

**Pastor Dave Carlson  
First Presbyterian Church  
October 2, 2016**

**Old Testament Lesson:** Exodus 16:31-35

**New Testament Lesson:** Hebrews 13:7, 8, 15, 16

My wife, Yuri, and I just returned from visiting her family for her dad's 86<sup>th</sup> birthday. A special guest was Bunkichi Ito VIII, who came all the way from Japan. Bunkichi is not his real name, though. It's a title. The title is passed down to a new Ito family leader from one generation to the next. It's a tradition that dates back to their days as landowners, before the Japanese government confiscated and redistributed all large property holdings to help heal the nation after WWII.

When Bunkichi VIII dies, the plan was to have a Bunkichi Ito IX in place to step into this line of succession, which goes all the way back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the first ever Bunkichi Ito. The problem is, Bunkichi Ito IX has not been living up to the standards expected of a future Bunkichi. And because he is the last possible family member who could inherit the title, which goes only to men, sadly, there will be no more Bunkichi's. The title ends with Bunkichi VIII, and he is now 89 years old.

As Christians, we all have a title: child of God, brother or sister in Christ. Just like the Bunkichi title is traced back to the first ever Bunkichi, so our title is traced back to the first ever Christians, the first disciples of Christ, and particularly the Apostles through whom God worked miracles.

My friends, God is not through working miracles. Our title as Christians is still a title – a way of life- that God works through to ensure that we don't lose sight of our role in the miracles God is working in this world, we have God's very word, given to us in Scripture.

*"Remember your leaders,"* says Hebrews, "those who spoke the word of God to you .... Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith." This, of course, refers back to the Apostles. But it also refers to those who have lived and worked among us in the Spirit of that same sense of selfless service, lazar-focused vision, and unwavering confidence that things can and will get better, with God's help.

We are called to imitate those people in our lives who strengthened our families, built up our churches, improved our communities, served our nation, led our businesses, schools and social-service agencies. And yet, when it comes to remembering and embodying the greatest leaders, we know or can think of, how are we doing, as a society? Do you think that our country's leaders today are faithful in how they shape society?

Do you think parents, for the most part, are equipped to prepare their children for success in today's world? Are churches given a role anymore, in shaping the moral and spiritual life of society? I think not.

Why is that? Why do our presidential candidates have the lowest approval ratings in history? Why do our corporate leaders receive multi-million dollar salaries while so many consumers can't afford to buy their products? Why is gun violence on the rise and church attendance at an all-time low?

It's because we as individuals have given up. And why is that? It's because our leaders have failed us. And why is that? It's because we have failed – we have failed to prayerfully and faithfully call forth and even demand accountability from our leaders. What is a Bunkichi-san to do? What are we to do, we who carry the title Christian?

In this, our third sermon about living a life that is pleasing to God, Hebrews tells us “Continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God; that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name,” Jesus’ name. “Do not neglect to do good,” “and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.” “Offer a sacrifice of praise to God....”

Today is World Communion Sunday, when we gather around the Lord's Table with all the world in remembrance of Him. This our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. Remembering Jesus means joining with Christians in our community, across this country and around the world in speaking up on behalf of Jesus. Speak up on behalf of what you know to be right, based on Christian values and a sound moral compass.

Speaking up might mean attending events like last week's meeting of the Eastern Jackson County Justice Coalition, which was held at our own Westminster Hall and featured Independence Mayor Eileen Weir addressing the health and safety issues faced by those who rent homes in our neighborhood.

Speaking up might mean participating in events like last week's Family Night at Proctor Elementary School, where parents received instruction on Positive Behavioral Supports, helping them to establish and maintain health family interactions.

Speaking up might mean giving a LOGOS postcard invitation to a neighbor or coworker or family member with young children or youth. You can find them on the Credenza after church – take one or two and pass them on.

There are countless ways you and I can help to improve things for our families, workplaces, schools, communities and nation. The trick is, knowing what is the right thing to do. And that has to do with us – you and me and all of society – maintaining a set of values based on tried-and-true principles.

Once upon a time, there was an international corporation that decided to have a competitive boat race between the United States and Japan headquarters. Both teams practiced hard and long to reach their peak performance.

They both felt ready, but the Japanese team won by a mile. The American team was so discouraged, management decided to hire consultants to investigate the problem and recommend corrective action.

The consultant's findings: The Japanese team had eight people rowing and one person steering; the American team had one person rowing and eight people steering. Oh, but there's more. The following year, when the Japanese team won by two miles, the Americans were so humiliated they decided to make a change. They laid-off the rower for poor performance and gave the managers a bonus for discovering the problem.

If only they had a set of values based on tried-and-true principles. It doesn't take much to do the right thing. But it does take a core set of values to guide our decision making, our choices, and our actions.

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." It couldn't get any clearer than that, folks. We have a core set of values that is based on tried-and-true principles – values like "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself."

As Jesus said, on these two commandments – on these two guiding principals – "hang all the law and the prophets, -all that we do and how we do it." If we align everything we do and how we do it with our love of God and neighbor AND self – yes, self respect and self care is important here – if we do that, then we can be assured of following in the footsteps of the greatest leader of them all – Jesus the Christ, who was and is at once teacher, healer, guide, provider, friend, Lord and Savior – titles all. Titles we can look to and embrace in living out our role as Christians.

In the weeks ahead, let us all measure what we do, the choices we make, and the things we say against our title as Christian – our love of God and neighbor, and our love of self, our sense of self respect and good judgment. If we do that, we can be confident that the Holy Spirit will be working in us and through us, and in that, throughout the whole world. Amen.

## **Pastoral Prayer**

O great God, be near to us. There are those who feel like you are distant; draw near to them.

There are those who desire so much to feel your presence; let them know your touch.

There are those who have lost hope; remind them of your truth.

We know we cannot see you, but we believe that you are real. Show us today your power, your goodness, your light.

Be with us now as we raise our eyes to Heaven and our voices in song, praying the prayer that you taught us:

**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.**