

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
“Don’t Be A Chimp”
September 20, 2009
Mark 9:30-37

He was the badest dude on the block. He was bigger, stronger and more powerful than anyone around. Wherever he went other moved aside. Some would bow. Others would follow him because they knew he was the one true leader. Few if any wanted to challenge him because of his power and prowess. His name? Goliath. There was no question that to go up against Goliath was to go down to sure defeat. But one day it happened. He was defeated. Anyone want to guess who defeated him? No, I am afraid the answer is not David. The answer is Mike. Yes Mike defeated Goliath and became the new Alpha male in the chimpanzee troop that was initially observed by Jane Goodall. For those of you who are not familiar with the name, Alpha male, it describes the dominant male leader in almost any group of mammals. Whether it is a pride of lions or a pack of dogs there is a stiff competition to be the alpha male because the rewards are great...everyone serves you and usually you have priority in mating. So the Alpha male is what males want...and as we discover with the disciples...the same is true with human beings.

Our story opens with Jesus on the road again. He is continuing to try and help the disciples understand not only what is ahead for him, death on the cross and then resurrection, but that they ought to consider such sacrifice a way of life. But on their way to the next destination Jesus senses that something is going on behind him. When they arrive he asks then what they were discussing...hoping they would fess up...because he knew what they were talking about...who is the greatest. They were being chimps at their best. They were playing the Alpha male game. I hate to say this but I can just imagine them as a bunch as a bunch of chimps, showing their teeth, running at each other, throwing dust, swinging branches trying to intimidate each other. But Jesus will have none of this. He brings them together and reminds them that “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then to make his point even more clear he takes a child in his arms and says, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes God.” In other words we are not only to be servants but servants who serve the very least, which is who children were. His point was clear, Jesus followers are to serve and not be served.

We might think then that if there is one organization in the history of humanity that understood the power and promise of serving it would be the church. So what I guess still surprises me is that the church has been and still is one of the last great bastions of chimpness...of alpha maleness...and in some cases even alpha femaleness. Within a hundred years of Jesus death the church had created an amazing hierarchy of power. It oppressed women and people of color. Even in our own time and in our own denomination we still find ourselves in struggles over power. Some of you may not be aware that over the last six years of my

ministry in Texas I worked with dozens of congregations trying to help them get their act together. In that time I met with pastors who were clear that it was their way or the highway. They would brook no opposition from anyone. I met with sessions, elder boards, that tried to intimidate their pastors. My favorite was a session that told their newly ordained pastor they would fire him unless he preached what they wanted him to preach...which by the way they can't do. I met with pastors who had a matriarch or patriarch who made it clear that as the largest giver, unless they got their way they would withhold their pledge. In each case it seemed we were returning to some sort of jungle mentality. They were all being chimpy.

So why is this...that after two thousand years we still spend so much time being chimps and not servants? Well my take is that is because we belong to a culture in which we believe UFC is a sport. For those of you who are not familiar with UFC, it is Ultra Fighting Championship. It is, as their owners put it, a mix martial arts competition. Actually what it is is a brutal all out fight in a cage in which two men try and beat the living daylight out of each other. And as long as they don't pull hair, eye gouge or head butt anything is legal. It is the modern form of gladiatorial combat. It is the ultimate Alpha Male competition. Once it was outlawed but now it is broadcast all over the world. But this is the climate in which we exist that this kind violence is acceptable. Which brings me to our cover. Chances are most of us know Clint. In many ways he helped to move us in this direction. He was the coolest, badest killer around. In Dirty Harry people in the theatre cheered when he blew the bad guy away. See we love the Alpha male and have come to accept it as the way the world is.

The issues becomes for us though, is this all that there is? Is this the way it just is going to be? The answer is no, for what Christ is doing is inviting us to become fully human. What do I mean? Our society, along with most that have come before us, has assumed that chimpness is the way things are. We have accepted that boys will be boys. But Jesus offers a different vision. Jesus understood that God had something greater in store for us than an Alpha Male competition. Jesus understood that God's plan for humanity was to create individuals and societies who lived in deep and passionate embrace of being those who love God and love neighbor. Now for the guys out there who when they hear this feel as if they are leaking testosterone, it doesn't mean you have to share your feelings of you can't play hockey. It means that in the depth of our relationships within and without of the church, the heart and life of a servant are what we can share with one another. Can you imagine for a moment living in a world in which our first question to others and theirs to us is, "How can I be of help you?" Think of an office, school or church environment in which everyone sought to serve everyone else. What a different kind of world that would be!

It would be a world, I have to say, that was brought to the screen by no other than Clint Eastwood, right here in Detroit. Gran Torino is a powerful movie. And for those of you who have not seen it, it is not for children, but it ought to be for the rest of us. For in it the once Alpha Male king Eastwood, demonstrates that a new kind of world is possible. In the film Eastwood's character begrudgingly befriends a Hmong teenager. In a gruff, curmudgeonly way that only Eastwood could play he comes to love this young man. Unfortunately the teen is beset

by gang bangers, and freeing him seems impossible. And as the movie nears its climax we see Eastwood polishing his rifle...and we know what is ahead. In his best Dirty Harry reprise he will shoot the gang bangers down and free his young friend from their grasp. But then something unexpected happens. When Eastwood arrives at the gang bangers apartment (and if you have not seen the film and want the ending to be a surprise do not read on) instead of pulling a gun, he tricks the young men into killing him. His death results in the arrest of the gang members and the freedom of his friend. If you are looking for a Christ image my friends, an image of what serving looks like, go see the film one more time. See even an Alpha Male can learn something.

In a few minutes you will be electing elders, deacons and others to guide this church family. As you do so I hope you will understand the roles to which you are electing them. You are not electing them to govern you, or to have power over you or to tell you what to do. You are electing servants. Just as when you called me, you are calling these men and women to a new life of service to you, the greater church and to the wider world. For you see First Presbyterian Church is a chimp free zone. We are a community of servants whose lives are shared in our common pursuit of becoming fully human; of becoming those who live out the servant heart of Jesus Christ. My challenge to each of you then is twofold. First hold those of us in leadership accountable to our calling to be servant leaders. The second challenge is to ask your selves, what is one step I can take to live a more fully human, fully Christ-like life as I leave my chimp self behind?