

**Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704**

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## **A Spiritual Frame of Mind**

### **Mark 8:33**

In May of 1885 this church celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. That celebration included a presentation on the history of the church by the pastor at the time, Dr. D. S. Johnson. His long address is preserved in our archives. It is of great value historically because he still had access to seven people who had been part of the church from its beginning.

But for me, what is most striking about his long address is what he did not say. He was speaking only twenty years after the end of the Civil War. In the run up to the war church people in Springfield were divided over the question of slavery. The wounds created by that division were still raw. Dr. Johnson could not speak openly about the creation of Second Presbyterian as an abolitionist church without damaging its relationship with other churches which had been pro-slavery or had not taken a clear position on the issue. He preached his address knowing that it would be covered in the local newspapers.

When Johnson described the founding of this church he spoke in a code which the members understood, but would not cause offense beyond the church. He described an 1834 revival by a Presbyterian missionary named Albert Hale who would later become pastor of this church. Hale was part of the Yale Band, a group of young graduates from Yale who made a pact to go to the new territory of Illinois to found churches and schools. Part of their program was to make sure that Illinois did not become a slave state, but Johnson did not say that. He did say that Hale's preaching had a profound effect on some of the members of the newly established First Presbyterian Church. Johnson described what happened in these words:

As a result of the revival of the previous year, a deep desire had taken possession of some hearts in the First Church for a more pronounced spirituality in the Church. In their view, worldly influences had asserted too great a control in the affairs of the congregation. An issue was joined at this point, and good people took positions on either side. The disagreement ended in the withdrawal of thirty persons in February 1835. Conferences were held by these persons for several weeks, and it was decided to form a new Church (50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Sermon, *Second Presbyterian Church Historical Data*, Vol. I, C. L. Conkling, page 125).

Johnson's listeners knew that his reference to "worldly influences" was code for the power of an economic system that was built on slavery. They also knew that a "more pronounced spirituality" was code for a frame of mind that refused to compromise on the question of slavery. They further understood that this spiritual mindset was at the heart of Albert Hale's preaching.

Jesus described this spiritual frame of mind in the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark. In this chapter the disciples have come to a turning point. In their journey with Jesus they are turning toward Jerusalem. From this point on the emphasis is no longer the mighty works of Jesus. The main focus now becomes the training of the disciples and the spiritual decisions which shape their lives.

The turning point begins when Jesus confronts the disciples with a very important question, “who do you say that I am (Mark 8:29)?” The question forces the disciples to come to terms with the nature of their relationship with Jesus. It is Peter who speaks for the other disciples when he says, “You are the Messiah (Mark 8:29).” This seems like a pretty good answer on Peter’s part until we read on a little further. It becomes apparent that Peter has his own ideas about what it means for Jesus to be a messiah and for him to be a disciple. When Peter learns that the messiah must suffer to stare down evil in the world and that a disciple must participate in that dangerous work, he loudly objects. This was not the journey he signed on for. He was looking for a popular messiah.

When Jesus responds to Peter's objection he uses the language of exorcism. “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things (Mark 8:33).” It is the same language Jesus uses in other places to silence demons and heal diseases. The people who founded this church understood the spiritual frame of mind that Jesus wanted for Peter. They knew that this was the frame of mind they would need to face down the evil of slavery in America.

Later in Dr. Johnson's 1885 address he spoke more openly about the anti-slavery commitment of the congregation. He described the meeting of the New School Presbyterian Synod in Springfield in October of 1837. This was the anti-slavery synod to which this congregation belonged. It was announced that a sermon would be preached on the subject of slavery by a Presbyterian minister from Peoria. When word got out, pro-slavery citizens rang the courthouse bell to gather a crowd in the square. Inflammatory speeches were made calling for violence against the minister to keep him from preaching. The crowd was turning into a mob.

In the end the program of the Presbyterians went forward as planned and their preacher delivered his sermon. But in order for that to happen they had to organize themselves to face down an angry mob on the streets of Springfield. One of the members of the Synod who was present that day was the Reverend Elijah Parish Lovejoy. Three weeks later he faced another angry mob in Alton, Illinois which gunned him down.

These Presbyterians understood what it meant for the disciples to travel with Jesus all the way to Jerusalem. They were ready to be part of that journey. That is the faith of our founders.