

LAY WITNESS

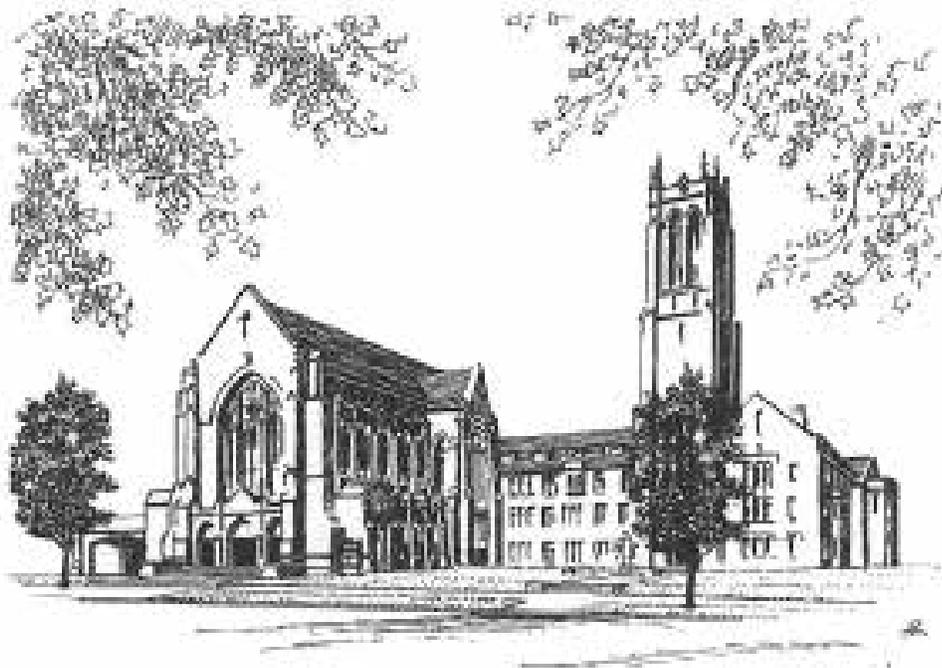
by

Noel Chang

October 20, 2013

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost

9:45 and 11:05 a.m.



ST. PAUL'S

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Texts:

Jeremiah 31: 27-34; Psalm 119: 97-104; 2 Timothy 3: 14-4:5; and Luke 18: 1-8

Jeremiah 31: 27-34

²⁷The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals.

²⁸And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the Lord. ²⁹In those days they shall no longer say: “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”

³⁰But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge. ³¹The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt — a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord.

³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Psalm 119:97-104

⁹⁷Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all day long.

⁹⁸Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is always with me.

⁹⁹I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your decrees are my meditation.

¹⁰⁰I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts.

¹⁰¹I hold back my feet from every evil way, in order to keep your word.

¹⁰²I do not turn away from your ordinances, for you have taught me.

¹⁰³How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!

¹⁰⁴Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way.

2 Timothy 3: 14-4:5

¹⁴But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, ¹⁵and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

⁴In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: ²proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. ³For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, ⁴and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. ⁵As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

Luke 18: 1-8

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ²He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' ⁴For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for any-

one, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.”

⁶And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer. Amen.

Good morning. If you are like me, you usually attend the same service when you come to St. Paul’s. If you usually come to the middle service, you’re probably saying “who is this guy?” I usually go to the late service. If you don’t always go to the same service, and by any chance you were at the late service last year for Laity Sunday, then you’re probably saying “didn’t he speak at last year’s service?” I did.

When Reverend Williams called and asked if I would give the witness this year, I told him I would, but I also told him I did it last year, and perhaps he would like to make some one else...er, give someone else the opportunity to speak this year. He wasn’t going for it. It was a nice try, but I should have realized that pointing out that I gave the witness last year wasn’t going to gain any traction with the guy who has to give a sermon every seven days.

When I first examined the lectionary readings for today, I was not encouraged. I wouldn’t expect to find these readings on anyone’s top ten list of bible verses. As I read through them again, though, a recurring theme caught my attention.

“I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts.”

“Continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it.”

These verses brought to mind a book I read recently, *The Righteous Mind* by Jonathan Haidt. The book examines the field of moral psychology and ad-

dresses questions of how and why good people can have different views of what is right and what is wrong.

So what do you firmly believe, and who did you learn it from?

And have your beliefs remained the same over the years, or do you find they change?

In his book, Haidt presents three different theories about where morality comes from. One suggests that morality is innate; we are born with it, written on our hearts by God, I suppose. The second theory says morality is learned through one's culture. The third theory proposes that morality is learned from personal experience, specifically experiences of harm being done when one is a child. This sounds like the old nature versus nurture arguments, and in the end Haidt believes the answer is some combination of these theories, and he offers a wonderful metaphor for understanding people's moral decision-making process.

He says it is like a rider on an elephant.

Usually, the elephant is going to go where it wants to go, and there is not too much the rider can do to change that. But, the rider can do some useful things. The rider can see down the road and help the elephant avoid obstacles. The rider can learn new things, like a new route to get the elephant where it wants to go faster. And of course, the rider can be an advocate for the elephant, especially when having to deal with other riders. The elephant represents our innate moral feelings.

Think of your immediate reaction to images of children being killed by chemical weapons in Syria. That gut reaction is the elephant leaning in the direction it wants to go. Then the rider steps in and tries to justify, and rationalize, or maybe persuade the elephant to go a different direction. We think about all the political consequences of taking action in Syria, the economic costs, and the human costs of putting our troops at risk, and taking more lives in Syria. These are all very real issues, but the elephant wants to go one way, and the rider is trying to make it go a different way, and this conflict is why so many find the situation in Syria so troubling.

I think Paul is aware of these conflicts between the rider and the elephant. When he wrote, “people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings” I believe he is talking about the tendency we all have at times to listen only to what we want to hear.

I love this metaphor of rider and elephant, but I tend to identify with the rider, and so I wonder: where did the elephant come from?

I grew up in the Episcopal church. My mother was a singer in the choir, and the director of the children’s choir. So of course I had to be in the choir. The church we went to was a fairly large building, not too different from St. Paul’s, and the choir loft was at the front of the church, as it is here. Above the altar was a spire, and from inside the church you could look up into the tall empty space inside the spire. I can remember as a small child, kneeling during the prayers, and looking up into that space and wondering if that was where God was. I think that’s where I first got my elephant. Singing in the children’s choir, going to Sunday school, staring up at that spire. Of course, the elephant then was young, like me, and a God that floated above us, in the spire, or in the clouds, that was the best the elephant or I could understand at the time.

In addition to being active in church, my mother was a teacher. She taught for years in a public school, in a very poor neighborhood in Harlem, in New York City. She told me a story once, about a very bad day she had at school. One of those days where you feel helpless, hopeless, and you wonder if you will ever be successful, or if you are wasting your time. Feeling very discouraged, at the end of the day she went to a coffee shop near the school. In the coffee shop, she noticed a man sitting nearby. He probably was not very well dressed, maybe he was homeless, and she said he smelled of alcohol. It was probably only 2 or 3 in the afternoon, and my mother was disgusted at the notion of someone drinking at that time of day. Here, she thought, was the embodiment of all the problems with the community that she was trying to teach in.

After some time, the man approached my mother and asked if she was a teacher. She probably did not want to have anything to do with that man, but she said yes. The man promptly thanked her, and told her that teachers were the only hope for the people of that neighborhood. His comment was a blessing for my mother, and just what she needed to hear at that moment. In time, she came to see that homeless man as an answer to her prayers, an angel sent in her hour of need.

There have been times in my life when I was struggling with a problem, or a decision I had to make. If I ever discussed these situations with my mother, she would inevitably ask, “have you prayed about this?”

I used to hate hearing that, because the answer was usually “no,” and I didn’t think praying would be of any help. I used to think that praying for help with a problem or decision was like asking God to come down from that spire and set a bush on fire to tell me what I should do.

But I also hated being asked if I had prayed because I think I felt guilty about not praying. The rider knows when it is trying to make the elephant go a different direction.

Over time, I thought about my mother in that coffee shop, and I started to notice God in my life, not in the form of burning bushes, but in the form of other people in my life. Family members, friends, or maybe even strangers in a coffee shop. When I am faced with a crisis, I do pray now. Not for heavenly signs, but I pray for strength, for patience, and to be aware. Aware of the signs that are around me every day, if I would just be willing to see and hear them, and not just hear what my ears are itching for.

“Continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it.”

When Janice and I first got married, neither of us belonged to a church. But when we decided to start having kids, we both knew we wanted to join a church and raise our children in the church. Our children would love to have a pet. Unfortunately, our older daughter and I are slightly allergic to cats an

dogs, so we have never got one. Though we've never had a dog or cat, I hope someday our kids come to appreciate the elephant we got them.

Sermons are also available pre-printed and on CD. The pre-printed sermons are in the information racks at the Jones Plaza entrance to the Sanctuary Building. To order a \$5 CD of the complete worship service, contact Phyllis Brockermeyer at 713-528-0527 or pbrock@stpaulshouston.org.