

“Unfinished Business”

© 2010 Rev. James L. Perry, Jr.
East Cobb United Methodist Church
September 5, 2010

Scripture: Luke 14:25-33

Great leaders make great and purposeful demands upon their followers. The Italian freedom fighter Garibaldi offered his men only hunger and death to free Italy. Winston Churchill told the British people that he had nothing to offer them but "blood, sweat, toil, and tears" in their fight against their enemies. Jesus spoke of the necessity of total commitment - even to the point of death. He conveyed this in no uncertain terms when he said to his disciples, "You must take up your cross and follow me."

Why was he so harsh with them? He knew what lay ahead:

Andrew died on a cross.

Simon was crucified.

Bartholomew was flayed alive.

James (son of Zebedee) was beheaded.

The other James (son of Alphaeus) was beaten to death.

Thomas was run through with a lance.

Matthias was stoned and then beheaded.

Matthew was slain by the sword.

Peter was crucified upside down.

Thaddeus was shot to death with arrows.

Philip was hanged.

Only John made it through alive, but he was exiled to a small island in the Mediterranean Sea.

The demands that Jesus makes upon those who would follow him are extreme. Christianity is not a Sunday morning religion. It is a hungering after God to the point of death if need be. It shakes our foundations, topples our priorities, pits us against friend and family, and makes us strangers in this world. We sing, "What A Friend We Have in Jesus." But, we must understand that on many occasions, we treat him not as our friend but as an adversary to our very nature.

In the text for today a large crowd was traveling with Jesus. Now, in large crowds you will have many motives. Some, in this crowd, were following because they had seen Jesus feed a multitude of people, and they were waiting to be fed. Some were following because they had heard of Jesus' ability to heal, and they were waiting for an opportunity to approach him and be healed. Still others were following for the excitement. It is safe to say that only a few were truly committed to this itinerant preacher's teaching.

Aware of their motives, Jesus turned to the crowd and told them what is involved in a true commitment. At this moment the crowd learned, as we do, that to follow Jesus, we must define clearly the task; determine what it takes to complete the task; and resolve to do whatever it takes to finish the work.

Define the Task Clearly

We must define the task and the importance of that task to us personally. Note, I said "personally." We often agree with ideas and support tasks that require little or no commitment from us personally. Too often, we allow things to stand in the way of what

we should consider important. Hobbies interest us more than our children and the needs of others. A job takes precedent over a marriage. Television displaces family conversations over dinner. We have the best of intentions, but the priorities we know to be vital to a good and happy life never get carried out in our daily living. Our tasks as children of God are to love God, love others, and introduce others to the love and grace of God. These are our reasons for being, yet we fill our lives with so much less than this.

Someone has calculated how a typical life span of 70 years is spent. Listen to these surprising numbers:

Sleep.....	23 years.....	32.9%
Work.....	16 years.....	22.8%
TV.....	8 years.....	11.4%
Eating.....	6 years.....	8.6%
Travel.....	6 years.....	8.6%
Leisure.....	4.5 years.....	6.5%
Illness.....	4 years.....	5.7%
Dressing.....	2 years.....	2.8%
Religion.....	0.5 years.....	0.7%
Total.....	70 years.....	100%

When put in these terms, we see how unimportant spiritual matters seem to be in our lives. But Jesus is a demanding leader. Jesus said, "So, therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple." Possessions must not stand between you and the Lord. Jesus went so far as to say, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own mother and father, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters, he cannot be my disciple." Even something as noble as the love of family, as good and right as that is, must not stand in the way of commitment to the Kingdom of God. Now Jesus was not using "hate" in the sense that we do today. He simply meant that we must put nothing above our love and commitment to him – not even family.

Jesus said, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Laziness, fear, selfishness, family - nothing should stand between us and the call to discipleship. Jesus Christ demands our obedience. Jesus is not some wishy-washy little fellow coming up to us, hat in hand, hoping to win our favor, saying softly: "Please sir, may I have a word with you." He comes to us as the Lord of Lords and makes demands: "Love; Feed; Take up your cross and follow me." He comes to us as one to be obeyed and asks of us sacrifices that many of us think are too great. How do I know? Because we routinely are not willing to make them.

Determine What It Takes

To follow Jesus we must first identify the task. Secondly, we must determine what it takes to get the job done. Look at how Jesus illustrates this point. Suppose, Jesus says, one of you wants to build a tower over your vineyard, so you can keep a lookout for thieves who might want to steal your harvest. Before you build, what is the first thing you

will do? Will you not, he says, first sit down and estimate how much it will cost you to build the tower? It is a rhetorical question and the answer is: "Yes! Yes, I will first count the cost." In today's language: If it is not cost effective, don't do it. You do not want to appear to be a fool by laying the foundation, running out of money, abandoning the project, and becoming the laughing stock of the community. But we do that all the time!

When Jesus told this story he was on his way to Jerusalem. All around him the crowds followed, thinking they were on their way to a coronation, but Jesus knew the path led to a cross. What a contrast! I used to think that the crowds in the bible followed Jesus because he was so wonderful. I later learned the tragic truth. So many followed for terribly shallow reasons. What they had to do – and what we must do - is sit down and take stock. Do we have the spiritual stamina to go the distance, even if finishing the job means death itself? That's the heart of the matter. Jesus wants each person in the crowd to answer that question personally and individually. This morning, he asks it of us.

Don't let it be said of you: They began to build but were not able to finish. They followed the teacher but did not learn the lesson. They followed the Lord but did not carry his cross. That brings us to the third point.

Pay the Price to Finish the Work

To follow Jesus we must clearly identify the tasks; determine what it takes to finish the job; and we must be willing to pay the price to get it done. This is for most of us the deal breaker. In no uncertain terms, Jesus told the crowd, "Any of you who is not willing to give up everything cannot be my disciple."

Could it be any clearer than that? Jesus spells out the extremely high cost of discipleship. It will cost all that you have if you do it right. If you choose to follow him, there is no part of life immune to that call. No part of your life will go untouched. Look at what some giants of the faith gave up.

Abraham was willing to give up his son.

Moses gave up Pharaoh's court.

Peter gave up his family and their fishing business.

Matthew gave up the lucrative profession of a tax collector.

Paul gave up his prestigious position as a Pharisee.

Now, unless you are called into full time Christian ministry you may not be asked to do as these men have done, but you could. None of us can escape the need to decide what we are willing to pay to follow the Christ we say we believe in and serve. Our church's mission statement identifies us as "A Mosaic of God's family Gathering..., Growing..., and Going..." ***GATHERING to embrace God and all people, GROWING in faith, love and joy, and GOING into the world to serve and share Jesus.*** The Mission Statement of the United Methodist Church is "***Making Disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the World.***" Are we doing that? Is that your life's priority?

I have often wondered what would have become of the church if Jesus' Disciples had not made those ultimate sacrifices. If they had not paid the price of discipleship with their very lives, where would the church be? Geographically Christianity is the most widely diffused of all faiths, and a third of the earth's 6+ billion people claim Christ as their Lord. What kind of church would we be if those 12 had put down their crosses? What kind of

church would we be if we took up our crosses as those Disciples did? What would the world look like? How can we be critical of the lack of the progress of the gospel when we just walk by on the other side and hope no one notices?

Several centuries ago in a mountain village in Europe, a wealthy nobleman wondered what legacy he should leave to his townspeople. He made a good decision. He decided to build them a church. No one was permitted to see the plans or the inside of the church until it was finished. At its grand opening, the people gathered and marveled at the beauty of the new church. Everything had been thought of and included. It was a masterpiece.

But then someone said, "Wait a minute! Where are the lamps? It is really quite dark in here. How will the church be lighted?" The nobleman pointed to some brackets in the walls, and then he gave each family a lamp, which they were to bring with them each time they came to worship.

"Each time you are here," the nobleman said, "the place where you are seated will be lighted. Each time you are not here, that place will be dark. This is to remind you that whenever you fail to come to church, some part of God's house will be dark."

That story makes a very significant point about the importance of our commitment and loyalty to the church. The poet Edward Everett Hale put it like this:

I am only one,

but still I am one.

I cannot do everything,

But still I can do something;

And because I cannot do everything

I will not refuse to do the something I can do.¹

Let me ask you: What if every member of our church supported the church just as you do? What kind of church would you have? What if every member served the church, attended the church, loved the church, shared the church, and gave to the church exactly as you do? What kind of church would you be?

Soren Kierkegaard said that there are a lot of parade-ground Christians who wear the uniforms of Christianity, but few who are willing to do battle for Christ and his kingdom. When it comes to doing battle for the Lord, too many church members are just sitting on the premises instead of leaning on the promises of God.²

The work is not done. The task is ours. We know what it will take. Are we willing to make it happen? The business of the Kingdom is unfinished. It is ours to build. What will we say to Jesus when he asked us why we were busy doing less important things?

Endnotes:

¹ James W. Moore, *Some things Are Too Good Not To Be True*, Dimensions: Nashville, 1994. pp. 117-118.

² Ron Lavin, *Only the Lonely*, CSS Publishing Company, Inc.