *greater than* each other and so have split themselves into little factions, each claiming spiritual superiority. In short, they have become self-satisfied Christian snobs. Paul is the one who started their

church. He called them to Christ out of their former paganism, and now they have become unbearable brats who make fun of him and look down their noses at other Christians.

The famous “love chapter” is not so pleasant and comforting as imagined by people who have not read it carefully enough. It talks about love, so it must be nice, right? Wrong. It’s angry, but with the anger of an apostle who would willingly lay down his life for those now-arrogant people he himself called to follow Jesus Christ.

I get as far as Paul’s statement, “Love is patient,” and the translation I read this morning makes it even harder by saying, “Love is always patient.” I am not always patient or kind. I can be resentful and have known myself to let a grudge keep gnawing at my mind like a rat that has built a nest there. As I approach retirement, I find myself asking, “Why was I not more often the person I thought I would be and sometimes was, but never completely?” Why am I inconsistent? Why do my feelings and actions sometimes contradict my most deeply held beliefs and my image of the person I want to be?

Okay, scouts. “A scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent.” Really? I was a scout for a time and a patrol leader. I really liked the hiking and camping, and I enjoyed summer camp so much the year I went that I hid the fact that I was sick until it became apparent that what I had was whooping cough, and I was sent home ASAP. Choose one: say, *a scout is brave*. Sometimes I was, sometimes not. And sometimes I was conflicted. Should I stand up and fight or let it go as the adults said I should? But inside I felt some shame if I made “the better choice” by walking away from the fight. That’s human nature and very much the nature of a twelve or thirteen-year-old boy, as I was at the time. “A scout is helpful.” Same story. Sometimes I was. At other times, I was more lazy or selfish than helpful.

Paul understood because God understands us. We are creatures of self-contradiction. Our understandings of life, self, God, and other people are always partial, not complete. We each see the world with just one set of eyes, and so everything we think we know or understand is slanted from one point of view. We are very much like the blind men in the Indian parable who encounter the elephant by touching different parts of its massive body. One says it is very much like a wall, but another disagrees, saying it is like a snake, another who has grabbed the animal’s tail, that it is like a rope, and yet another that it is like a spear. So we see things in life, Paul writes, as through a glass dimly. But the literal translation of “dimly” would be, “as a riddle.” When we ask what anything is and what it means, our viewpoint is partial, one-sided, and slanted, and so our observations are no more than clues to a riddle, and some of those clues may mislead us, especially when we look through the distorted lenses of our prejudices. Then we see what is not true at all.

Paul is trying to get the embarrassingly self-congratulating Christians of Corinth to recognize their own human limitations and not just the other person's. From the very beginning, God has been trying to get all of us to accept and embrace our own humanity – not as a feeble excuse for our refusals to learn or accept responsibility – “Well, I’m only human” – but as God’s gift to us. God created us to be human, with ourselves and with each other. The great temptation in the Genesis story of the Garden of Eden is not to eat a piece of fruit but to “be as gods” in our own eyes. Our sin is not being human but being inhuman toward each other and proud of it. The king of Judah is condemned in our reading from Jeremiah, not just because he had an expensive renovation done on his palace, but because he did for himself while ignoring the sufferings of his people and their cries for justice. He didn’t even pay the people he forced to work on his palace. Wage theft was a problem even back then, as it continues to be a big problem today. Jeremiah tells the king that because he has chosen luxury for himself over fairness and compassion for his people, and because he thinks he is so great as to be an exception, he will be buried, not with royal honors, but as a dead donkey is dragged out the city and tossed onto a trash heap for the wild animals to devour.

It’s right for us to be human, and Jesus Christ calls us to keep becoming more and more human as God created us to become. It’s okay that we understand life only in part and sometimes seem puzzling to ourselves, as long as we know our knowledge is partial and, therefore, keep trusting God to lead us into ways of life that are meaningful. The dangerous people are those who think they know absolutely – who put their view of things, their principles or values, and their opinions above justice or even compassion. For human beings, it is quite possible to be so right that we get it all wrong. It is when we think we see with simple clarity what is true that we make fools of ourselves and may start labeling other people as less valuable than we are. Then, as the Corinthian Christians tore the fabric of their church, we tear the fabric of our families, our communities, our nation, and the whole human world community. We are called to put our trust in God, to live and share the hope God gives us, and to do it with a humility that sees all people in the light of God’s love for them and God’s desire, we know in Christ, for a humanity that lives in peace and justice.

So, the true measures of all we do and all we become are three – trust (faith), hope, and compassion (that is, love) – and the greatest of even those three is and always will be love. Amen.