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*Rev. Dr. Steven L. Frazier*

**That's On You...**  
**5 July 2009**  
**14<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
 Ezekiel 2:1-7  
 Mark 6:1-13  
 First Presbyterian Church  
 Lufkin, Texas  
 Dr. Steven Frazier

Pastor Marianne was greeting people after worship. She had been doing that in the front yard of the church since she became the pastor at Our Savior Presbyterian Church. The yard was nearly empty when Corrina walked up. She was holding her purse in both hands; there was no hand for Pastor Marianne to shake. Corrina sounded stern when she said, "I want to talk to you about the concerns some of our members have about your sermons." Pastor Marianne smiled and said, "Sure. Let's go to my office."

A few minutes later Corrina launched into her list of concerns. Finally she said, "Sermons should just be about the Lord. Telling us what God wants us to do is your opinion. And lots of people disagree with you. We want to enjoy church. We don't come here to have you preachin' at us and tellin' us what to do." Pastor Marianne smiled and said, "I understand, but I also disagree. Sermons involve knowing and doing. But we can discuss this some more; and I hope we do. But the others are going to have to speak for themselves." Well, Corrina wasn't happy about that.

But she was stubborn. And she was determined to change Pastor Marianne's sermons. A week later the Worship Committee met. That was a meeting Pastor Marianne always attended. She was pulling into the church parking lot when Corrina drove up. She spoke to Pastor Marianne. She was even pleasant. But Pastor Marianne knew that would change if she was there to meet with the committee. Corrina was starting to remind Pastor Marianne of a dog that was always just dying to bite somebody.

Anne and Matt, the elders in charge of the Worship Committee, called the meeting to order. And in no time at all, Corrina turned into a bulldog. She wanted sermons with facts about the Lord. But she didn't want sermons telling her what to do. In her opinion that wasn't a sermon, and that wasn't the pastor's job. Anne and Matt weren't too happy about ending up in the middle of a discussion about preaching that was starting to feel more like an argument. They were happy to let Pastor Marianne defend herself.

That began when she started leafing through a Bible. When she found what she was looking for she said, "This is from Ezekiel, and it describes the preacher's job." She started reading, "Son of man, I am sending you to the nation of Israel, a nation that is rebelling against Me. They are hard-hearted and stubborn people. But I am sending you to say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says!' And whether they listen or not—remember, they are rebels—at least they will know they have had a prophet among them." She put the Bible down and continued, "Pastors are like prophets; we speak for God. Sometimes people don't like our sermons because they don't care for what God is

saying. When that happens it's usually because God is giving them a job." She paused and then said, "For me, there's no such thing as an info-sermon."

That conversation went on for a while. But it didn't go on long enough to change Corrina's mind. She left when she realized she wasn't going to get her way. But she didn't leave until she reminded everyone there that she was there to speak on behalf of a lot of people who didn't like Pastor Marianne's sermons. It was not a happy ending.

After the meeting was over, Pastor Marianne, Matt, and Anne were chatting as they walked out to their cars. After Anne left, Matt asked Pastor Marianne, "Is the Lord leaving it up to you each week to figure out what He has in mind for us? Or is He just speaking through you? And why does the Lord leave it up to us to figure out whatever He has to say in your sermons? He's left plenty of wiggle room in preaching."

Pastor Marianne laughed and then said, "Wiggle room—you are right about that. You've got some great questions! God gave us minds to know Him with and hands and feet to serve Him with. But like He told Ezekiel, we can be stubborn. The Lord wants us to do the right thing, and sermons try to explain what that is. But the Lord also wants us to make those choices for ourselves." Matt asked, "Like a partnership?" Pastor Marianne said, "Hmmm. Yes and no. We are helping, but God is the senior partner."

A week later, Pastor Marianne was back in the church's front yard greeting folks after worship. She noticed Corrina slip out of one of the sanctuary's side doors just about the time Matt came up. He said, "I've been thinking about what you said. It sounded like preaching was a partnership between you and God. But then I thought, it's a partnership between you and us, too. Can it be both?" Pastor Marianne beamed. "Sure! God speaks through me to speak to you. I'm doing my part when I'm studying and writing. You're doing your part when you're listening to the sermon and keep thinking about it after church is over." Matt said, "So, the main thing is that everybody be faithful. You do your best to explain what God is saying, and we do our best to figure out what that means for us." Pastor Marianne said, "Yeah, it's a week-long process for everybody."

Matt went on, "Doesn't that mean we could all come up with different answers?" Pastor Marianne said, "Sure. That's possible every time I speak and whenever anybody hears me." She could tell Matt had more on his mind, but it was lunch time, and Matt's kids were tugging on his pants leg. He said, "Well, I've gotta go. Don't worry about Corrina. She's always tries to get her way by saying other people agree with her." He wondered out loud, "I wonder what she hears when you're preaching?" Pastor Marianne smiled and said, "You know, I don't know. In Ezekiel the Lord says some people will hear and some won't. Who is hearing and who isn't might even change from week to week."

During the week Pastor Marianne ran into Matt's questions again. The Gospel passage for Sunday had Jesus telling His disciples, "If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." It was the picture of a broken partnership. As the week went on Pastor Marianne started to hear God calling the members of Our Savior Presbyterian Church to partner with Him by being evangelists. They didn't have to be successful. They only had to be faithful. God was calling everyone to share Jesus' message of forgiveness and new life. By Sunday, Pastor Marianne's sermon was just that simple and just that challenging.

Well, that one didn't set well with Corrina either. She didn't wait for everyone to leave before she started complaining this time. "That sermon was un-Presbyterian. We are not evangelists. Everybody knows that. That's something other churches do," she sniffed. Pastor Marianne smiled and said, "If we're Jesus' disciples, it's something we have to do. We don't have to be successful, just faithful." Corrina disagreed. "Evangelism is about being examples of what He taught." Pastor Marianne replied, "I agree, but that isn't what today's passage was saying. Jesus sent His disciples out to teach. And that means speaking. Now He is calling us to do the same thing. Think of scripture as a drama. God is the director. He has given us a part and the Bible is how He is giving us directions on how to play our part."

That discussion wasn't over by a long shot. Come Monday morning Corrina was back for more. She was spoiling for a fight. Pastor Marianne invited her into her office and offered her a seat. But Corrina refused. She was not there for small-talk. "That sermon should have been half as long and twice as interesting. All we needed to know was that Jesus told His disciples to teach other people. They did, and the church grew. We can admire them; they were great men. But that was then and this is now. God takes care of the church now. Growing churches is none of our business."

Pastor Marianne disagreed. "That way of seeing evangelism is so broken it can't be fixed. Like I said, we're Jesus' disciples. We're actors in a divine drama. We play our parts by carrying out His instructions in scripture. Jesus isn't calling Christians to be spectators in an audience. That hasn't changed then or now." Corrina fumed, "It has, too. Talking to people about our faith just isn't Presbyterian. It is not our tradition." Pastor Marianne disagreed. That was a tough conversation.

Pastor Marianne continued, "Matt came up with a pretty good way of describing sermons. He said it was like a partnership between God and me and between me and the congregation. My part is studying, writing, and speaking. God does His part by speaking to you through me. You do your part when you listen and figure out what that means for you. Jesus' words and actions help us with that. They're like instructions on how to play our part. But sermons that feed our minds and don't change our hearts aren't sermons; they're theology lectures. And whatever preaching is, it sure isn't a theology lecture." Corrina hissed, "You think you know everything. Well, I know a few things, too. The Presbyterian Church has gotten where it is today by holding on to tradition. If you don't help us keep our traditions, it will be all your fault."

Pastor Marianne sat up on the edge of her chair and looked Corrina right in the eye. "You're right. We are where we are because we've gotten tradition, preaching, and discipleship all confused. Imitating Jesus and continuing His ministry is the best way I know of worshiping God. Tradition is just customs and habits. Some sermons are better than others; I'll admit it. Some speak more clearly to one person than another; that's life. But God's Spirit is working in every sermon teaching us something and then calling us to do something." Corrina glared at Pastor Marianne and said, "If I wanted to do something, I'd join a club." Pastor Marianne replied, "I understand. But a church that isn't sharing the good news and inviting people to follow Jesus is already a club."

Well, Corrina is used to getting her way on everything. She told Pastor Marianne, "Maybe it's time to change your job description. Maybe it's time for us to control what you have to say." Pastor Marianne said, "The job description that matters the most to me is the one God has given me. My job is to speak for God. And I'm going to keep doing

that until God tells me different. And as long as I'm faithful in doing my job, I'm doing what God wants me to do. After I study, write, and preach, it's your turn. It's time for you to figure out what God wants you to do."

Corrina sneered, "I'm doing what God wants me to do when I show up for church. But maybe it's time for me to stop listenin' to anything you have to say." Pastor Marianne replied, "That's your choice. But I'm going to remember what God said to Ezekiel. I hope you do, too. 'Don't be afraid of their threats. You must give them My message whether they listen or not.' Even the people in Jesus' home town amazed Him when they wouldn't listen to Him. My job is to be as faithful as I can. What you do with what I say? That's on you." Amen.