

A Day In The Life  
Matthew 9:9-26  
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights  
June 8, 2008  
Pastor Dave Carver

Does Friday, November 1, 1985 mean anything to you? Do you know what you were doing on that day? For reasons I'm still not exactly sure of, I know exactly what I was doing that day. Here is my trusty clipboard. I don't use it much anymore...actually, I don't know who does use clipboards much any more...and the last page on this clipboard – ever since Friday, November 1, 1985, has been this purple sheet that contains a “time log” of my day. I won't bore you with all of it, but here are a few entries:

6:45 a.m.: meet with four leadership kids and principal of Langley to discuss a fund-raiser for the new building [later known as The Open Door].  
9:30 – get home, print up plans for youth retreat, shop for retreat  
1:30 – blow up 6' weather balloon for Kids Klub game  
3:00 – Kids Klub begins, play volleyball with 6' balloon. Balloon pops on first try – scares kids to death.  
5:00 – Kids Klub ends  
5:05 – Kids begin arriving for Youth Retreat  
6:00 – 3 kids call to ask if they can still go on the retreat. 4 kids call to say that there is no way that they are going on the retreat.  
6:30 – every kid who is going on the retreat is waiting at the church.  
6:45 – first driver for the retreat shows up.  
7:00 – leave for the 1 1/2 hour drive  
8:30 – most of us arrive  
10:15 – the other car arrives  
10:15 – Eric McKee splits his finger with an axe  
10:19 – discover flat tire on the way to the hospital  
10:40 – start retreat lesson  
10:42 – discover huge wasps nest in the room where we're studying the bible.  
11:00 – discover that there is no heat in the building where the boys will be sleeping.

You might ask yourself, “Self, why has Dave kept that piece of paper on his clipboard for more than 20 years?” Good question. First, let me tell you why I put that list there in the first place. Later, I'll tell you why I keep it there now.

Here's why I wrote that list: when I went to bed that night, I was convinced that it had been a terrible day. Frustrating. Out of control. Nothing, nothing, nothing went the way that I planned it. And so I wanted to keep that paper where I knew where it was so that whenever I felt like I was having a bad day, I could look at that, my worst day ever, and say to myself, “See, it's not so bad. You've had worse.”

I thought about that day when I read through this portion of Matthew's gospel earlier this week. Jesus, it would appear, is having a colossally bad day. I mean, you heard it – but let's look at the "highlights".

Jesus is walking along, and he runs into Matthew. He calls the tax collector by saying simply, "Follow me." Later that day, he ends up sharing a meal with Matthew and his friends – conveniently labeled "sinners" for us. And, as you heard, the religious people are pretty upset by this – Jesus, going into the house, and sharing the food of, a "sinner".

Now, the Pharisees wouldn't go into that house, of course. Wouldn't be caught dead there. And they know that Jesus is crazy, so they don't waste their breath talking with him. But they see a certain pained look on the faces of some of his disciples, so they motion to them and question Jesus' practices. "He's not religious enough," they say.

Well, as that controversy is bubbling away, here come some of the followers of Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist. And their question is similar to the one asked by the Pharisees: "Look, Jesus, why is it that you don't do some of this religious stuff that we've learned is so important? Are you for real? Or should we look for another Messiah?"

Wow. So Jesus, the son of God present in the flesh, is now going toe to toe not with the pagans, not with the evildoers, not with the outsiders – nope, he's interrupting his ministry with Matthew and his friends so that he can calm down the Pharisees (the group that is most likely to "get" the importance of what Jesus is doing, the group that is charged with the spiritual leadership of the People of God), calm down his own followers, and calm down John's disciples. With friends like this...

But before he can quite put that fire out, the leader of the synagogue – a well-respected and powerful man in the community – came into the house and begged him to come and do something about his dead daughter. The man wasn't interested in any theological discussion – his child has died, and he thinks that this crazy Rabbi may be his best hope.

So Jesus sets out with the leader, accompanied by his disciples. But before they get more than two or three blocks, he is interrupted by a woman who has suffered "hemorrhages" for twelve years. Twelve years of bleeding uncontrollably had made this woman "unclean" and therefore unable to associate legally with her family or friends – twelve years of suffering not only the disease, but the effects of being an outcast. As powerful and respected as the leader of the synagogue is, that's how powerless and disrespected this woman is. And now she rubs that powerlessness all over Jesus by touching the hem of his cloak unbidden. She says, essentially, "Look, don't waste your time and energy and salvation on people who are already dead – look at how terrible MY situation is!"

But Jesus doesn't get derailed by this – he turns to her, and, speaking very tenderly to her, pronounces her healed. Only then does he follow the ruler into the little girl's bedroom where he endures the laughter and mocking of the

mourners, before raising the little girl (and her family) to new life. He's not religious enough for the scribes and the Pharisees, and he's too religious for these professional mourners. And whereas he had commended the bleeding woman for her faith, we note here that there is no mention of faith on the part of the little girl – in fact, being dead, we can be pretty sure that she was passive throughout the entire affair.

And later in the day – after our reading concludes, he is stopped and heckled by two blind men and a demon-possessed mute whom he also heals.

And I thought that November 1, 1985 was a long day!

What about your day? What day would you carry around on your clipboard, if you were so stylish and debonair that you actually owned a clipboard?

Have you ever felt like all you are doing is careening around the room? Have you ever felt like you are powerless and bouncing from one thing to another, maybe like one of those metal balls in a pinball machine – ricocheting off the bells and the bumpers, shot around with no sense of control yourself? Have you had a day, or a week, or a month, or a life where sometimes you felt like you were only trying to catch up...where you are always out of breath, where you feel helpless and hopeless to measure up? Have you been there?

Then I have good news for you. Listen carefully: it is not up to you to create meaning to the events in your day. It is not up to you to create order in the world.

According to Genesis 1, those things are God's job. How does Genesis start: "In the beginning". And what were things like in the beginning? "The world was formless and void, and darkness covered the face of the deep." And what was happening there at the beginning? "The Spirit of God hovered over the face of the deep." Creation begins when the Creator decides that it is HIS job to bring order to chaos, to bring form to formlessness. That is what God does. That is not my prerogative. I cannot bring order to chaos or form to emptiness.

So when I confront a day that is totally screwed up – a day that, to use a very colorful military acronym, is SNAFU, then I cannot panic. I cannot take responsibility. I cannot assume responsibility for transforming that day into something orderly and meaningful.

And I don't know about you, but realizing that I cannot do that is empowering and enriching for me. It is freeing to be able to let some of that go. It's not up to me!

Here is what IS up to me. I can take some deliberate steps when I am confronted by a day or a situation that is seemingly chaotic or out of control. And I think that those steps are outlined by Jesus' words and behavior in Matthew chapter 9.

First, I can follow Jesus into any situation of my day. That was his invitation to Matthew, and it is his invitation to me and to you today. What does it mean to follow Jesus?

It means that I can trust that God is already present and active in any of the places where I am going. When Jesus went to Matthew's house, or walked by the sick woman, or entered the room with the dead girl, he was not alone – he was trusting that his Father was already at work in each of those situations.

Similarly, when you are being crushed at work, or when you are floundering in a relationship, or when you are wondering what in the world you are going to do in a screwed up situation, you do not have to sit around and wait for God to show up – because God is already there. When you get into a situation that seems overwhelming, take a moment and pause, and look for the place where the Spirit of God is hovering. I promise you that the Spirit is there. Ask God to show you where.

And once you are in that place where you are overwhelmed, remember that it's God's job to bring order to chaos. It's God's role to, for lack of a better word, "fix" things. My role, and your role in these situations, is to simply be an agent of Christ's presence in that situation.

What does that mean? Well, in the day that Jesus was having, he spent a good bit of his time speaking and acting tenderly to those who were excluded or on the margins. Maybe that's a good strategy for me when I'm having one of those days where it seems like things are all screwed up and there is nothing good happening...maybe instead of stewing and fussing and feeling lousy about all the things that are happening to me, or all the things that I cannot do, maybe one of the things that I'm supposed to be doing on a day like that is to look for those who are marginalized, bleeding, blind, or dead – and act in love on their behalf.

How do you deal with a situation that seems out of control? What do you do when the problem is too big and the pain is too overwhelming? I've thought a lot about that in recent weeks. And I want to close by sharing an analogy that comes from my experience as a fisherman.

When I learned to fish, my dad taught me to use a good stiff rod, fifteen pound test line, and a big hook. And I got pretty good at catching fish that way. This week, Lord willing, I'll be out on the river – maybe with Adam or Tim or Rick, and we'll be catching 8 ounce bass on 15 pound line. And that's not too hard, really. You get a bite, you jerk the line, and you reel it in. It's all in the power of the line, my strength against the fishes. And I almost always win.

But when Don and I go up to Erie, I'm fishing for 6, 10, 12, or even 14 pound fish, and I'm using 4 pound test line. If I fished for Steelhead the way that I fish for bass, I'd be sunk. You can't bring a big fish in on light line like that.

So I take a rod that is very, very flexible. I take a reel that is really sensitive, and that allows the fish to pull line out faster than I can put it in. I used

a tiny hook. And I hold on to the fish – I work the fish – I allow the fish to run where it wants, always hoping that somehow I will be able to bring the fish to shore in spite of the fact that the fish is stronger than the equipment that I have.

Last month, I was involved in a conversation that was very, very painful. Another friend was present for some of it, but eventually she walked out. She was offended for me. She thought that I was being abused. When the conversation was ended, and the other party had finished dumping on me, my friend started in – “Why didn’t you say...How could you allow...” etc. She thought I was fishing for bass.

But I thought I had a steelhead on the line. I thought that the person wasn’t really mad at me – but rather, was upset with life. I just happened to be a convenient target.

In a situation like that, if I try to bring healing on my own, I’m sunk. If I try to “fix” anything, to sort it out, to organize...then I’ll be disappointed. But if I can trust that healing, fixing, sorting is God’s intention and that God is already in that situation through the power of the Holy Spirit, then I can just hang on and keep the line in the water, playing it until I can bring that situation to shore...and then I give it to the Master. It’s his problem, his pain, his world. I’m just following him.

Well, you might have guessed why I still have that paper on my clipboard on June 8, 2008. None of that stuff matters any more. All those things that I thought were so terrible on Nov. 1, 1985? Gone. All that energy and frustration? Wasted. God was there. I look at that page when I’m having a terrible day now because I want to remember that God is here, now. God is active now. God is hovering now. And I’m a follower. I’m an agent. I can speak tenderly. Some days, that’s all I can do. And some days, that’s frustrating. But the reality is, that’s what we’re supposed to do. Hang on. Look for God. Honor others. Amen.