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October 14, 2007

**"Vuja De: It's déjà vu all over again: 'Honor Not Honors'"**

Rev. Jim Wood

Good morning, Church. We want to thank Bill Hamner for being at the organ and leading our choir today. Sue is away and Jean is still a little under the weather, so it's a gift to have you. Thanks for being with us today.

We are continuing in our series in how it is that we can understand and see the presence of God in the midst of all that the world offers. We are working through 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy but before we look at that passage we are going to look at a passage in the Old Testament, Zechariah Chapter 7. Zechariah is a prophetic text that is a little bit troubling to the scholars, because the first eight chapters of Zechariah are clearly dated between the years 520 and 518 B.C. I'll give you some of the context with that. The last chapters from nine to 14 seem to be dated later, there's some understandings, so it is believed that this is a school or following of Zechariah who has written the latter chapters. The 7<sup>th</sup> chapter was written between 520 and 518 B.C. What has happened has been that the Babylonians several generations earlier have come in and defeated the Israelites, have defeated the Jews. As part of the Babylonian policy of conquering, they have dispersed the local residents, sent most of them out to different parts of the Babylonian kingdom. In that the attempt is from the Babylonians is to ameliorate or to weaken any ethnic or national understanding among people.

The Babylonians, the neo-Babylonians really, have been defeated by the Persians. The Persians have a king named Cyrus. Cyrus is actually so influential for us in our history that the prophet Isaiah actually calls Cyrus a messiah because of the great things that Cyrus does. In particular Cyrus, who is not a Jew but a Persian, reverses this policy and begins to allow people to return to their homeland, and so there are groups of Jews now coming back and in particular coming back to Jerusalem to reshape themselves as a people and as a nation. What often happens when we see this throughout history, when a people have been conquered and been defeated and been oppressed, when they have the opportunity to reform themselves, to gather themselves together, they so very often become focused only on themselves. They so very often become focused only on what it is that they need to be a people, what it is that they need to be regathered, what it is that they need for their own identity and they lose the focus on their true calling.

The prophet Zechariah is working with the people and challenging them, using God's word as God speaks to Zechariah to challenge them in what it is to truly be the Jews, to be Hebrews. That is not simply to be gathered together as a people, but to be gathered together as a people so that they can be a blessing to all of the nations, in particular so that they can be a people who care for those who are in the greatest need. You'll see that in this passage as we read it today.

Listen for the word of our Lord.

Old Testament Reading – Zechariah 7

*In the fourth year of King Darius, the word of the LORD came to Zechariah on the fourth day of the ninth month, which is Chislev.*

*Now the people of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regem-melech and their men, to entreat the favor of the LORD,*

*and to ask the priests of the house of the LORD of hosts and the prophets, “Should I mourn and practice abstinence in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?”*

*Then the word of the LORD of hosts came to me:*

*Say to all the people of the land and the priests: When you fasted and lamented in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted?*

*And when you eat and when you drink, do you not eat and drink only for yourselves?*

*Were not these the words that the LORD proclaimed by the former prophets, when Jerusalem was inhabited and in prosperity, along with the towns around it, and when the Negeb and the Shephelah were inhabited?*

*The word of the LORD came to Zechariah, saying:*

*Thus says the LORD of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another;*

*do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.*

*But they refused to listen, and turned a stubborn shoulder, and stopped their ears in order not to hear.*

*They made their hearts adamant in order not to hear the law and the words that the LORD of hosts had sent by his spirit through the former prophets. Therefore great wrath came from the LORD of hosts.*

*Just as, when I called, they would not hear, so, when they called, I would not hear, says the LORD of hosts,*

*and I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations that they had not known. Thus the land they left was desolate, so that no one went to and fro, and a pleasant land was made desolate.*

Now in the New Testament in the 5<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Paul's first letter to Timothy. Rather than reading the entire chapter, I think we will stop at the conclusion of verse 8 today. Timothy is a young man serving the church in Ephesus. There are great challenges facing the church in Ephesus, and as Paul begins to write to him, he is offering practical advice, and yet practical advice that is girded with an understanding of who we are as a people of God and what our true religion is. You'll note today the same theme coming from Zechariah now coming from Paul to Timothy that who we are is defined by how we care for those who cannot care for themselves.

In this passage in particular it is speaking about widows who had particular needs in the world at Timothy's time. Particular needs because there were two different roads that could happen for widows. Many, many women were widowed at early ages; there were very few widowers. The men tended not to live nearly as long as the women. Some of them were widowed and actually did relatively well; they received some wealth from their families, from their husbands, and they were on a track to be able to do well without having to work, without having to be involved in things. Paul will talk to Timothy about how they should be cared for, how they should be encouraged to be involved and to be active. Then there are also widows who are generally of a more advanced age who have no resources at all. The church has always claimed them, has always welcomed them, and has always sought to provide for them. We see that in Paul as he is going out and about in his ministry to the Gentiles and yet at the same time collecting up an offering for the widows to be brought back to Jerusalem and we see it in this passage as well.

Listen for the word of our Lord.

New Testament Reading – 1 Timothy 5

*Do not speak harshly to an older man, but speak to him as to a father, to younger men as brothers,*

*to older women as mothers, to younger women as sisters—with absolute purity.*

*Honor widows who are really widows.*

*If a widow has children or grandchildren, they should first learn their religious duty to their own family and make some repayment to their parents; for this is pleasing in God's sight.*

*The real widow, left alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day;*

*but the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives.*

*Give these commands as well, so that they may be above reproach.*

*And whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*

I have kind of a nerdy habit on Saturday evenings. Usually I try to work my routine, I was a little distracted yesterday for some other reasons, but I usually try to listen to Garrison Keillor and the

Prairie Home Companion<sup>1</sup> from 6 to 8 on WHRO, our local NPR station. As is classic form, WHRO began I think yesterday their fall commitment campaign raising funds. The fall campaign lasts until about a week before the spring campaign I've learned (laughter). They are very creative in the way they raise funds; they get you at the places where you are most vulnerable, the shows you want to listen to and kind of let you know that if you don't support they might come off the air. They also start offering you all kinds of incentives for what you donate – different kinds of coffee mugs, or different kinds of things that you can get. Bill and Susan Rawls talked about stewardship campaign earlier about tithing. We will be receiving our pledge cards in another week or so and our actual day where we make our commitments is October 28<sup>th</sup> which is coming up in a few Sundays.

I've been thinking about it and I've been thinking that perhaps we ought to try something creative as well. I have decided, now I have not run this by the Admin Committee, but I have decided that if you will increase your pledge by 25% we have these decals from the University of South Carolina (laughter). That's for a 25% increase in your pledging. If you increase your pledge by 50% you'll actually get a magnetic Carolina bumper sticker (everybody realizes that the true Carolina is South Carolina. History has proven that for nearly 400 years) (laughter). If you increase your pledge by 100% you will actually receive a Carolina Gamecock poster that will be signed by an alum of the University of South Carolina. I'm sure that that is going to be the incentive that we need to take us well over the top in providing resources for our church.

It doesn't seem quite appropriate, though, for me actually maybe more so. It misses something doesn't it? We look at what other organizations and other groups do and it seems to be appropriate and working for them, and yet for the church how is it that we speak about how we live our lives? How is it that we speak about our commitment and in particular our financial commitment to the Body of Christ? Zechariah says that God's loyalty and compassion is to be replicated by God's people. Zechariah is so very clear, or the word of God spoken to Zechariah is so very clear, that it is God's gift of life to us that is to shape who we are. In this passage today God says to the people, "When you were fasting all of these years, all of these years in the dispersion, in the Diaspora<sup>2</sup>, all of these years that you were out and you were doing this fasting, were you fasting for God or were you fasting for yourselves?" The answer from God was very clear, "You were fasting not for me but you were fasting for yourselves, for what you would like to receive, for what you like to have."

I believe that that's really the heart of the spiritual challenge that many of us if not all of us encounter almost daily. I believe it's also why Jesus would be kicked out of most churches today because He talked about money too much. The Rawls mentioned today that there are over 2000 passages on finances in Scripture, but we forget often as well that Jesus spoke much more about money than He talked about heaven. Much more about money than He talked about heaven. Why was it? I think it's clear it's because Jesus realized that how we live our lives, how we share, how we shape who we are by our financial bounty or by our lack of it, determines what we really believe.

I remember reading a number of years ago a small little epitaph. I came across this so many years ago and I've had it in my head and I think this is correct. I think it's on the tombstone, the grave marker, of Sir Richard Francis Burton<sup>3</sup>. Sir Richard Francis Burton I believe was a great explorer, polyglot, had a huge impact on exploration in various continents, generations ago, a century or more ago. His tombstone says simply this, "Honor not honors was his life's ambition." I've remembered it and I've used it in so many settings. "Honor not honors was his life's ambition."

We see honors daily. We see them in our diplomas, we see them in our addresses, the neighborhoods in which we live, we see them on the stickers on our cars, we see them on our cars themselves. We see honors, what the world says is an honor, daily, but what is honor, true honor? What is it to be an honorable man, an honorable woman? 1st Timothy gives us an answer to this in a very clear way. In the third verse of 1st Timothy chapter 5, Paul as he is writing to Timothy, tells him, "Honor widows." That word that he uses is a Greek work *timao*<sup>4</sup> is a very, very important and significant word. It means give special reverence, almost to the point of worship, not false worship but almost to the point of giving so much reverence that we lift up and we exalt someone much higher than we. That's truly what reverence or honoring really is, isn't it? It tells us where our place is, where our standing is, so when we honor someone with this word as Timothy is told, we are to lift someone up higher than ourselves.

It's significant that as Paul is giving this instruction that he is giving the instruction to the people of God as if they are in a family. He began by saying, "Do not speak harshly to an older man, but speak to him as to a father, to younger men as brothers, to older women as mothers, to younger women as sisters—with absolute purity." What Paul is saying to Timothy, what he's saying to the church in Ephesus, what he's saying to us is that we as the church are to be a family, a family that is permanently committed to each other's welfare. When we come together as believers in Christ we are not separate believers but we are truly brother and sister. True honor is shown within the family in ways that the rest of the world cannot even begin to understand. You and I know that. You and I know that we have so many opportunities to really honor people that are within our family, opportunities to recognize them, to lift them, to exalt them. Paul wants us to gather together in the same way.

I was reminded of that this last weekend. I was able to go away for a wedding. The Dille's daughter was married at Kiawah Island outside of Charleston. I had a great opportunity to be able to go on Thursday night and see South Carolina defeat soundly and solidly the University of Kentucky that moved them up to number 7. This football season's been great for me, I've been loving it. After the wedding in Charleston and Kiawah, I had the chance to go get my mom who's staying with her brother right now for a few weeks, he'd had some eye surgery, and to take them to church on John's Island outside of Charleston, their home. It's where my mom grew up. My mom's 88 and my uncle is 93. It's an old, old colonial church and our family has been there for generations and generations. I went to the early service with them. I picked them up, drove them over to church, and as we went into the church we had the normal greeters, people shaking our hands and telling us that they were glad that we were there, the kind of typical things that happen in a good Presbyterian church. We sat down in the pew and we began to wait for the service to begin. My uncle wanted to get there early, so I think we were there well in advance. I began to look at the bulletin. I looked at the bulletin and I realized my uncle's name was listed as a shut-in; he doesn't get to church much now, and then I realized that his name was listed as well as the elder emeritus, two ways to be able to honor him.

My uncle is very, very sharp, extremely sharp mentally, but his hearing is not great right now and so he missed very much of what was going on in the service. Until he recognized and realized that the offering was being taken. As soon as that happened he sat straight up and he reached into his pocket in a manner that I could tell he has done for decades and decades and decades and pulled out his envelope all ready and prepared to be able to offer his gift, his tithe, to God. He did it with such fervor that it literally brought me to tears. Someone in the advanced stages of his life who doesn't get to go to church very often at all any more, and yet when he comes feeling so connected and so much of the body that I began to think "honors of your name in the bulletin and the honor or giving, which is more important?"

I love Bible study. The time and the energy that goes into sermon preparation each week is some of the richest time in my week and of my life altogether, but I've got to tell you that as much as I love that, as much as I enjoy that preparation, as much as I love being in God's word it's when the church is a family, when women and men, brothers and sisters live out their honor with what Zechariah would call compassion and loyalty that God has first for us, when that is lived out that's when I'm brought to holy tears. The church is a family and when it's a family we all gain. We come not for ourselves, but we come to be together and when we come together it is required of us as it is of every family to be able to find seats of honor for people. Not for ourselves, but for others. To be welcoming and engaging of new people certainly and totally. The church lives for others outside, but as well when we come together to be able to recognize and honor the great value and wealth of the multi-generational family. I pray that that be something that we as a congregation never ever lose. The gift that we have of the different generations coming together and worshipping and working and honoring each other is one of the richest gifts that we have.

Jane told me several days ago that one of our older members who's in his 90's wants to start a small group in his home, he and his wife, because it's just not easy for them to get out and to go and to be in a small group so they want to start a small group that will meet in their home. Knowing this member and his wife, Sox and Cordelia Baldwin, knowing what a great gift and blessing they are to so many people and to me, what an amazing opportunity for people of all generations to come and to gather and to be with them in a small group. Now, if you're interested in that, don't wait ten years to decide. Sox might have changed his mind by then (laughter). Be open, open to the opportunity of being with people of all different ages. If you're in the older generation take the opportunity of being with our youth. What a gift it is. That's what it is to be the Body of Christ. That's what it is to be a family.

When Paul uses this word "to honor" widows, when he speaks about what it is to truly be in a family, he not only uses the strong word *timao*, but he uses it in an imperative – this is what we must do, this is what defines us. This imperative takes over all of our lives. This imperative is one that calls us to live in such a way that everything we do is to seek to give honors to others. To seek honor for ourselves, that intrinsic notion of what it is to live for someone else and to lift others higher than we. That's what it is to take over our lives. That's why you got a mailing this week. If you're a member of our church you got a letter from me talking about our stewardship drive and what is coming up. You received what we call a "Priority Check." It's just a fake check; it's actually on card stock. The intent of it is to be able to place it in our checkbook and to be able to have a prayer on the back so that before we write each check we would literally pray this prayer, that before we pay our bills we would ask the question of ourselves, "Where are my priorities in this? How is it that I am living for either honors, the things that I acquire, the things that I have that give me my name and my reputation as I think the world sees it, or living an honorable life?"

You see for us it's not just about what we give. It's not just about raising funds for the church. There are opportunities for us to be able to do our Thanksgiving and Christmas baskets again for the local needy in our community. We do it through Ghent Area Ministries and it's an amazing program. Last year we provided well over 100 baskets between Thanksgiving and Christmas, both of those holidays, for almost exclusively not the homeless. These are baskets that are for the working poor. There were over 500 people served by it. It's an amazing thing to do. This year it's going to be different. This year we actually have a devotion that goes with it and we are literally asking people as they go to the grocery stores, as they go and make the purchases that are listed for these baskets that they would go through this devotion, even before they get out of their car in the parking lot, "even before we enter the grocery store filled to overflowing with food and sustenance we are reminded of the blessings of our lives, the home we left with running water and

electricity, the car we drove, the road safe from bandits, even the people in this lot who are made secure by the freedoms we experience daily and we are reminded as well that 1.2 billion people live on less than \$2 a day and another 1.8 billion live on less than \$3 a day. Even in the affluence of our community there are people, usually the working poor, who have to calculate before they enter the store exactly what they can do with and without so that they will have enough for the basic foods, no frills, just to survive. As we enter we pray that we would stay focused on what we are about to do.” There is a devotion for us as we are in the grocery store, as we are back in the parking lot, as we are at our family table that evening. It is something that I encourage us to do, particularly those of us who have families with children still at home. To follow something like this – why? It’s not just about giving the food. It’s about recognizing why we do it. It’s about living our lives in such a way that we are honorable people, that we live our lives with an imperative to care and to keep that caring balanced in who we are, to keep that caring as our identity as the family of God. Honor not honors.

In a wonderful book that came out recently called *Caring for Mother*, Virginia Stem Owens<sup>5</sup> writes about caring for her mother as she ages and wrestles with dementia and with Alzheimer’s. It’s a wonderful, wonderful, wonderful read. She is very vulnerable and open and sharing all the struggles that go with caring for an aging parent, something that is impacting more and more people in our community almost daily. As she writes, she begins to say that she realizes that metaphor in life, the things that her mother did for her in small little ways, even as a child, now carry forward great power. As she begins to write at the end, she begins to reflect on her own children and grandchildren and to think about what it is to truly be a family. She says, “Through our three generations of bodies runs a literal string of messages etched in the most elegant of scripts, deoxyribonucleic acid, DNA. This chain, ladder, stream of life, call it whatever metaphor you like, carries the letters of the dead to the yet-unborn. What are they saying? What do I want my note, tacked to the string to say? Only this. Loving people is such a burden. If love, in and of itself, weren’t the center from which life flows, if it didn’t as Dante says move the stars, how could we bear such weight?”

As you think about your life, your family, what do you want your note tacked on the ongoing letter of the family to say? Loving people is such a burden and yet if it weren’t for love, what would we have? What would be worth living or dying for? Jesus would certainly agree. Jesus defines our family as a family that is willing to give its life because He gave His life for us and the note that Jesus tacks upon the letter of faith, the letter of family has changed it forever.

I was thinking the other day about a story that I had forgotten for a number of years. When I was in the sixth grade we had a chorus teacher named Mrs. Moore. Mrs. Moore was one of the greatest teachers that ever lived. Everybody adored Mrs. Moore. She was very maternal in her outlook and in her approach. She was very much in love with the music that she taught us, but more than that we knew that when we walked into her room that she loved us, each child, she loved us and she loved us unconditionally. She sought to recognize and to honor each and every child that came into her classroom. This is something I think we forget so often, the incredible eternal value that our teachers have and the impact that they make. Mrs. Moore was such a wonderful teacher. Everything was just perfect about her. It was kind of “Mary Poppins” like almost but in a maternal sense. She dressed just perfectly as she should as a sixth grade chorus teacher. She acted just as she should. She loved us and she cared for us just as she should. She had many challenges because she had a lot of sixth grade boys, me included, and we didn’t act just as we should.

About the middle of the fall semester as we were beginning to prepare for the Christmas concert, and the Christmas concert at our school even though it was a public school, back in those days in

South Carolina the Christmas concert was one that was huge. The sixth grade chorus would come out and sing. We would begin it and then there would be all kinds of readings and all kinds of scripture readings and all kinds of things that would go on, prizes and awards, and it would take most of the morning it felt like. Our part was just at the beginning, three songs at the beginning and a scripture reading and it set the tone.

Mrs. Moore began to prepare but we got a new student named Bill Cody. Bill Cody was an extremely poor boy who came from an extremely poor family in an already pretty poor community. He didn't fit. He came dirty and smelly to school. He stuttered as he began any conversation, which was rare because he was very embarrassed to try to talk. Mrs. Moore began to work with Bill. She began to give him special attention and special grace and special love. Bill began to soar so much in her class that she decided that it was time for Bill to have the most honored role for the sixth grade chorus class on that day and that was to read from the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Luke, the birth of Jesus. Actually it wasn't to read, because Mrs. Moore was an old school teacher – it meant to have it memorized and to get up and to give it. So she worked Bill before and after school, she worked with him in class. Bill worked on it and worked on it and worked on it until finally the day came and we began to do our music. We did our three songs. We were so full of ourselves. We thought that things had gone amazingly.

Bill Cody came out as we were standing on the risers, he walked down. He had on a new white shirt and a new pair of blue pants. We knew that Mrs. Moore bought those clothes for him. Even though she never said it, we knew it. Bill Cody walked to the mike and he stood at the mike and it was his cue to begin to speak these words and yet he froze. We waited and we waited and a few giggles finally started and then finally after what felt like an eternity, at least to us if not to him, he began with the words, "In those days, in those days, in those days ...." He said it five times and then finally he caught his rhythm and he said, "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor ...." He went on and on and he finished all 20 verses perfectly.

Mrs. Moore was sitting on the piano bench behind him, so proud of him, her face just beaming. Finally, as Buffalo Bill Cody as we called him, turned around snickers began, little laughs and then fully outrageous laughing. Bill Cody had become so scared he had urinated over all of his new pants. Mrs. Moore, the teacher that she was, knew that it was time for Bill to walk back up and to take his place back up in the risers with all of the rest of us. As Bill Cody begins to walk back she reaches over to him, puts out her hand, and she pulls him to her, and she pulls him up on her lap, and that's where Bill Cody spent the rest of the assembly – on Mrs. Moore's lap. As she rocked him on the seat of honor, taking upon her stainless lap the wet soiled reality of a life saturated with fear and never fitting in, there wasn't a boy or a girl in the sixth grade chorus who wouldn't have done anything to change seats with him.

This is the reality of life that you and I, for all of the soiled, saturated life of feeling as if we don't fit in, of living lives of fear, you and I are called upon a lap of grace by Jesus Christ – to sit with Him and His father. When that day comes, we know where we'll be. The thing's that so amazing to me about this faith is that you and I not only know what it will be when that day comes, but you and I live in this reality daily. We live in a reality daily where God forgives us and loves us and calls us upon his lap, and gives us the preferred seat of life. How dare we not? How dare we cheat ourselves and not live into it?

As we go out today, the real question is how do you and I live our lives? Seeking honors or being the honorable people of God? Living with our priorities, living with our life in such a way that others are lifted over us.

Thanks be to Him. Amen.

Sermon Dictionary Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Prairie Home Companion – an old-style variety show authored and hosted by Garrison Keillor and first performed in 1974.

<sup>2</sup> Diaspora - dispersion of a people from their original homeland; specifically used to refer to the dispersion of Jews outside of Israel beginning in the sixth century B.C. when they were exiled to Babylonia.

<sup>3</sup> Sir Richard Francis Burton - mid-19th century British explorer who is also known for his translation of stories known under the title Arabian Nights, and for his travel literature on western Asia, Africa, and South America

<sup>4</sup> *timao* – Greek word meaning to revere or value

<sup>5</sup> Virginia Stem Owens – an author of fifteen books including *Daughters of Eve: Women of the Bible Speak to Women of Today, And the Trees Clap Their Hands: Faith, Perception, and the New Physics, and Caring for Mother: A Daughter's Long Goodbye* published in 2007.