

“Where Do I Pay?”

1 Peter 2:1-10

Rev. John O’Kain

Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church

4/20/08

Let us pray: God, may the stone that the builders rejected indeed become the chief cornerstone of our lives. May the Holy Spirit dwell richly in my words and in our lives together, so that your children *beyond the doors* of this sanctuary may harvest the fruit that Your Spirit bears in us, your children. Challenge us to go outside the gate and welcome the stranger, knowing that as your family, we all belong at the same family reunion. Indeed, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts and lives together be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. AMEN

Today’s sermon starts in an odd place--with a superhero. Perhaps you’ve heard of Spiderman. Maybe you’ve appreciated the fact that though capable of swinging from skyscrapers and having a spider-sense and superhuman strength, that Spiderman is . . .by day, a college student who struggles to make it to class on time; who works odd jobs as a pizza delivery man and a part-time photographer for the local paper to make ends meet. Since he was “born” in 1962, Spiderman and other characters in the Marvel Universe have delighted readers and fans with the problems and “real” nature of being a superhero. Gone are the days of the barrel-chested male opera singer superhero that can race bullets and win before leaping small buildings. No, we like our superheroes down here facing real-world problems with the rest of us real folks, thank you very much.

The reason we start today with Spiderman is one of his catchphrases: With great power comes great responsibility. It took Spiderman a tragic loss before he realized the importance of that statement. Does the statement ring true for you as well? Do you, friends in the faith, realize the challenge of faithfulness, even as you are abundantly blessed?

With great power comes great responsibility. It’s challenging, it’s inspiring, it would even look good on a bumper sticker, but is it really worthy of time in a sermon? Is it simply shallow comic book theology? No. Remember the words of Jesus in Luke 12:48 “From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required.”

As a congregation, we want to celebrate students in our midst, and particularly those who in just a couple of weeks will be graduating from Winthrop University. We have been blessed by your presence among us, we are proud of you, we love you dearly and we are excited to see how you will respond to the blessings that have been bestowed upon you: Your education, yes, but also your supportive families, your friendships, your connections to the body of Christ.

My neighbor Frank and I don’t have a fence that divides our property, but we occasionally meet at the line to check-in with each other and be neighborly. Now while I haven’t had time yet to know everything there is to know about Frank, I know that I like him. He is principled, opinionated, experienced, and willing to admit that as he gets older that there are some things about the younger generation that he just doesn’t understand. “What is that stuff they listen to today and why do they listen to it so loud?” he might say. Frank once instructed me on the proper way to mow my yard—in

rows instead of circles. Frank has attention to detail, and it's a good thing, since he spends time building experimental aircraft in his garage at home. You get the picture.

Frank and I were talking about retirement plans, the stock market, the economy, and the world one day. He doesn't waste words, Frank. He said something that really stuck with me. "From day one, I put money away for my family. That money wasn't mine, that money was theirs!" I'm reminded of Proverbs 13:22 "The good leave an inheritance to their children's children"

Thinking of those who will come behind, thinking of those who share the world we live in, thinking of those who carry more burdens than blessings. Friends, this is the challenge and the calling of the Christian. Where will you spend your greatest resource, which is yourself, to love a hurting world? Luke 12:34 (and Matthew 6:21) reminds us, that where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

I think it bears repeating over and over, what Frederick Beuchner said: that your vocation, your calling, is the place where your greatest gladness meet the world's deepest need. I challenge you, prospective graduates, but all of us gathered here to find that intersection of our gifts and the world's urgent needs.

Discerning my own vocation, I know there were times as a child I felt like Samuel, when I should have been asking "God, is that You?" but as an adult, I can tell you three crucial moments in my calling and discernment for ministry.

One happened when an acquaintance asked "Why would you be inclined to be a pastor or a minister in a world that has so many atheists, so many non-believers, when religion and especially Christianity is so . . . passé?" The right answer, which I didn't have at the moment was, "Who goes to the doctor but the one who is sick?"

My conversation with Jimmy the pornographer, was the second, "Finally, Lord, a true-bona fide heathen." I let 'im have it, but I later regretted it—because no one cares how much you know until they know how much you care.

Third, a carpenter friend asked about my calling just recently. Why am I a pastor? Because there are people that need to hear that there is still hope when they feel that hope is gone. There are people that need prayer and a shoulder to lean on, and that's what I want to do for God.

A quote from Velvet Elvis author Rob Bell states:

Oftentimes the Christian Community has sent the message that we love people and build relationships in order to convert them to the Christian faith. So there is an agenda, and when there is an agenda, it isn't really love, is it? It's something else. We have to rediscover love, period. Love that loves because it is what Jesus teaches us to do. We have to surrender our agendas. Because some people aren't going to become Christians like us no matter how hard we push. They just aren't. And at some point we have to commit them to God, trusting that God loves them more than we ever could. I obviously love to talk to people about Jesus and my faith. I'll take every opportunity I can get. But I have learned that when I toss out my agenda

and simply love as Jesus teaches me to, I often end up learning more about God than I could have imagined.

### 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13 – [Mad Lib version]

If I speak in the tongues of Nsync and the Black Eyed Peas but have not love, I am only trash pick up at 4:00 am or nails on a chalk board.

If I have the gift of math and can fathom all psychology and physics and if I have a faith that can move an elephant but have not love, I am nothing.

If I give my cell phone and teddy bear to the poor and surrender my body to silence and death by my own arm but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy it does not boast.

It is not rude, it is not self seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no records of wrongs.

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

Love never fails but where there are scrunchies they will cease: where there are gigapets they will be stilled; where there are wind suits, it will pass away.

For we know in part and we prophesy in part; but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears.

When I was a child, I tattled like a child, I wet the bed like a child, I screamed like a child. When I became an adult, I put childish ways behind me.

Now we see but a poor reflection as in a spoon; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am known fully.

And now these three remain: faith hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Niehbur:

Christ against culture

if you lie down with the dogs you rise up with fleas

Christ and Culture

the pitfall of relativism

Christ as transformer of Culture

At some point in your life you stop worrying about who's gonna influence you, and you start worrying about who you can influence for the better.

Noah's Ark and the Church

The ark may be stinky sometimes, but it's better than the alternative

Trust the Holy Spirit to work in the lives of those to whom and with whom you minister, even as we are blessed to see the Holy Spirit at work in your lives even now.

Remember, the Church is only one generation away from extinction. Christ is counting on You!

AMEN.