

## **“Running through the Thistles”**

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It seems funny to arrive at this day, so a little at the beginning of the sermon will be about me more than Jesus; but pretty soon we will get to Jesus a lot more than me.

I had a thought last night at the dinner - and that was an amazing experience - that my mother rang through my head (although it turns out Scott is afraid of my mother and I didn't know that until then). She criticizes his preaching more than mine apparently. [Laughter.] I remember when she hit her 95<sup>th</sup> birthday a year ago. One of her friends was visiting her and in the midst of her dementia, this friend asked her, “How did you get to be so old?” She said, without hesitation, “I didn't mean to.” [Laughter.]

When we came to join you here in December 1996 - and I'm glad God called us together - I didn't mean to be here now, never imagined that it would be 21 years, virtually, or close to that, to be with one community of faith. You guys have staying power, and it has been a blessing for you to plant seeds of faith in my life and my wife, Sue's, and we have been blessed by you. I just want to say “thank you,” blue shades or not.

[In Ken's college days he performed with a group called the Blue Shades. At the retirement dinner Saturday evening everyone attending received a pair of blue sunglasses in honor of that group. The choir sang the anthem on Sunday with their blue shades on, and Ken borrowed a pair to wear at the beginning of the sermon.]

[Ken read the Scripture at this time.]

Life can be kind of prickly at times and in some ways all of us, individuals, or institutions, or even nations kind of run through thistles all of the time. The title of the sermon needs a touch of an explanation. It comes from a paper published way back in the 1970s by an author from the Alban Institute, Roy Oswald, who wrote great and insightful stuff. A paper he wrote in the 1970s, that still is in print, is called “Running through the Thistles.” It's about what happens when a pastor announces a resignation or a retirement and the pastor's church is thrown into the changes that brings - whether it is a call to another congregation or simply retiring.

Oswald calls it “Running through the Thistles” because there are all kinds of things in that process that are uncomfortable - that prickle us and that can kind of puncture us. It can raise anxiety for an individual pastor or a congregation. They say that a person doing this kind of thing can experience a lot of the emotions of a person who is dying. While a church family may experience emotions as when a family member might be dying, thank goodness we aren't doing anything that dramatic. But what we are doing is a little prickly; we are saying “goodbye,” you and I, but not quite. I have the privilege and blessing of not having to quit cold turkey but to kind of decompress and be around the edges and a bit behind the scenes, to do a little caring and transitioning. We hope that works out well for me and for you as well.

That was one of the things Oswald was talking about in his paper “Running through the Thistles.” He thought the church, even then, was doing this terminating of pastoral relationships too much cold turkey: get them out of Dodge and they are gone.

I felt some sadness thinking about separating my life from yours. Twenty-one years is a lot of time to be bonded by; and I think, in my heart, we will stay that way. But things are changing. The new life here-coming, we need to make all of this room for that. It will feel funny not to be fully a part of it, but there is also anticipation of a phase of new life.

We said last night downstairs at the dinner - that one of the things my wife reminded me of - is it is not just 45 years or so of ordained ministry, but three years in seminary and a year before that when I was a youth director in a church in east Tennessee. She said, “We have had 50 years of no weekends.” [Laughter.] She is ready. [Laughter.] That is something to think about. That alone says we are headed to some type of new way to live; new experiences. You gave us two different sabbatical times over these 21 years, and Sue and I learned in those that we might survive retirement, because we came out of those sabbaticals still speaking to each other. [Laughter.]

It will be good to be able to do a little volunteering around the edges and try to be helpful, but not get in the way. Some of this strange feeling is the knowing I’m giving up power and some control of things, making room for who and what is coming into the life of Westminster, as this Church builds its life and builds its mission, and prayerfully moves forward in the love of God.

Now, back to the thistles. Roy Oswald was remembering a time growing up in Saskatchewan when he and his brothers would walk to and from school. They always took the road to school and walked barefoot at least in the summer; but going home they just wanted to hurry to get there and the road took longer than going through fields, so they cut through the fields - those barefoot boys - but there were those thistles. That is a large problem. Bare feet and prickly thistles don’t co-exist well. His older brothers would each grab a hand and they would all three run through the field and through the thistle patch. He remembers yelping in pain all of the way until they reached the soil on the other side, collapsed, and pulled briars out of their bare feet.

He does see parallels in the way he sees most ministerial relationships end. Pastor, church, or both, running pell-mell through it as fast as possible. You avoid the briars you know about, but you fall into the ones you don’t see; for instance the powerful unexpressed emotions and feelings on the part of the pastor, or on the part of the congregation. Even some of you who have been waiting with bated breath for me to go are sitting on that feeling. [Laughter.] If you have a little time to work on it, you can move ahead aware of where you are - and that helps if you want to move ahead healthfully.

A moment of insight came into some of this last night at the dinner. It was a bit like being at one’s own funeral, I said to them last night that it was the visitation and tomorrow would be the service. [Laughter.] It really was a fine experience, and it was uplifting and it was confirming and often fun. But it was about me in a way that felt very, very strange. The combinations of warm expressions of appreciation and support coupled with the unexpected gift of a better guitar than I had ever hoped to own. [Laughter.] (I’m in league with John Lennon of the Beatles, now. George Harrison played one of those Gretsch guitars in the

early 1970s. How did I fall into that company?) I thank you for it. But it triggered powerful emotions I had not expected to feel or saw coming, and it increased my awareness of deep appreciation for all of you, and the support over all of these years. Please know you have my heartfelt good wishes for all that you do here and in the world. It's good to know a little more about what I'm feeling and I think last night opened me up to some of that. I'm glad God has led us together.

It's interesting what else came. You know Laura Sherlock. If you don't know our communications director, Laura is one of those unstoppable forces. She got the job of putting some things together for last night's dinner and some of those things are still down stairs if you go to the reception. One of those things is wall-to-wall pictures. She dredged them up. She hounded Sue and me for some and got some out of you guys that we didn't know existed - some from previous churches. It is kind of amazing. But all of those pictures and all of those faces - and it's happening to me right now looking at your faces as well - the way we are in a sense are bonded together and carry each other.

I want to share a paragraph from a book called "Bread and Wine" that my wife, Sue, is reading. It is reflections and recipes, I suppose. They were looking at photographs. The author and her grandmother were looking at old pictures of the grandmother. She [the author] said, my grandmother is 82 and I love to look at old photos of her and my grandpa. She told me one morning, as we were flipping through an album, that getting old is like carrying all of these "selves" with you. She said she remembers just how the 13-year-old in that picture felt at the time, or the 19-year-old new bride felt then, or the 30-year-old woman felt on the back of the motorcycle in the photograph.

She said you carry them [your selves] inside of you, collecting them along the way; more and more selves inside you with each passing year - like those little Russian nesting dolls stacking one inside the other, nesting within themselves, waiting to be discovered - one and then another. I felt that last night and I'm feeling that now.

There was one picture on the wall. Sue, if you made it to church this morning, forgive me. One of my favorite pictures of my wife is way back in 1969. There is Sue in our lacquered, shiny, black, Chevrolet 1959 Impala: the one with the wings, a convertible with red upholstery. You don't have those things after you have children. [Laughter] She is there with a red scarf over her head, arm over the door edge, looking out at the camera smiling like Hollywood. [Laughter.] All she is needing is that long cigarette holder and the voice that says "dahling." For some reason that picture triggered off in me the awareness - and thanks to this little book - that that young woman still lives in my house [Laughter] and I am grateful. It is not just those old kinds of versions of yourself that you nest and carry along. It's all of the other connections you and I have, that are nested. I love that idea down inside here, and they will come out and be there as we go forward - and I'm happy to know that they will be there.

You know that is still talking a lot about me and I'm still working through so many things. Others will come and do things in their own way. I have been here long enough that one of the traps I'm leaving is - some of you think I know how to do it. [That's] Not really true. You may know how I've done it, but that may not be the way to do it. A friend of mine that writes technical manuals, says you buy a barbecue grill at Sears, and you follow the manual, and you put it together, and think you have put it together correctly. That may not

be true. You put it together the way the guy who wrote the manual wrote it, but there are 50 other ways to do the job, and we are opening up that kind of time, when new faith comes, new abilities come, new ideas grow. Allow a little time to pass, some things will go on and some things will change, but Scott and a wonderful staff are already in place.

I 'm still working through thank yous and how to say them because it takes more than just "thanks." One of the blessings is I will have a little time to do that. But I'm working to put relationships in the context to make sure you know I appreciate you. I'm looking forward to continuing that. One of the blessings is that [being an] Associate Pastor is very different when you retire, or leave, than a solo pastor or senior pastor. You still have a very solid senior pastor in Scott here, and the elected leaders of the Session and the Deacons, and others on committees hard at work on the church's mission. Your welfare is in good, good hands. Continue to support all of them. Be ready to be surprised at what God has in mind for you, for Westminster and for the future of mission and ministry that you will do together and individually. This is where the sermon gets past me and off to what Jesus is saying.

Look at these simple little stories he is telling. I'm not going to try and get all of them in, in the little bit of time you allow me now - just a couple. The element of surprise is at work, and in all of these parables - and particularly in these two - "the Kingdom of Heaven is like..." you get the similes of that treasure in the field, or the pearl in the market place and that worker on the farm or that professional pearl merchant. They seek and find and they are surprised. It is interesting how these stories are told. The treasure story is present tense, the pearl is past tense, but there is this sense of surprise, no matter how hard that person has worked to get to that point. It is all there in the New Testament - time and time again - people reach to touch Jesus or open themselves to the Spirit, and they are surprised at what happens.

Zacchaeus was surprised by his encounter with Jesus. He gave away half of everything he had to the poor. Before the crucifixion Peter denied his Lord and he was in agony afterwards - he rejected his own Lord. But then he hears of all things, angels saying to the women who reached the tomb first, "He has risen. He is not here. Go tell the Disciples and Peter." And Peter hears that he is still living in the embrace of the living God and Christ. He didn't expect that. Those Disciples on the Emmaus Road, downcast and depressed after the crucifixion find a comforting stranger who walks along with them and they don't know who it is until they do the very ordinary thing of sitting down to eat together.

Are we willing to be surprised by God in very, very dramatic ways? When has God surprised you?

One of my surprised years ago that led me into the ministry from which I'm now retiring was Harry, my advisor in college, who was an atheist. It drove him nuts that I was thinking of going to seminary. (He was the one who taught me why we have buttons on our coats; so you could button your fancy Edwardian cuff back over your coat sleeve, which would keep it out of your soup - he dressed that way.) But he was almost enraged that he thought a great up-and-coming clinical psychologist would go to seminary. In the process he helped me make up my mind, [laughter] and there was real joy in that decision made. I was surprised that one who claimed not to believe in God at all led me into the ministry. What could be more surprising?

Who knows what surprises are in store? Jesus says, "Seek and you shall find," but he doesn't say you will find the thing you were looking for. You may just find what it is you need - something more valuable than you thought. Jesus, in these little stories, is calling us to live expectantly. We come to these moments and we find the joy you see in those parables. Jesus is also saying you come to this in a variety of ways. There is not such a tight script that you have to march to someone else's drummer. Jesus, when he says, "Have you understood all of this?" and they say, "Yes," knows their answer is incomplete. They are still waiting to be surprised by more understanding. Behind all of that is a funny question of action versus attitude: there is clear call to act, find that treasure, find a way to make it yours, get that pearl, find a way to buy it and bring it home - but the action is powered by attitude.

Jesus is calling us to live with an attitude of "faithful expectancy" - that there will be opportunities coming to us because God loves us; then action will be required. Are you open to that? These little stories are so brimful of meaning. They invite us to not only be discoverers, but also be channels of God's Spirit to the world around us. So it is worth asking what are you or I looking for? What do we hold to very high value? What values sustain us in a difficult world and what is God calling us to do with the answers to these questions?

That's what the Church has always been about and it will be tomorrow. What moves us? Be we fieldworker or merchant, to give something our all? Jesus clearly calls us to discover what the "Kingdom of God" can mean; not just a phrase in the Bible, but what is God's will and purpose for us and all of the value that is there?

Sue and I heading into retirement can feel that we are going to be redefining what it means to reach for God's purpose. A little phrase from Richard Fraser. He is a Lutheran pastor in Indiana, talking about what counts. He was talking about a harbor pilot - a skilled harbor pilot - who had brought this cruise ship into a difficult port and got it safely to harbor. Someone who had been on the ship and watching it all was praising the pilot. They said, "You know where all of the shallow places are and you avoid them so well," The pilot said, "You are wrong about that. I know where the deep waters are and how to find them."

We are back to the weeds and the wheat of last Sunday's sermon, where Jesus says don't discount the evil but focus your mind and your attention on what's good and how to nurture and grow that. Very consistent, this Chapter 13 of Matthew's Gospel.

In our living this week, last week's words from Jesus combine with this week's words. They call us to live with an attitude of deep heartfelt expectancy, looking for the deep truth of the Kingdom of God - not just interesting ripples on the surface - and step forward in our living, knowing that both Christ and the future are calling. We continue life's journey - individually or together - *seeking* out meaning, *expecting* to find it, *seeking* to be faithful and willing, *willing* to be surprised by the joy Christ brings.

Wherever any of us go, that is what we are called to do. What more can you say but, "Amen." So be it.