

IT'S FREE AND IT'S NOT FREE!

(10/21/18)

Scripture Lesson: Luke 9:51-62

Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." (Luke 9:62)

The scripture reading this morning describes a dialogue between Jesus and three Samaritans. Each of the Samaritans expresses his desire to become a disciple of the Way. After a brief conversation with Jesus, however, all three turn away discouraged.

Next month, on November 18, the Sunday before Thanksgiving, we will celebrate Stewardship Sunday. This is a day when we make our commitment to support our church financially in the year to come. It is a day when we renew our commitment not only to our church but also to Jesus, our commitment to be his disciples. As we heard this morning, Jesus tells us that if we do not make this commitment we will not experience the kingdom of God.

One of the central themes of the Bible is the theme of commitment. Jesus tells us that there is a cost to discipleship. The gift of the gospel is freely offered, but it is not really free. It demands something of us. In fact, it demands a lot of us!

Not everyone wants to hear this, yet it is at the heart of church membership. We are called to be generous stewards of our time, talent, and treasure. We are called to build up the church, the body of Christ. We are called to use what we have and who we are to carry out Christ's healing work in the world. This is how we build up treasure in heaven.

This past week I read a newspaper clipping that describes a new church start. This morning I would like to tell you a little about this church, at least as I understand it, to share my reservations about their approach to attracting new members, and to use it as an illustration and reminder of all the things that I think we are doing right in this church.

Let me begin with a caveat. I know nothing about this church except what I read in the newspaper. I have never attended a worship service, nor have I talked with their pastor. What I am going to say may be an example of what Jung would call the projection of my shadow. I am going to tell you how I think our church differs from their church, and why I would not want our church to take the path that they have taken. In all honesty, I also have to admit that I am also experiencing a little attendance envy; they draw more people to Sunday worship than I do. So as long as we are clear that I am not trying to be fair to this church but am simply using it to make a point about the present strengths and also the future of our little church, we can proceed.

The heading of the article reads, “Praise the Lord and Pass the Popcorn.” The worship service, if you would call it that, takes place in a movie theater. Actually, they don’t call it a worship service but an “experience.” I know the word “worship” may be old fashioned, but I think there is no other word that describes what we are doing here this morning. Webster defines the word worship as

1. *a prayer, church service, or rite showing reverence for a deity;*
2. *intense love or admiration of any kind;*
3. *to show religious reverence for; and*
4. *to have intense love or admiration for.*

I think you can see why I like this word. We have not gathered here this morning to “have an experience,” though that may indeed happen; we are here to worship God!

Because they hold their “experiences” in a movie theater on closed circuit television, there are no visible symbols of our faith. There is no cross, no communion table, no altar, and no baptismal font. There are no candles, religious pictures or stained-glass windows. As you know, I believe symbols are important parts of our faith journey; they help us build a bridge to the inexpressible, the wondrous mystery of God. They also serve a transporting function.

I don’t think the pastor of this church would call where they meet for their experiences a sanctuary. I happen to like the word “sanctuary.” Webster defines the word sanctuary, which comes from the word *sanctus*, which is Latin for sacred as:

1. *a holy place set aside for worship;*
2. *a holy place within a church or temple, as the part around the altar;*
3. *a place of refuge or protection;*
4. *a reservation where animals or birds may not be hunted or molested; and*
5. *refuge, protection, immunity from punishment.*

I think you can see why I feel this word describes not only this sanctuary but our little church!

I think we have a beautiful sanctuary, a special place that is set aside to worship God. I know that God is everywhere, even in a movie theater, but I still find the idea of a sacred space meaningful. I also like the ritual of our worship service. Every single part of our service has a deep meaning. Every single part helps us to understand God, God’s will for our life, and helps us to deepen our relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

The newspaper article doesn’t mention the rationale for the absence of a cross. However, I once heard the pastor of a large modern church say that the omission of the cross from their meeting place is intentional. Public opinion surveys discovered that the cross offends some

people; it carries connotations of suffering, sacrifice, and death. Yes, it does! This is why it is the central symbol of our faith! This is why it assumes a central spot in our sanctuary.

Going back to the newspaper article, the pastor of this new church explained that they are trying to reach out to the un-churched. I totally support this kind of mission outreach, though I have reservations about how they are doing it. The pastor was quoted as saying, “we do whatever it is, just short of sin, to reach people far from God.” I’m not sure I would go that far. I think if we go too far in our effort to make not only our church but also the Christian faith palatable to the un-churched, we may end up throwing the baby out with the bath water.

The newspaper article made no mention of community. People come to the theater for the experience and go their way. There is no discernible sense of the kind of community that we have in this church, a community that is at the very heart of what and who we are. In many churches like this, the church is “owned” by the founding pastor, not the church members. The pastor is not accountable to anyone. In some of these churches, the megachurches, this has led to an abuse of power. This is very different from our church, where the power resides in the people, in the church membership, in the community.

Then there is the matter of stewardship. In their effort to bring people into the fold, churches like these tend to ask little. There was no mention in the article of church membership, commitment, or pledging, even giving though I assume they take an offering every Saturday or Sunday at their “experiences.” I think of our little church where the average pledge this past year was a little over \$39 a week--the *average* pledge per week! I think of the people in our church who give so freely of their time and talent to sing in the choir or to work on our various boards, committees, and fund raisers. I cannot get my head around the notion of a church without stewardship, or even a Christian who does not grasp the deeper dimension, the spiritual dimension of stewardship.

There was no mention of mission in the article. What do they give to the community? We give a lot for a church our size—to our community, to various missions in the area and around the world. There was no mention of any ecumenical or interfaith relationship, probably because this pastor and his parishioners feel theologically and spiritual superior to those who belong to the other churches in their area, those who find their home in other religious traditions. You know how much I celebrate the ecumenical and interfaith spirit of this church even though the United Parishes of Southborough seems to be struggling a little at the present time to decide what to keep and what to change in our traditional ecumenical and interfaith gatherings.

Many people go to churches like the one mentioned in the article to be entertained. I have been to churches like this, and I have indeed been entertained! The rock band in my son's church in South Carolina is absolutely amazing! I also think their pastor is an excellent preacher, though there are points where he and I part company theologically. Many of these pastors are quite charismatic. To say that they are more charismatic than I am isn't saying much; I have been told that I am about as charismatic as a hedgehog. However, I am not sure we should offer free popcorn and a reduced price per gallon at a local gas station as drawing cards. The message this conveys is that the church is here to give to you. And it is! But that is only half of the story!

I guess what I am saying is that I love this little church. I am not opposed to new ideas, new ways to grow, new ways to let the community know who we are and what we are doing. But in our efforts to attract new members I would not want us to lose our soul in the process. An important part of who we are is the commitment we make to our Lord, to this church, and to each other. How could we be a disciple of our Lord and not be there for each other, not reach out to those in need? How could we call ourselves disciples if we try to avoid the sacrifice, the suffering, the death that is so powerfully symbolized in the cross? How could we call ourselves disciples and not take our Christian stewardship seriously?

I guess what I am saying is that I would rather have our church die for the right reasons than survive for the wrong ones.

I remember a discussion about church membership from one of my courses in theological school. The professor posed the following question: if we want to attract new members, should we make church membership easier and less demanding, or should we make it clear that it is a process and a commitment that demands much? Should we call people to make a radical commitment to the church and their own faith journey? Or do we try to attract people by promising them much while asking them for little?

When I was starting out as a minister fifty years ago, I wanted to bring new members into the church. Of course, I wanted them to hear the Word of God, but I suspect I also wanted to be able to say that the number of members during my watch increased every year. This meant I was a successful minister. Two voices warned me against going down this road. The first was the Reverend William Rees, my field education supervisor at the Pawtucket Congregational Church in Lowell. Reverend Rees continually warned me not to judge my church and my ministry by what he called "secular standards of success."

The second was the example of the Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C. In the Church of the Savior everyone is welcome to attend worship, but in order to become a member of the church you have to make a commitment. You have to engage in a minimum of two years of study in Old Testament, New Testament, church history and theology. You have to be involved in a local mission, like a soup kitchen or tutoring inner city children. You have to support the church's larger mission, be informed about local and national political issues, and attend worship regularly. And, of course, you have to tithe; you have to give one-tenth of your family income every year to the church.

I wonder how many people would be members of their church if these were the conditions for membership!

The vast majority of people in our nation are un-churched. They don't attend worship other than on special days like Christmas and Easter. They are not involved in the life and mission of a church. They do not sing in the choir, serve on committees, or teach in the church school. They do not attend study groups or support a church financially, though they do not hesitate to utilize its services for baptisms, weddings, and funerals.

I suspect that many of these people would tell you that they are members of a church. They may believe that an historical connection, no matter how long ago it happened is the same as church membership. They may consider themselves members of a church because their parents were members of that church. When I think about what church membership means to these people, I wonder if we have made the process too easy. If we can't get people to take church membership seriously, how can we expect them to make the commitment to their faith journey that Jesus would call discipleship?

In this morning's gospel lesson, Jesus and his disciples are on their way to Jerusalem. The disciples are beginning to understand that they are walking the difficult way, the narrow way, the way of the cross.

Three men approach and express their desire to become disciples of the Way. When Jesus tells them what this entails, they turn away discouraged. Each is unwilling to let go of his attachments to make the necessary commitment. The first is unwilling to sacrifice his security. The second is reluctant to adjust his priorities. The third is unable to direct his full and undivided attention to the journey.

Every communion Sunday, I read the following invitation of Jesus:

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Jesus is indeed a comforting presence to those who follow him. A yoke can make a burden lighter because it is shared. Jesus invites us to share our burdens with him.

A yoke can also be seen as a way of *taking on* a burden, of stepping into a harness. Jesus asks us to share his burden, the burden as well as the joy of sharing the gospel in word and deed with a world that desperately needs it. Just as he did for his disciples and the Samaritan men, Jesus calls us forth into a radical commitment, a commitment to become disciples of the Way.

In the simplest of terms, this involves a process. We need to move from attending worship occasionally to attending worship regularly. We need to move from being church attenders to being active and involved members. We need to be more generous in our support of our church and its mission. Then we need to move from being members to being disciples. Jesus did not try to market the Way as a comfortable path, a path that asks little of us. If it was not easy for Jesus and for his disciples, why should it be easy for us?

In the gospel reading this morning, Jesus challenges us just as he challenged his disciples, just as he challenged the Samaritans. He tells us that the Way is not an easy path but a never-ending spiritual journey. He tells us that he will not only guide us, he will also accompany us on this great adventure--the exciting adventure of discipleship!

As members of this church, let us put our hand to the plow! Let us take his yoke upon us! Let make or reaffirm the commitment to which he calls us, the commitment to become disciples of the Way. If we do this, we will experience the kingdom of God!

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