

September 3, 2017

Discipleship is Not an Easy Road to Travel

PRAYER

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Heavenly Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. AMEN

SERMON

Outside the entrance to the National Civil War Museum is a statue called “Moment of Mercy.” That statue is depicted on the front of the bulletin this morning. And the statue commemorates an incredible act of mercy and compassion that occurred at the battle of Fredericksburg, Virginia. The battle of Fredericksburg was one of the longest or biggest and bloodiest battles of the Civil War. And in its main assault, nearly 60,000 union troops went up against the confederate forces under the command of General Stonewall Jackson. And the assault was so intense, it threatened the right flank of Jackson’s army. And it would have succeeded had it not been for a powerful counterattack had it not been for his troops and the lack of reinforcements of the Union troops. As a result, there were many casualties. Over 9,000 soldiers were killed, wounded, or missing in action.

Because of the layout of the battlefield, the union soldiers who were killed or wounded were strewn out in front of the confederate forces. And making matters worse for those wounded soldiers was the change that was occurring in the weather. It was getting very, very bad. Snow started falling as night came and temperatures dropped well below freezing. It was simply a miserable situation. And making matters worse for soldiers on both sides was hearing the cries for help from those Union soldiers who lay on the battlefield. It was agonizing for the troops to hear those cries for help, hour after hour.

Finally, Richard Kirkland, a 19 – year old Confederate Sargant from South Carolina could take it no longer. So, he approached his commanding officer and asked if he could go to help those Union soldiers that had been wounded. At first his commanding officer said no, but seeing the passion, the heart, the courage in Kirkland, he finally relented. But he agreed only on one condition that when Kirkland went out to help them, he could not carry a white flag. There could be nothing that would suggest any kind of surrender on the part of the Confederate forces.

So immediately, Kirkland went and he gathered as many canteens as he could and filled them with water. And then he climbed over that stone wall protecting the confederate troops. At first, shots rang out from the Union positions. But as soon as the Union commander saw what was happening he yelled out, “Don’t shoot that man. He’s too brave to die.” For the next hour and a half, Kirkland went and tended to the wounded, comforting them as best he could. Giving them water. Trying to make them comfortable. And for an hour and a half there was absolute silence as soldiers from both sides looked on. Toward the end, in one last act of mercy, Kirkland

took his own coat and placed it over a Union soldier. And then as he went back to his own side, there were cheering from the troops on both sides. And he climbed back over the wall and resumed his duties as a confederate soldier. A little over a year later, young Sargent Kirkland was killed at the Battle of Chickamauga near Chattanooga, Tennessee. But in spite of his death, his legacy of mercy and compassion lives on to this day.

This morning in Paul's letter to the Romans, we hear Paul giving us some practical application of the teaching of Jesus regarding how we are to live as followers of Jesus. How we are to live as his disciples. Paul says, "Let's be genuine. Do what is good. Hate what is evil." And he goes on to say, "To be compassionate. To be good to those, love those that persecute you." And then he goes on to say something that is really startling. "If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he's thirsty, give him something to drink." You know so often the teaching of Jesus is so counter to the realities of the world.

Jesus says love your enemies. Really Jesus, you want us to love our enemies. Now, bless those who persecute you, right. And if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn and give them your left cheek, sure ummhm. We hear Jesus saying this and we would really like to say to him, "Jesus, get real. Living like that can get to killed." To which Jesus says, "If you want to be my followers, if you want to be my disciples. Take up your cross and follow me." Wow!

Following Jesus or doing God's will in the world is not an easy road to travel. We see that in the life of Jeremiah the prophet in that first lesson. You know, he's experiencing rejection because he is doing what God has called him to do. And so, he prays out to God that God would just wipe out those who are contending with him. Those who are fighting him every step of the way. God just wipe them out. But when he makes that prayer, the answer God gives him is not the answer Jeremiah is looking for. Because rather than saying, "Okay, I will wipe them out and make the road you travel as my prophet, as my spokesman. I'll make that a very easy road." Instead of saying that God makes a promise, "I will be with you and I will save you."

God doesn't promise to make it easy. God doesn't promise to take away everything that makes it difficult for us to live the way that he wants us to live. He simply makes a promise, "I will be with you and I will save you." And it's that promise and that promise alone that gives us the hope and courage to live the lives of discipleship we are called to live.

Now in the gospel when Jesus says you know, "Those who follow me, if you want to follow me take up your cross." Peter says, "God forbid that this should happen." You know we are so like Peter. You know, on our good days we are the rock upon which Christ builds his church. But most of the time Jesus is saying, "Get behind me Satan. You don't get it and all you're doing is getting in the way." But the good news is we are a forgiven people even though we fail to live up to God's expectations in our lives, we are forgiven. While we may give up on God, God NEVER gives up on us. And that's good news. God NEVER gives up on us. God's promise is, "I will be with you and I will save you."

That's the promise of God that gives us the courage to try to as best as we can to live out the teaching of Jesus. To live out what he calls us to do and to be as his people. We may never do an act of mercy or compassion as great of that as Sergeant Kirkland. We may never do something so bold and dramatic that the world stops and looks in awe at what we are doing. But we can do little acts of compassion. Make a difference in the lives of people who are struggling. People who are hurting. People who need the blessing of our help.

Some years ago, there was a movie made about Mother Theresa and there was a scene in there and a quote from her that has made an indelible impression on me. She was with her sisters of her Missionaries of Mercy in Beirut, Lebanon. In the midst of all of that strife and conflict and Civil War that was taking place there. And she was in a make-shift hospital where they brought some children who had been kind of trapped inside a hospital inside the main part of the city that had been bombed. They went in and brought them out to this make-shift place and showed her with some of these children. And it showed her getting a cloth and getting it wet. And then cleaning the rails of a hospital bed and as she was cleaning the rails of that bed, she said this she said, "No act of love is too small. Because the moment we give it to God it becomes infinite." I love that.

"No act of love we do in the name of Jesus is too small. Because the moment we give it to God it becomes infinite." We have a chance to share the compassion of God's love in Christ in small ways. I don't think any of us are going to go over to Texas or Louisiana and just clean everything up and make things all wonderful for the lives of those who have been devastated by Hurricane Harvey.

We can do little acts of love that will bring blessings to the lives of those who have been devastated. We can support the work of the church as it reaches out with the love of Jesus. To help those who have been so devastated by this storm. And as we share our small acts of compassion they become infinite because we have given them to God. And in the giving of our acts of love, we are blessed. Because we see the blessing it brings to the lives of those we help. You see, it's blessing upon our lives as well.

PRAYER

May that peace of God which passes all understanding keep your heart and your mind in Christ Jesus. AMEN