

Costly Obedience

From the Lenten sermon series: The Human Face of God

Text: John 12:27-28

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
Lent II, March 15, 1987

Transcription of the spoken sermon

Now my soul is in turmoil, and what am I to say? "Father, save me from this hour?" No, it was for this that I came to this hour. Father, glorify Thy name...

John 12: 27-28

Jesus' life has made its impact down through the centuries, and it's an amazing fact that he has changed the landscape of the world, given the limited years that he lived and the limited space that he ever occupied, the fact that he never wrote a book, he never led an army, he never really intended to found an institution, and yet the life of Jesus has so impacted the world that the world has never been the same. In our Lenten pilgrimage we are trying to find the contours of the life of Jesus in order that we might learn the contours of the life of a contemporary disciple. What does it mean today to follow Jesus?

Next Sunday I will take that text from the first letter of Peter where we are encouraged to follow in his steps. He has given us an example that we should follow in his steps. To lay the groundwork for that, I want to say this morning that *Jesus was what he was because of his intention at the very beginning of his life fully to follow the will of God.*

Jesus' obedience was intentional from the beginning. The Gospels were written after Easter, and because of that, they give us the impression that Jesus knew more than he knew, and understood more than he understood in the days of his flesh as he carried out his ministry leading up to his final crisis, crucifixion and resurrection. The Gospels, because they were written after the fact, after Easter, in the light of his victory, give us an impression that Jesus was more aware of what God was doing through him than I believe is justified. If we read the Gospels carefully, we will see that Jesus lived a genuinely human existence, one day at a time, having no clue as to the morrow, and what he understood about what was transpiring or what was building up in the future, he knew not because of some supernatural knowledge; he knew it because he was a sensitive human being that could see the outcome of the life he was living would end in the violence with

which his life finally ended. But, the magnificence of his life, the inspiring nature of the narrative of his days is the fact that Jesus with an early intention continued through to his death fully obedient to the will of God as he understood it. I want you to see this morning that it was a costly obedience, but an obedience that calls us, likewise, intentionally to follow the vision and the dream and our understanding of God's claim upon our lives.

Jesus intended from the beginning fully to follow the will of God. In Matthew, Mark and Luke we have at the inauguration of Jesus' ministry, his baptism and then his temptation. You will find in the first three Gospels that those two events are back to back, and I think that you can reduce the temptations in the wilderness, which Jesus encountered immediately after his baptism and immediately prior to his ministry, to the temptations to become a kind of political messiah. The temptation to Jesus was to exercise his gifts and his charisma, whatever that may have been, in the cause of gaining worldly power, perhaps for noble ends, nonetheless, to carve out for himself a platform of power which would get him influence among the rank and file of humankind. Jesus said no to that temptation.

John's Gospel does not record the temptation narrative for us. But in John's Gospel, it is very interesting that we get a clear idea that Jesus, from the beginning of his ministry, had an intention to live by a vision, that he was claimed by the Father and that he would follow the Father's will at any cost. In the second chapter of John's Gospel, his first miracle at the wedding of Cana, his mother came up to him and said, "Son, they're running out of wine," and he said, "Woman, don't bother me because my hour has not come." That is a characteristic note in John's Gospel. He doesn't give us the temptation narrative by which the other Gospel writers let us know from the very beginning Jesus wrestled with who he was to be and what God was calling him to be, but John does let us know that early on Jesus had a sense of who he was to be, and that his life was claimed in a very special way to work out the will of his father in the proclamation and bringing in of the kingdom of God, that is, the rule of God. So, he said to his mother, "My hour has not yet come."

If you go on to the seventh chapter of John's Gospel, you will find them saying to him, "Are you going to go up to the Feast in Jerusalem? If you're doing all of these things, don't do them in secret. Go and do them in the public arena." Jesus responded to them once again, "My time has not yet come." Jesus had a sense of being on a mission. He was living by a vision. He was consciously claimed by the Father, and he was moving deliberately to allow the Father's will to be worked out in his life, but he did not precipitate the action; he did not take matters into his own hands. He simply continued day by day, week by week, month by month to teach and to preach, to heal and to be a sign of the rule of God that had now come into the arena of human history.

And then, one day Andrew came to him, because Phillip had come to Andrew, because some Greeks had come to Phillip. Phillip's name is Greek, and he spoke Greek. Some Greeks were in Jerusalem for the Passover. They had come to Phillip and they had said, "Sir, we would like to see Jesus." And Phillip got Andrew and Andrew went to Jesus and he said, "There are some people that want to see you. Some Greeks." It's as though that triggered in Jesus the recognition that the time was coming now when the kingdom of God would break out of the limits of Israel and be for all people. The coming of the Greeks seemed to trigger in Jesus' mind the recognition that now events were ready to break out on a wider front. And so, in the 23rd verse of John, chapter 12, Jesus said, "The hour has come."

Jesus said, "The hour has come for the son of man to be glorified."

And then he goes on to speak that parable that said unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it abides alone, and so forth. There are Bible scholars who study the passage who believe that perhaps originally verse 23 was followed immediately by verse 27, and it makes good sense. Let me read it for you.

Then Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the son of man to be glorified. Now my soul is in turmoil, and what am I to say? 'Father, save me from this hour?' No, it was for this that I came to this hour. Father, glorify Thy name."

The in-between verses are probably a commentary on what this meant for Jesus to come to this hour, but it's very possible that originally he said, "Now is the hour. Now my soul is in turmoil. What shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, for this hour came I forth. Father, glorify Thy name."

The hour had not come at Cana of Galilee. The hour had not come when the Feast of Tabernacles was held at Jerusalem early on. But, when the Greeks made inquiry, something triggered in Jesus, and he said, "Now is the hour." And when he recognized that the hour was here, he received that recognition with fear and trembling. Again, John does not tell us about the agony of Gethsemane which we read in Matthew, Mark and Luke. John doesn't tell us about that anguished prayer, "Father, if it be possible to remove this cup from me..." But, John gives a hint of the very same kind of anguish in this context where Jesus recognizes now that things are to the boiling point, and he approaches that moment with turmoil of soul. The word behind turmoil is a word that speaks of distress, of a wrenching of the soul, and in that agony, Jesus had to say, "Now will I cop out? Now will I seek to be spared from the moment? No, no. This is what it's been about. This is why I came. Father, glorify Thy name!"

That obedience which culminated in the agony of Gethsemane where he continued to struggle and anguish and pray, but said, "Thy will be done," culminated in the cross where, in the midst of the darkness, he cried out, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" That intention to obey enabled him

to stay the course and through fear and trembling, with the agony and anguish and tears, fully to follow the will of God. And I submit to you that that was costly obedience, but that it was in such costly obedience that Jesus not only was true to God, but because he was true to God, was true to himself and thereby has become such a magnificent model in the midst of our own human struggles.

Jesus rightly has caught the fascination of the world. When you think of Jesus, you must be impressed with the power with which he persevered in the mastery of his own life. A self-mastery that was a consequence of being mastered by God.

As I deal with people, and as I reflect on my own life, the time that we're most disgusted with ourselves is when we sell ourselves short. The time that we have the lowest self-esteem and sense of self-worth, the time that we really put ourselves down is the time when we have failed to be true to ourselves, failed to be true to the person that we believe God calls us to be. And Jesus is such an inspiring person because he lived with that self-mastery that enabled him to be a totally free human being in an age much as ours that was always trying to press him into another mold.

Jesus didn't fit anywhere. He didn't fit with the establishment, the Sadducees from whom the High Priests and Chief Priests came. They were collaborators with the occupying Roman power. Now, a Sadducee could come here this morning and could make a good case for collaboration. A Sadducee could stand before us this morning and suggest that there would be no bloodshed, that there would be the preservation of the Temple, and the tradition of the fathers, and there would be a certain tranquility in society if only that independent, rambunctious Jewish spirit would rest and simply cooperate with Roman intention.

Some of us are collaborators. I think I probably would have joined the Sadducees. I think I probably would have rationalized away the radical claims of Jesus by saying, "Look, it's only reasonable, it makes sense simply to play ball. There is a gray area in which one could cooperate without really betraying oneself."

Not Jesus. Jesus had a sense that in him God was calling for a radical decision, and he refused to play ball with the established religious authority, and he became a terrible threat to those who were in power, for the thing that they were interested in more than anything else was the status quo that would enable them to maintain their relatively good position in that society. Jesus didn't fit.

But he didn't fit with the Zealots, either. There was a Zealot party. They were the radical revolutionaries. If the Sadducees were far to the right, in their conservatism, the Zealots were far to the extreme left in their zealotry. They wanted to foster an armed rebellion against the Roman power; they were all fire in their eyes and in their hearts, and there was a time when they saw the tremendous gifts of Jesus as being the possible key to leading the popular revolt that would finally throw off the Roman power. Jesus said to them, "Look, the

problem is not Rome. The problem is not some external authority. The problem is that you are a slave to your own soul. You are not free inside. Real freedom cannot come through some form of political liberation. Real freedom is a spiritual matter, a decision of the heart." And maybe Judas, who was probably a member of that band, finally betrayed Jesus because Jesus refused to lead the popular rebellion.

He didn't fit with the monastic communities of the day. We know now that out in the wilderness there were monastic communities, the Essene community, for example, that were very meticulous in the keeping of the law and the rule of holiness. Jesus didn't leave society, he didn't repudiate the world, and he didn't withdraw and pursue an inner spiritual retreat, which let the world go on its way without involvement. Jesus was not a spiritual pietist that gave up on the world. I suppose he would have granted that it was all right for those who felt called to be such, but not for him.

And he, of course, was not one of the Pharisees who made an accommodation with the world, who tried to live according to the law, a legalism in the midst of a society that they wrote off with their superior self-righteousness over against the masses. Jesus opened his heart and his arms to all kinds of people. He was not afraid of being tainted by his contact with the ordinary person.

He didn't fit anywhere, not with the Sadducees, nor with the Pharisees, nor with the Essenes, nor with the Zealots. There was that in Jesus that offended everybody. He didn't toe any party line. He would not line up with any ideological position.

What magnificent freedom – living by a vision that was his vision, living before the face of God, freely offering obedience as he understood the will of God. What power! What freedom!

Jesus ended up on a cross, but he didn't lose his soul. Jesus ended up crucified, but he never had those dismal days like you and I do when we fail to live according to our best selves, and our highest vision. He, from the beginning, had an intention fully to follow the will of God, and it got him through the days of his ministry through the conflict and the struggle of those days, and when he came to the crisis, he didn't collapse, but he maintained that posture. It was a costly obedience, for it cost him his life, because he had no political action group, he had no lobby which could go to the powers that be to get him off the hook. It cost him his life, but he never lost his life. He died, but he never lost his soul. Isn't he inspiring? Isn't that magnificent?

There was a person born in the early part of the century in France by the name of André Trocmé. Trocmé was born into a rather well to do family and had a very privileged childhood. Early on his mother was killed in an auto accident, and he lived in a French Huguenot, French Reformed home in which his father's spirituality was very quiet. But there was so much feeling in André that he could

never really let loose until he joined a youth organization in France in his village, in which he was exposed to a very personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and in that experience came himself to a very personal relationship. As a young man, he began to be shaped by the vision of Jesus.

One day, during the First World War, his village being occupied by German soldiers, a German soldier said to him, "Would you like some bread? Are you hungry?" He said, "No, I'm not hungry, and if I were, I wouldn't take bread from you because you are the enemy." And the soldier said to him, "No, I'm not the enemy. You don't understand who I am. I'm a Christian." And André said to him, "My brother is fighting in the war, and you would kill my brother." He said, "No, I would not kill your brother." André, said, "But you're a soldier." He said, "Yes, but I don't carry a gun. They allow me, as a telegraph officer, to do my duty without carrying a gun because Jesus has said that I must not kill." The genuineness of this German soldier so impressed André that he took him to his youth organization where the German soldier shared his witness for Jesus. That witness of that German soldier made such a deep impression on him, the German soldier having come to his conviction because of his relationship to Jesus Christ, that André could never get that out of his mind and it started him on the road to pacifism. Eventually, Trocmé became a pastor in a rather poor French village. He was leading a men's Bible study group one day and he found himself saying, without having thought ahead of time about saying it,

"If Jesus really walked upon this earth, why do we keep treating him as if he were a disembodied, impossible, idealistic, ethical theory? If he was a real man, then the Sermon on the Mount was made for people on this earth and, if he existed, God has shown us in flesh and blood what goodness is for flesh and blood people."

There were about ten men there, and they heard him say this, and it was like the spirit of God illumined those words. They all fell to their knees and asked God to enable them to emulate Jesus, and that was the beginning of what was an awakening, a spiritual awakening in the whole area. André Trocmé eventually became the French Huguenot pastor in a little village in Southern France, Le Chambon. During the Second World War, he led his whole village to become a refuge for refugees, especially Jews fleeing the Nazi power. The thing that stirred and triggered and empowered the life and the vision of Trocmé was his determination early on in his life not to be separated from Jesus. What this meant to him was that God had shown mankind how precious man was to him by taking the form of a human being and coming down to help human beings find their deepest happiness. Trocmé believed also that Jesus had demonstrated that love for mankind by dying for us on the cross and if these beliefs sounded too mysterious, he knew that Jesus had himself refused to do violence to mankind, refused to harm the enemies of his precious existence as a human being. In short, Jesus was for Trocmé the embodied forgiveness of sin and staying close to Jesus

meant always being ready to forgive your enemies instead of torturing and killing them.

Trocmé led the village of Le Chambon, first of all, to a passive resistance to the French Vichy government that was the puppet of Nazi power. But then the day came when they finally had to take their stand, and it came when an official of the Vichy government came to visit the village in order to celebrate Vichy France, the Nazi-dominated France at that time. Some students of Trocmé's school gave the official a statement which said, "We have heard what happened in Paris where 28,000 Jews have just been rounded up and deported and sent to their deaths, and we want you to know now if you ever come here and ask us to reveal the presence of Jewish people in our midst, we will refuse." And, of course, the official reacted strongly, finally threatening Trocmé, saying, "If we don't get the Jews, we'll get you."

It's a marvelous story recorded in the book, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, by Phillip Hallie. It's a story of how one person was impacted by a vision of Jesus and determined to live his life according to that vision, and who had a very fruitful ministry. During the years '40 to '44, he led a village of 3,000 to save the lives of 6,000 men, women and children.

I am sure that it is only in the concrete living of life that we can see the outworking of good and evil. We keep telling the story of Jesus because Jesus inspires us to follow in an obedience like his. And I would simply say in closing that each one of us must determine what Jesus is calling him or her to be. My vision and your vision need not be the same. I'm not at all convinced that we are all called to respond in the same way. I am convinced of this - that to the extent that one is captivated by Jesus, that will stamp one's character, and then, it is the challenge of one's life to live out of that vision.

It'll never happen, unless it is one's own vision. You cannot take this from my lips and simply adapt it to your life. You cannot do something as an external norm pressed upon you from the outside. We could argue about all these things; we could debate about Trocmé's philosophy, the philosophical and theological ideas expressed. People have debated these issues down through the centuries, but that is simply to create a smokescreen. When one is captivated by the vision, then if one follows the vision, one may lose one's life, but one will not betray one's soul. Jesus fully followed the will of God, and he got a cross. So to live is not to ensure success, not to guarantee security, not necessarily to come into a tranquil and serene life. But so to live, is to live nobly, so to live is to live heroically; so to live is to live humanly.

Jesus never faltered, in spite of the turmoil and the wrenching of soul. He fully followed the will of God. It was a costly obedience. And he died without a clue. He trusted God in the darkness of death as he had followed him in the days of his life, but you and I know that the darkness of Good Friday was dispersed by the

light of Easter Sunday, and that when one is faithful within history, the God beyond history will give His "Yes" and vindicate such a life.

Jesus calls us to find that vision which is really our own, and then to be true to ourselves in the living out of our life before the face of God. That really is living so far beyond the shabbiness and the shoddiness of so much of our discipleship. Jesus – inspiring model of obedience!

Reference:

Phillip Hallie. *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of the Village of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There*. HarperCollins, 1979.