

June 30, 2019

Time to Go

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts and all that we say and do be only acceptable to you, oh Lord our God. Amen.

It is said that refined, sensitive people always know when it's time to go. Most of us probably have many friends afflicted with what psychologists call termination issues. They just can't seem to hang up a phone, they can't seem to say goodbye at the door, and they can't leave an email unresponded to.

This reminds me a Southern goodbye. Have any of you heard of that, a Southern goodbye? It begins in the room where you've been visiting with people, and the people get ready to leave. So, they get up together, and they stop on the way to talk and visit. Then they get to the door, and they stop, and they visit some more. Then they get out on the doorstep and stop and visit again. Then they go all the way to the car and close the door and wave to them goodbye. That's a Southern goodbye. These people cannot stop talking or even make room in a conversation for the person who's forced to endure this flood of their words. There's a sincere need of a proper sense of boundaries, of limits. And it's unmistakable in the world we live in, the world of Facebook, tweets, and text messaging. For too many of us, it is not breaking up that's hard to do, it's just signing off and leaving.

In today's gospel, there is some difficult saying when we first hear someone say he wants to follow Jesus wherever he goes. Jesus replies this clear thing here, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." And then another, Jesus issues the invitation to follow, says ... This one we'd expect of a good child to say, "Lord, first let me go bury my father." Jesus does not respond positively. He says, "Let the dead bury the dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Another prospect accepts the invitation, but also has a perfectly reasonable request. "Let me first say goodbye to my family." After these strange exchanges between Jesus and followers, he says, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Now, I have never plowed a day in my life, but I have been blessed as a young boy to watch my uncle and older cousins plowing in their field, in their farm. Obviously, that's a long time ago, because tractors were just coming into being at those times. My uncle said, "This is the best way to do it." And he was slow in getting a tractor, he later did. But he like a mule with the help of blinders never ever diverted his eyes from the straight row that he was plowing. In fact, one time he corrected me for doing something along the side that distracted him and the mule. I never did that again though. The rows had to be perfectly straight for cultivation, for harvesting, for getting the maximum yield out of the crop. There also seemed to be with my uncle and others

who did that, a sense of pride in their work. But once he set his hand to the plow, there could be no looking back.

The message is clear, very clear when we hear our Lord speaking. He says, "The kingdom will not wait. A disciple must know when it is time to go." Most of us are more like those hapless folks who run along up to Jesus along the journey, and they make this pledge of allegiance, "I'll follow you wherever you go." With no thought to how radical that journey really might be. Or we make conditional statements, "I'll follow later, but first, but only if, but only one condition." Jesus exposes these false declarations of discipleship for what they are, and he rejects them all. Authentic followers do not look back. They look forward. We can only head into kingdom territory if we first abandon our allegiance to those smaller, smaller goals in our lives.

Today's reading asks us to launch out in new directions of faithfulness to God. They ask us to believe great things and trust God to work creatively in our own freedom. That's what Paul talked about was the freedom that we've been given, freedom from the limits of legalistic traditions, freedom from the guilt and shame, but freedom for life-changing, life-renewing behaviors in our lives. The way of the Spirit opens us to the world and frees us from ego and self-centered individualism and inspires us to bring greater unity, greater community to our world. We need to let our values, those things that we really hold and cherish, the values shape our social, our political, our civil involvement in this world. Our freedom as followers of Jesus Christ is not revealed in phrases such as, "Don't tread on me," or, "It is my life, and I can do what I want with it," or, "It is my property and my money." There's nothing that is ours alone. We have never earned anything in our lives. Only God does that.

Accordingly, Paul says these are ways of death, because they destroy relationships, and they destroy people in communities. So, we need to balance individual desires with the whole in mind, the care of others, the care of those in the whole, for the good of the whole [inaudible 00:07:30]. The Christian life affirms that, that we should love our neighbor as ourselves. So, as we explore our destiny in this world, as we begin to achieve and build our legacy, we need to remember that creating healthy communities is just as important as our own personal well-being. We need to go from individual and community loyalty to world loyalty. Few of us, few of us will ever sacrifice everything for the kingdom of God. And we know that.

And we cannot take the bite out of Jesus' words, for we need to continually ask ourselves as we go about our responsibilities, our regular duties, check our bank accounts, drive our children to school, pick up our grandchildren, and act as responsible members of society. We have to continually ask, "Are we looking beyond our own self or family interest? Do we see God's way of life in our way of life?" We need to be willing to adjust our course, our pathway to be faithful in our time, in our place, in economics, spiritual practices, congregational community loyalty.

Yes, we all have obligations and responsibilities, and we need to affirm our responsibilities to our families and our loved ones. The kingdom of God is found in everyday relationships of faithfulness, forgiveness, support, and healing. Think in terms of ethics, integrity, honesty, morals, social responsibility, personal empowerment. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we love God by loving those around us. Above all else, that makes us human, is that which makes us human is the love in our lives. All of God's hopes for us are summed up in the single command that Paul reminded us of, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Amen.

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