

Living From Commitment

From the sermon series: Lifelines

Text: Luke 14: 27, 33

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

No one who does not carry his cross and come with me can be a disciple of mine...none of you can be a disciple of mine without parting with all his possessions. Luke 14: 27, 33

To commit is to entrust oneself to another. In the Christian Faith it is to entrust one's life to God through Jesus Christ. It is to turn over the controls of one's life to Christ, to yield to His Lordship, to recognize Him as one's sovereign, one's King. The Christian Life is a life lived out of commitment to Jesus Christ. That commitment involves the whole of life; every area of life is affected - human relationships, vocational decisions, attitudes, political and economic decisions. In the Christian understanding of things, one's spiritual commitment is not one dimension of life among others, but the primary decision of life which shapes all others.

It is also the Christian understanding of human existence that yielding one's life to the Lordship of Jesus Christ is not to lose one's life, but rather to come into the fullest possible realization of being, of a truly, fully human existence.

I begin with this message a series entitled, "Lifelines." It will be my purpose to show that the total commitment of oneself to Jesus Christ and the consequences of that commitment, or the living out of that commitment lead to life in its fullness. Commitment to Christ and the disciplines of Christian living are Lifelines. In this series we will focus on several facets of the Christian life in order to find the path to the abundant life Jesus came to bring and which He makes available to us.

Before we examine some of the disciplines of life, however, let us begin with the recognition that the call of Jesus to follow Him involves us in a costly choice: *He calls us to radical commitment*. Radical is a word deliberately chosen. It comes

from *radix*, root. The call to follow Jesus reaches to the very root of our existence. His claim and call are uncompromising. His claim and call are serious. He would shape us from the core of our being so that the attitude and actions of our daily lives are the fruit of that one primary and fundamental commitment to be His disciple. The choice of texts presented a problem only because there are so many possibilities. The Gospels carry the theme repeated in various contexts. I point you to the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 14. The paragraph beginning with verse 25 begins,

Once, when great crowds were accompanying him...

No one could accuse Jesus of inviting followers on false pretenses. He always laid it on the line. Obviously He was not running for election. He was not astute at winning friends and influencing people. There was nothing manipulative in His manner. He was a person consumed with God and the Kingdom of God He came to inaugurate. In the vivid language of the East, He put it this way when the crowd swelled and He feared there were many following without really understanding what was at stake.

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, even his own life, he cannot be a disciple of mine. No one who does not carry his cross and come with me can be a disciple of mine. ...none of you can be a disciple of mine without parting with all his possessions. Luke 14: 25-33

The sharpness of the saying jars us and that is precisely its purpose. To hate means literally to love less and the counsel is obviously not hatred in intimate human relationships which are sacred but simply to say there is no relationship or claim upon the disciple of Jesus which takes precedence over the claim of Jesus on our lives.

The renunciation of possessions was a familiar model for conversion in the world of Jesus. The gentile who converted to the God of Israel was called to such a once-for-all act of renunciation, which entailed a break with one's social relationships. Edward Schillebeeckx, in his book, *Jesus*, points out that this pattern was taken over from late Judaism. Being converted meant in practice surrendering all one's possessions, becoming odious, having to leave father and mother, etc., and all one's worldly goods. The radical break with the past was called for by Jesus in light of the coming rule of God.

The narrative of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus illustrates that this young man was not ready for radical conversion because he was unwilling to renounce all and give to the poor. The actual surrender of all material goods was the sign of a true conversion.

As for the call to cross bearing, that was a familiar sight in the Palestine of Jesus' day. Crucifixion was the fate of the Zealots who were always plotting against the

Roman occupiers. Once again here, cross bearing was a sign of the willingness to lay down one's life and Jesus' own death on the cross became the concrete illustration of the cost of discipleship.

Cross bearing was the willing assumption of the suffering involved in following Jesus and aligning oneself with the cause of the Kingdom of God. It is voluntary. It is not a burden thrust on one about which one can do nothing; it is an active assumption of the consequences of following Jesus.

All of the imagery of this paragraph and the others liberally sprinkled throughout the Gospels speak of death, the dying to self.

In his book, *Alive in Christ*, Maxie Dunnam tells of a friend, Brother Sam, a Benedictine monk who shared with him the service in which he took his solemn vows and made his life commitment to the Benedictine community and the monastic life.

On that occasion he prostrated himself before the altar of the chapel in the very spot where his coffin will be set when he dies. Covered in a funeral pall, the death bell that tolls at the earthly parting of a brother sounded the solemn gongs of death. There was silence - the silence of death. The silence of the gathered community was broken by the singing of the Colossian words, "For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. " (Col. 3:3). After that powerful word, there was more silence as Brother Sam reflected on his solemn vow. Then the community broke into song with the words of Psalm 118, which is always a part of the Easter liturgy in the Benedictine community: "I shall not die, but live, and declare the words of the Lord. " (Psalm 118:17 King James Version).

After this resurrection proclamation, the deacon shouted the words from Ephesians: "Awake, O Sleepers, and arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light." (Eph. 5:14). Then the bells of the Abbey rang loudly and joyfully. Brother Sam rose, the funeral pall fell off, and the robe of the Benedictine Order was placed on him. He received the kiss of peace and was welcomed into the community to live a life "hid in Christ." (p. 27F)

That is a beautiful ritual, a vivid image of the call to discipleship, not just to monastic orders. Jesus calls us to life through death, the death of self, self-control, self-life.

That this is the call of Jesus and that His claim on our lives is absolute there can be little argument. But granting that, how do we live that out in our world in our day? What does it mean to follow Jesus today?

We have just been reminded of one of our own generation who put his life on the line and paid the supreme price for his discipleship. Martin Luther King said shortly before he fell from an assassin's bullet:

Every now and then I think about my own death, and I think about my funeral. ...I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long... Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize... Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards... I'd like somebody to mention that day, that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others. I'd like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody...

Say that I was a drum major for justice, say that I was a drum major for peace. That I was a drum major for righteousness, and all of the other shallow things will not matter. I won't have any money to leave behind. I won't have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind.

Martin Luther King, Jr.,
Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia. February 4, 1968

And he did.

Would anyone say he was a failure?

About three years ago Archbishop Romero was likewise gunned down while saying Mass in EL Salvador. He was killed because his call to discipleship led him to take up the cause of the poor and oppressed in that troubled nation.

The moving film, "Gandhi," has reminded us again recently of that great spiritual leader who changed the face of India and he too took an assassin's bullet.

Around the world today many languish in prisons because they have espoused unpopular causes in situations of tyranny. Our world is no stranger to the violent death that pursues those that seek to bring justice and righteousness to bear on the concrete conditions of humankind.

But what of ordinary mortals like you and me living in the safety and security of Western Michigan? What does it mean for us to live from commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord? Sometimes I fear we put discipleship out of reach when we speak of King and Gandhi and of course, Jesus, who remains the preeminent model. One hardly knows where to begin and certainly there are many more things to say than can be dealt with in the compass of this message. Yet we can say some, things.

First, *the call to commitment is the call of the gracious God revealed in Jesus Christ*. There are not two Gods. The God of grace Who in Jesus has touched our world is the only true God and His heart is love and His movement toward us is gracious. In the face of Jesus we have seen into the heart of God.

This is the God of tender compassion Whose love will not give up on His people, Whose judgment is the other side of His love with the intention of calling His people to their senses and to return unto Him.

The call to commitment is issued by Jesus Whose heart was moved with compassion because the people were restless, harassed, like sheep without a shepherd; Jesus Who said, "Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest." The call comes from one Who dealt tenderly with the weak and embraced the sinner, offering unconditional acceptance and a continuing positive regard for persons.

It must be obvious then that total commitment is not the call of a despotic sadist who enjoys seeing people on the rack.

A second thing that comes to mind is that *the call to commitment issued by Jesus is not properly responded to by a heavy religiosity*. Any cursory reading of the Gospels will detect a strong strain of anger in Jesus, anger directed toward the most religious groups of the day. His anger was not a disapproval of religious practice as such but against religious practice as a way of self-righteousness, self-justification before God, religious practice that was outward conformity to structured ritual and ceremony without corresponding inwardness, religious practice that fulfilled institutional demands but was exercised apart from the more important matters of love, justice and mercy.

A third observation I would make is that *the call to commitment transcends institutional structures*. Perhaps I can put it simply this way: Jesus calls persons to life in God, not simply to join the Church. By now you know me well enough to know that I consider the institutional form of the Church as a necessary evil. Spirit needs form and apart from the institutionalization of the Gospel in the community with creeds and rituals and forms of organization, the Gospel would not have reached us. All organized religion involves a set of rites, an ethical code and a body of doctrine. The institutional Church - just like the Judaism of Jesus' day, consists of rituals, ethics and doctrines and these structures become the vehicle by which religious reality is mediated from one generation to the next. By these institutional forms – rituals for worship, rules for conduct, articles of faith for understanding – a religious system is shaped which is the carrier, the mediator, of religious belief and practice.

But when Jesus called to commitment he was calling persons to something more than institutional loyalty. In fact, it was the perception that He was a very great threat to the institution that got Him crucified. There was fear for the Law and the Temple. He dared point beyond Law and Temple to the God toward Whom both Law and Temple pointed, thus relativizing Law and Temple in the face of the absolute demand of God.

Keeping the Law was not an end in itself; rather the Law was God's gift to Israel that they might find fullness of life. The Temple was not an end in itself; rather it

was the place where altar and sacrifice and Priesthood were present to mediate the presence of God to the worshiper and bring him beyond the outward forms into the gracious presence of his God.

That would suggest a fourth comment: *The institutional forms of religious faith and practice fulfill a necessary function in providing the structures by which we find our life's fulfillment in the worship and service of God.* Here I am not saying anything not already mentioned, but I say this explicitly lest I be understood to be cavalier about institutionalized religion. How could I be?

My whole life is spent in the cause of institutional religion because I see in it the only means by which the Truth of God may be conveyed and the worship and service of God cultivated, through which God is glorified and His people led into the fullness of life.

There are rare souls that seem to be able to go it alone, to find the ecstasy of mystical contemplation of God in splendid isolation, but such is not possible for many. And even those who find the vision of God in the solitude of contemplation did not learn of God in a vacuum.

The institution is necessary; its forms and structures are the vehicle upon which the Truth of God is conveyed. They are the signs pointing beyond themselves to the mystery of God and apart from them the vision would soon die.

The institution also provides the social structure within which we are aided in the spiritual quest. We are social beings. We do not live as isolated atoms in the Universe. We are bound together in the bundle of life. We were created for community and we need the support and encouragement of one another. Personal devotion is essential; contemplation in solitude is essential. But such cannot take the place of corporate worship when as one body we are caught up into the presence of God and lose ourselves in the wonder of worship.

The purpose of religious structures then is to mediate the knowledge and experience of God. If we did not have them we would have no access to God but if, having them, we never rise beyond them, we will never experience the mystery of God. Charles Davis says it well:

Religion is the drive toward transcendence, the thrust of man out of and beyond himself, out of and beyond the limited order under which he lives, in an attempt to open himself to the totality of existence and reach unlimited reality and ultimate value. This drive cannot be confined to the observance of a moral code, settling questions of right and wrong within a limited frame of reference. The person who is merely moral knows nothing of the heights and depths of human experience and existence.

Even a religious system set up to mediate the drive toward transcendence cannot contain it. It never fits exactly and at its best is inadequate

precisely because it is in itself limited and relative, not transcendent and absolute. (*The Temptations of Religion*, p. 73)

Again, David writes,

For religion the relativity of any human order of truth and value indicates its mediating function. Its purpose is to become transparent, to lead beyond itself and mediate a transcendent experience.

Summarizing what we have said:

1. The call to commitment is the call of the gracious God revealed in Jesus Christ.
2. The call to commitment issued by Jesus is not properly responded to by a heavy religiosity.
3. The call to commitment transcends institutional structure.
4. The institutional forms of religious faith and practice fulfill a necessary function in providing the structures by which we find our life's fulfillment in the worship and service of God.

If the above statements are true, then it must be evident that the call to *commitment is a serious call to find the highest possible human fulfillment in a life whose first priority is the worship and service of God.*

God has made us for Himself. There is a hunger in the human heart for God. The universality of religion would seem to demonstrate that. To be sure that claim has been disputed and it does seem in our day there are many who live "one-dimensional" lives with no transcendent reference, no worship, no sense of mystery beyond the human and the mundane.

Yet our day would also seem to witness to that hunger for transcendence. We speak of the younger generation "turning East." With the lessening of influence of the traditional Church we have seen a rise of the cults and bizarre expression of religious devotion.

Ernest Becker, the noted scholar in the field of psychoanalysis finds in the human being a longing for the heroic. He sees a universal fear of death but not the fear of extinction so much as extinction without meaning. We want our lives to be significant, to mean something, to find ourselves caught up in something bigger than ourselves. Although he does not profess to be a Christian thinker, he finds great truth in Kierkegaard who found in the Gospel's call to total commitment that which lifted the person out of himself and satisfied his longing for meaning, (cf. *The Denial of Death*).

God calls us to Himself not that He may be enhanced in His Sovereign Rule, but because God is love and love would bestow the best and highest gift on the creature made after His own image.

The truth of Jesus' words has been proven over and over throughout the centuries. To grasp on to one's life is to lose it; to lose one's life in the service of Jesus and the Gospel is to find it.

Thus the call to commitment is an invitation to experience Life at its highest. It is the call of the gracious God in Jesus Christ to experience abundant life.

If that is true, then it must be evident that the successful living out of one's commitment is always threatened from two directions:

- a. From the danger of absolutizing the institution and its form and structure;
- b. From the danger of abandoning the institution or giving it only slight regard.

The first danger is succumbed to by the religious. Jesus' greatest foes were the highly religious: those who absolutized the established form of Jewish faith, who made idols of Temple and Law and ritual.

One can see this so very prevalent in our own day with the upsurge of visibility and volubility of the religious Right. Fundamentalism has become militant in our country as illustrated by the conflict over Creationism and Evolutionism.

One can see it also in the mean-spirited militancy that crusades against abortion and the rights of homosexuals. There is little civility in the debate on issues in which there can certainly be differences of opinion. In great emotional display evidencing deep-seated anger, we see people demonstrate for God and Truth as though they had some corner on the truth. What they have done is absolutize their position, which is limited and relative because it is a human perspective on divine truth, not that truth itself.

One can see the danger of absolutizing the institution where people are controlled and manipulated by religious leaders. Often the implication is if you do not follow my leading or support my program, or serve in my institution, you can have no part in the Kingdom.

But there is danger on the other side, as well. Too many have "progressed" to where they recognize that God and the institutional forms structured to give access to Him are not synonymous and have thus simply written off the institution and the practice of religious life.

One theologian of sorts writes that he doesn't need the institution or the symbols anymore. Growing up as a Scottish Presbyterian, it was all so deeply ingrained "that he can go on without it." Fine. But who will tell his children and provide the

experience in which they might be overwhelmed with the mystery of God? Who will pass the torch of faith and maintain the community of faith for the generations yet unborn?

For many years now at Christ Community I have chosen the difficult path of teaching you that our creedal statements are not the last word, our way of worship is not the only form of true worship, our grasp of the Christian life must always be open to examination.

Our institutional life and structure is not absolute; our program as a congregation is not synonymous with God's perfect will. Yet I have called you to commitment to Christ and the Church and its life here, recognizing we have blinders, we are flawed, and we stand always in need of correction and further insight.

What "sells" today is to reduce complex issues to simple formulas, claiming they are absolute, beating the drums, whipping up the emotions and leading a crusade. Such has not been my style nor the posture of this congregation.

We have sought rather to be both *Civil and Committed*.

Is it possible to recognize the relativity of our grasp of God's Truth and of the structures of our life and worship and yet be totally committed to God through Christ in the life and mission of the Church?

I believe it is. I would hope that I might myself be "Exhibit A." I believe in what we are about here. I commit myself unreservedly to it, even though I recognize the flawed nature of all we do and are.

This is the kind of commitment to which I call you. Spirit needs form. Faith needs structure.

The Gospel of Christ will be perpetuated from one generation to another only if we maintain the community of faith, flawed though its every expression is, relative though its grasp of Truth may be, partial though its obedience always is.

The cause of the Kingdom of God is carried on in the world by people like us for whom God is a priority, who, having found Him gracious, find the fullest experience of being human in the worship and service of His Name.

We have striven never to come off as laying on you heavy duty and obligation. Rather, we have sought to lead you into the joy of losing yourself in the service of God. The Gospel paradox is true - greedily grasp your life to yourself and lose it; give your life away for Jesus' sake and find it.

You don't have to do anything. God loves you anyway. But in failing to find yourself, your gifts and energies in the employ of God, you lose out on the deepest joy of being human.

God's claim on you is absolute; Jesus' call to commitment is total, because God being the fountain of love would give Himself to you as you offer yourself to Him in response to His redeeming grace.

Thus I set before you the key lifeline: Commitment. Living from commitment is to live fully, richly, deeply. It is the abundant life.