

BREAD FOR THE JOURNEY

(08/06/17)

Scripture Lessons: Deuteronomy 30:11-14

Luke 18:18-30

“When Jesus heard this, he said to him, ‘There is still one thing lacking. See all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’” (Luke 18: 22)

Our gospel reading, the account of Jesus' conversation with the rich young man, is ostensibly about our attachment to material possessions and how that attachment can distract us from the deeper meaning of life. This morning I would like us to think about the passage from a different point of view, to explore what it might be telling us about the heart of the Christian faith. From this perspective the important words are not "Go, sell all that you have," but rather Jesus' invitation, "Come, follow me."

Many, if not most people in our secular society feel no need for religion. They feel no inclination to be a part of a church, to serve on committees, teach in the church school, or be involved in mission outreach. They do not participate in Sunday worship, read the Bible, study, pray, or receive the sacraments. They have adopted this stance not because of any negative feelings about the church or even the minister, but because of their theology, their understanding of what the Christian faith is all about.

In my premarital counseling with young couples I raise what I believe are some of the fundamental dynamics or issues of married life. We talk about how they resolve conflicts, their personality styles and patterns of communication. We talk about how their finances will be handled and by whom. We talk about their parents, their in-laws, and the transition from being children to being adults. We explore their feelings about having children and the matter of gender roles. We talk about their goals as individuals, how they plan to achieve them, and how they plan to help each other achieve them.

Finally, I talk with them about the experiences they have had in the churches they have attended, about the role religion plays in their lives and will play in their family.

Let me share a characteristic response of many young and some not-so-young people. "Religion, now that's an interesting topic. I think what religion is all about is following the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule. Religion is meant to help us lead a good life, to treat people fairly, and I try to do this in my daily life."

When I ask them what part the church plays in their lives, the answer usually goes like this: "To be perfectly honest, Reverend, the church isn't important to me. I don't need the church or the worship service or even the Bible to tell me how I should live. I know what's right and wrong, and I don't need to dress up and go sit with a bunch of hypocrites every Sunday morning to be told the same thing time and time again. Church may be fine for some people, but I don't get anything out of it. And I don't want to go if I don't get anything out of it because that would make me a hypocrite just like them."

I can understand this response. If religion is basically about helping us lead a good or moral life, then perhaps we don't need church, we don't need worship, we don't need the sacraments, we don't need disciplined study or prayer or meditation. How many times do we need to hear a sermon on the Ten Commandments or the Golden Rule? If this is what religion is all about, I'm not so sure that people need the church.

The rich young man is a good illustration of this point. He grew up in the Jewish faith with its emphasis on the Law. He knew the Ten Commandments and the hundreds of other laws--dietary, cultural, and religious, and he lived them the best he could. But the man had a feeling that something was missing in his life. He had not experienced what Jesus talked about as the mysterious Kingdom of God that lies within us.

Jesus touches the man at his growing edge. He tells him, "It's important to obey the religious laws, but there's more to life than this. Let go of the religious and cultural traditions by which you have defined yourself, and come, follow me." But the man had too much invested in where he was and who he was. It wasn't just that he had a lot of money. He was not ready to undertake the journey that Luke says was characteristic of Jesus' life. Because he was not willing to undertake this journey, he turned away sad.

Christianity *is* concerned with social responsibility, with the way we live our life. Remember, Jesus begins by advising the man to hold fast to the laws of his tradition. He tells us it is important to live a good and moral life, but he also tells us that life is more than this. Jesus and his disciples broke or disobeyed the law several times, perhaps even to make this point. Jesus described himself as an eater and drinker as opposed to John the Baptist, who was an ascetic. He healed people even when to do so broke the laws of the Sabbath. He held the Publican, the repentant sinner to be greater spiritually than the Pharisee, the righteous, law-abiding citizen. He held the Prodigal Son to be greater

spiritually than the upright elder brother. If we take these passages seriously we are led to the conclusion that Christianity cannot be reduced to a simple obeying of social and religious laws.

Whenever people have grasped this dimension of Jesus' teaching, they have been struck by both its power and its absurdity. The apostle Paul tells us we are saved by our relationship with the living Christ, not by our good works. St. Augustine tells us: "Be a Christian, and do whatever you want." Martin Luther tells us we are saved by faith. Paul Tillich, the twentieth-century theologian, tells us that Christ frees us from religion. These religious giants are saying that there is more to life than being a good person, more to life than obeying the religious and secular laws. This is what Christianity offers us and calls us to experience. This "something more" is what has been described as a journey.

People have struggled to grasp the meaning of life as a spiritual journey since the beginning of recorded time, and their religions and mythologies are filled with accounts of journeys. We can feel the power of this metaphor in the old Christian emphasis on a pilgrimage. In the church sanctuary, which was designed by the ancients to symbolize this journey, the center aisle is the Way, the journey of life. In ancient traditions the baptismal font was located in the back of the church, at the beginning of the journey. The people sit on the sides, along the Way. The lectern and the pulpit, the scriptures and the interpretation of the scriptures, are ahead of us to guide us. The communion table, the symbol of union with Christ, the altar, and the cross, the symbol of death and rebirth, stand at the very end as the goal, and then as the beginning of a journey into eternity.

The ancients describe life is a pilgrimage. Some even grasped that this journey does not lead us outward, does not lead us on a pilgrimage to sacred places, but rather leads us inward, into the deeper parts of ourselves. The writer of Deuteronomy says,

For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we might hear it and do it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we might hear it and do it?" But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you can do it.

From the inception of his ministry, we realize Jesus is on a journey, a journey that leads him outwardly to Jerusalem, to his death, but also an inward journey, a journey

through which he works out his own unique destiny, his special relationship with God. This journey is not reducible to the observance of religious or secular laws; it is concerned with the gradual revelation of who he is. Jesus invites his disciples to leave their homes, to sell all they have, and to accompany him on this journey.

Their journey was not a walk in the park. It involved heartbreak and suffering, days in the wilderness, the continual temptation to turn back. It involved a profound lack of outward or secular security, a putting behind of cherished things and people. It involved suffering, chaos, death, hell, and then resurrection, rebirth, new life. Time and time again we hear the words, "Come. Come and follow me." This is Jesus' call to the spiritual journey.

Jesus of Nazareth called people of his day to this journey. The eternal Christ, the Holy Spirit who dwells within us calls us to this journey, the journey toward new life. The Holy Spirit calls to know ourselves as incarnations of God, and calls us to know the God who speaks to us and lives through us in many different ways. It calls us to a new awareness of the Spirit that is within us, of where this Spirit would lead us, of what it would have us become. We are given the tools, the guidance, and the companionship for this journey. We are also told that it is never too late to start.

This is what the Christian faith would offer, to which it calls us, and this is not the same as leading a good or moral life.

In the Roman Catholic tradition, the communion given to a person at the time of his/her death is known as the *viaticum*. The meaning of this term is literally, "bread for the journey." The priest tells the communicant, "Receive, my brother or sister, this food for your journey, the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, that He may guard you from the wicked enemy and lead you into everlasting life."

Our Sacrament of Holy Communion, a sacrament of Presence, is also "bread for the journey," the journey of life, the journey which hopefully brings us closer to God and the true meaning of our lives. In Martin Luther's words, it provides us with "strength for the Way." Let us so partake.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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