

Allen Pruitt
Proper19B21
St. Mark's, LaGrange

Brother Neal Prichard
was the preacher I knew best in the Primitive Baptist Church.

During my childhood I had other preachers.
They were giant old men,
who wore short sleeved dress shirts
and wide, polyester ties.

I didn't often understand their words while they preached,
but I always understood that they loved me
and they were glad to see me.

And that was enough.

Especially when Aunt June Bug
would pull sticks of Juicy Fruit out of her purse
and pass them back to us boys
so we'd have something to keep us out of trouble.

Brother Neal appeared later in my life.
As the churches started to consolidate,
he started preaching at my grandma's church
and she started going to his.

Every church just met once a month,
so they'd all travel around to a different building every week.

I didn't just know him in church though.
 Brother Neal taught me to watch for snakes
 as I picked pole beans in his garden.
 Brother Neal's wife made us lemonade
 and we sat in the air-conditioning
while I listened to him and my grandma talk and tell stories.

Perhaps my strongest memory of Brother Neal
 was that song we heard the choir sing in place of the Psalm
 just now.

It started out,
 Jesus, and shall it ever be,
 a mortal man ashamed of thee?

But the part I always remembered was the second verse.
 In the Primitive Baptist Church,
 the service would start at 11:00,
 but the singing would start at 10:30.
 People calling hymn numbers.

In *that* old hymnal,
 there wasn't any notation,
 just the words,
 almost like a book of poetry.

Somebody would call out, *number 58*.
 And we'd all turn to that page,
 but nobody would start singing,
 not until Brother Neal hummed out the pitch
 and then sang the first line.

I remember the second verse so strongly
because by then,
everybody was singing.

In those churches,
it wasn't always about the pitch.

Harmony was found by everybody singing it as full as they could.

In my early childhood,
it was sixty or eighty people of all ages.

Later in my life

I could only visit when I was on vacation from my church job,
and it would be ten or fifteen folks
between eight and eighty-four,
singing their lungs out.

*Ashamed of Jesus! sooner far,
Let evening blush to own a star;
He sheds the beams of light divine
O'er this benighted soul of mine.*

This could easily be a sermon where you walked away feeling ashamed,
ashamed because you aren't doing enough
for Jesus
or God
or the church.

That's what I remember hearing in my Southern Baptist Churches.
That's the way I felt walking out on *those* Sundays.

But I never felt ashamed when I left the Primitive Baptist Church.
I felt loved.

And that's the Gospel.
Not shame,
but love.
Not endlessly failing God,
but being welcomed, for all eternity.

I think our gospel story today
is one partly about shame.

Jesus explains to his disciples
just who he is.

Who do people say that I am?, he starts.

All kinds of things, his disciples tell him.

*John the Baptist come back from the dead,
Elijah come down from heaven;
and some folks think you're just a prophet,
calling us back home again.*

"But who do you say that I am?"

*Peter answered him,
"You are the Messiah."*

And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Why?
Why not tell anyone?

In my Southern Baptist Church growing up,
I'd have been made to feel ashamed
if I didn't tell *enough* people about Jesus.

I want all of you
to tell more people about Jesus,
about the God you are meeting here at St. Mark's.

Why on earth
would Jesus want it kept a secret
that he is the Messiah?

I think it's because they don't get it.

They call him Messiah,
and the next thing he does
is to tell them what that means.

*Great suffering,
rejection,
killed,
rise again.*

*He said ALL THIS
quite openly.*

Quite openly.

Jesus is open
about what it means to be the Messiah,
but he tells his disciples to keep their mouths shut.

And Peter lets us know why.
Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him.

“No.
Not one word more Jesus.
You are the Messiah.
You can't suffer;
you can't be rejected;
you can't be killed.

All that might happen to us
if we follow you,
but it can't happen to you.

We need you to win!
We need you to conquer.

Anything else
would be a waste of our lives.

Anything else
would be shameful.”

I'm putting words into Peter's mouth.
But I think this is about right,
because Jesus does the same,
there at the end of today's reading.

*Those who are ashamed of me,
of them I will also be ashamed.*

"If you are ashamed of what it means to be the Messiah,
then it's going to be hard for you to live in the kingdom.

The kingdom isn't about conquering the world,
but instead,
it's about conquering death.

Without knowing that,
you're not going to be able to see the kingdom,
even though it's all around you."

There is a lot to **do** in this reading.

First,
accepting Jesus' vision of what it means to be the Messiah.

But then,
that gospel work that comes up again and again,

*If any want to become my followers,
let them deny themselves
and take up their cross
and follow me.*

*For those who want to save their life
will lose it,
and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel,
will save it.*

That sounds like a lot for us to **do**.

*Take up a cross;
follow Jesus.*

That's enough right there.

And we will fail.
And failing,
we might feel ashamed.

It will be impossible for us to live like Jesus,
to love like Jesus.

The most we will do is to follow,
stumbling after him.

But there is grace.
There is mercy.
That is the gospel.

The gospel,
the good news,
is that God has accomplished far more
than we could ask or imagine.
The gospel
is that Jesus died and rose again,
saving us all.

We simply follow after
the salvation that seeks us.

Hear that second verse again.

*Ashamed of Jesus! Sooner far,
Let evening blush to own a star.
He sheds the beams of light divine
O'er this benighted soul of mine.*

We are benighted.
We fail and are ashamed.

But just as the dark sky does nothing to earn the stars,
 simply allowing them
 to shine through the darkness,

so Jesus simply shines upon us,
 through the darkness of night,

all the way to the blazing sun
 of our resurrection to new life.

And what shame could there be,
 in that?