

## **"Outfitted for Ministry"**

**Pastor Dave Carlson  
First Presbyterian Church  
Sunday, August 12, 2012**

**Old Testament Lesson - Psalm 9:9-14  
New Testament Lesson – Mark 6:4-13**

Last Monday, the NPR radio show "Talk of the Nation" focused on the deadly violence that occurred on Sunday in a Middle Eastern religious community in Oak Creek, Wis. Six members of the religion known as Sikhism were killed in their house of worship by a loan gunman. Three others were wounded in the attack, which the FBI views as domestic terrorism. While questions remain about motive the shooter could have had, religious and racial targeting is suspected. You see, even though Sikhism is completely distinct and separate from Islam, Sikhs often are mistaken for Muslims because of how they dress. And of course, there is absolutely no justification for violence against any peaceable group, Muslims or Sikh or whatever, but it happens. During the radio program, talk show host Tom Gjelten interviewed a policy adviser for the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund. The gentleman's name is Navdeep Singh. When Mr. Singh heard about the killing, he immediately called his father, who was at a Sikh temple in Washington, D.C., at the time. "This is another situation where ... it appears ...," said Singh, "that people that our family knows we're attacked because they look different. They (were) attacked because they were exercising their fundamental right to practice their faith in this country." Following up, Gjelten pointed out that Sikhs and Muslims, in some ways, do look alike. "Sikh men wear turbans and, of course, some Muslim men wear turbans as well," he said. And here's where this situation helps to clarify our perception of today's New Testament lesson. In explaining why members of the Sikh religion wear turbans, Singh said they have an obligation to stand out. "Because," he said, "if anyone should need help, it's the same as going to a police officer. You recognize them by their uniform, you recognize a Sikh by (his) uniform. You know that (he is) there to help you." Jesus, in sending the twelve out to do ministry on his behalf, established a certain uniform of dress for them. As Mark tells it, "He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics." Bible commentator Douglas Hare<sup>1</sup> notes that "even a beggar's bag is denied them, so that no one may think that they hope to benefit materially from their preaching and healing."

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<sup>1</sup> "Mark," 1996, Westminster John Knox Press, 71.

And the staff, or walking stick? This would allow the apostles to protect themselves and others from wild dogs, says Hare. Leaving behind their extra tunic he notes and taking no bread or money, would be symbols of their faith in God's provision.

So, if you were to meet a couple of the apostles along the way, you would know from how they are dressed and what they are carrying that they are there to help you. And yet, think back to our example from NPR's Talk of the Nation. Is that what we think of when we see someone wearing a turban – that perhaps this man is there to help people. Or do our prejudices and misperceptions get in the way of us seeing it when people are there to help? The apostles were outfitted to help people, apparently members of the Sikh religion are outfitted to help people, and this church at it's best is outfitted to help people, outfitted for ministry. But how? Bible commentator Hare gives us a clue. He says looking at how Jesus outfitted the apostles, "what comes through clearly in these travel instructions," "is that Jesus' representatives must be visibly self-forgetting." And yet, are we as a church "visibly self-forgetting?" Is that the Christian witness we give when interacting with family members or coworkers or friends or strangers? Do people see that ***it's not about us***, but rather ***it's about God*** and what God is up to in the world?

When people hear us talk about our church or see us serving in the community, what message do they get? Is the message we send that we need more people to join the church because if they don't ...; well look around – none of us is going to be here forever. Do we look at the church finances and say, "If we don't get more members we'll never meet our budget," as if bringing people into a faith community is all about keeping the doors open and the lights on. These are important questions. Because how people see us is directly related to whether we can actually be instruments of God's presence and power in their lives and in this community. It's kind of like how Jesus was seen in his home town, where he found that "he could do no deed of power there (except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them)." While a few people saw Jesus as an instrument of God's restorative and healing power & presence, most did not. Most people in his hometown saw Jesus as (quote) "the carpenter" who grew up there alongside his brothers and sisters, ... and they still lived there, and (you know) they knew him. Jesus goes out into his own community, and because of his past, everyone in Nazareth figures they know who he is, they know what they can expect from him, they know what he can actually do for them – build a table or refurbish a cabinet. And realizing this, Jesus declares, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house."

Sometimes the hardest people to reach are those closest to us; those who think they already know what we are all about; they know who we are and what we can or cannot do for them. Do you see how this parallels our church, or even your own life – your home or workplace or neighborhood or a group of friends? When it comes to sharing the faith and meeting the

needs of family, friends and neighbors and this community, how people see us-how people see you and me matters. It matters whether they perceive that our motives are ultimately for the good and in keeping with God's will, rather than being self-serving and judgmental.

It's like the young man who had just gotten his driving permit. He asked his father if they could discuss his using the car. "I'll make a deal with you," said his father. "You bring your grades up, study your Bible a little, get your hair cut, and then we'll talk." A month later the boy came back and again asked his father if they could discuss his use of the car. "Son, I'm real proud of you," he said. "You've brought your grades up and you've studied your Bible, but you didn't get your hair cut!" "You know, Dad, I've been thinking about that. Samson had long hair, Moses had long hair, Noah had long hair, and even Jesus had long hair." "Yes, son," said the father, "and they all walked everywhere they went!" The son had no idea how getting his hair cut had anything to do with driving his dad's car. But had he moved forward in faith and trusted someone else's vision of the future, he'd be driving like his dad right now instead of walking like an ancient Israelite.

This church is surrounded by households and businesses that have no idea why we come together as a community of faith. They have no vision about what coming along side us in faith might mean to them and to the people they love. They have no idea how serving through a church can grow them, stretch them, and help to outfit them to help other people. And for many in our community, at your workplace, in your classroom, and even for many in your own families, their perception of us is clouded by the past, just like Jesus in his hometown do no deed of power because they would not see him for who he really is-an embodiment of God's love and concern and provision and healing. Changing how people see us requires us to change how we look to them. Maybe it's the words we say, or how we use our money, or where we spend our time. Look at those things in your life – I continually need to watch those things in my life – to see what they are saying to other people. And that goes for the church, as well. Being the church God calls us to be might just require us to change a bit, which we are doing – with contemporary worship, fluid and customized Sunday school curriculums, new missions projects, and many other wonderful ministries. To be the church we are called to be means to be a church willing to change and grow as God would lead us. And yet making changes based only on our faith and hope that they might bring God's blessing is not easy. It's not easy to distinguish ourselves from the building (like we'd still be First Presbyterian Church no matter where we worshiped). It's not easy to separate our success and identity as Christians from our Sunday morning attendance figures, or from our favorite worship style or mission project or church activity. It's not easy to take all that makes us followers of Christ and step out in faith based solely on a future hope or dream, while mentally and spiritually leaving behind the trappings of our surroundings and our standing in the community, or our family or our school or workplace.

But stepping beyond the limits of who we and others see us to be might just move us closer to who God sees us to be. What changes can you think of that might help us as a church better serve our community and our fellow members and our friends – an evening Bible study, a men’s fellowship group, a performing arts series or some other regular community offering; how about including a friend in your next mission project or fellowship outing... . The possibilities are endless. And of course, we needn’t limit this to the church. I mean, what in your life have you always dreamed about changing or transforming – your job, your health or body shape, your grades at school, or the pay-off you get at work the core motivation behind what you do.? What has gotten in the way of your goals and dreams – either as a church or as an individual? Whatever that might be, and even if you’re not certain what it is, there’s one sure thing that can make a difference: **change**, trying **something new**, even if you don’t know whether it might work or why in the world it should work – cut my hair so I can drive my dad’s car. Because in the end, the old saying really does ring true – “If we don’t change where we’re going, we’ll end up where we’re headed.”

In the weeks to come, let’s ask ourselves – as individuals, as First Presbyterian Church – what could we change, what could you change in order to better experience the blessings of God’s presence and power in your life, in our lives, in my life-what could I change?

To receive the healing, to experience the transformation that God desires for us, and for those we love, and for those we hope to serve, what about us – as a church, as families, as individuals – what about us might need to change? How can we be better outfitted for ministry?

### **Pastor’s Prayer**

**God of shepherding love, we are born into the world alone. And in solitude we depart from the world at our death. During the precious years in between, we have the gift of countless opportunities to befriend each other and draw closer to you, and to thus come to know that we are never alone.**

**Jesus Christ instructed his disciples to take nothing for the journey, except for a shepherd’s staff, the symbol of your guidance and care, as well as their responsibility to care for others. In all else, he told them to rely on the welcome and kindness of others, and to discount the security that comes from possessions. We thank you, God, for the example of Christ and the disciples, who teach us to value love and our responsibility to others above all else. Grant that we may truly befriend each other, so that no one lives out life in loneliness. And, as we seek to become more faithful to who you created us to be, shake from our complacency; expose our excuses; get us involved in the life of our faith and neighborhood communities and our world, including the close-up world of family and friends.**

Help us to find integrity once again that we may ever draw nearer to you in service to Christ, whom we claim as spiritual guide and divine savior. We pray all this, Lord, using the words that you taught us, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.  
Amen.

