

15TH Sunday After Pentecost, September 9, 2007

ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY

The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Rector

"All or Nothing?"

AN OLD FABLE

There's is an old fable about an Emperor who many years ago gathered together the wisest people in his kingdom and said, "I want you to assemble all of the great knowledge of our civilizations so that it will be available for future generations."

They worked many years before returning with ten bound volumes. The Emperor glanced at the stack of books frowned and said, "Too long." The sages scurried back to work and did not return until they had edited the ten volumes down to one. However, when they handed it to the Emperor he refused to open it. He said, "It is still too lengthy." Over the next two years, the sages condensed the book into one paragraph. The emperor still wasn't satisfied.

Finally, these wise people came back with a single sentence inscribed on an index card. The Emperor read it, smiled, and said, "This is perfect. Now future generations will understand why we have been so successful. All the genius we possess is contained in this brilliant solitary phrase." The sentence read: "There is no free lunch."

HATE MOM AND DAD?

The truth is whether you eat dog food or filet mignon depends on how high of a price you're willing to pay for the meal. And in today's Gospel lesson from Luke, Jesus speaks about the high cost of following Him. He gives us what many would call three hard sayings 1) ***"If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple."*** 2) ***"Whoever does not carry his own cross cannot be My disciple."*** 3) ***"No one can be My disciple unless he gives up all his possessions."*** There are three areas that Jesus is talking about here – our relationships, our own personal lives and our possessions.

Some people look at these verses and say, "Ah, see Jesus is contradicting Himself," or "If we really take Jesus literally than we need to give up everything we own." Let me just say that such statements stem from ignorance. It's an example of someone who has no clue about how we interpret Scripture.

The real difficulty with this passage is not in understanding what Jesus is saying, the real difficulty is in doing it. Of course, before we can do it, we need to understand what Jesus means. So what is Jesus saying?

First of all we need to understand what Jesus is not saying. He is not saying that we are to hate anybody. Indeed, Jesus teaches us not only to love one another, but He tells us to love our enemies, as well. So we know that's not Jesus' intention. In fact, what makes this clear is His words to hate even our own lives. Obviously, Jesus does not want us to hate life. God's Word teaches us that God is the author and giver of life. We're made in God's image. Who is it that wants us to hate life? Not God but the Devil. Satan comes to lie, kill and destroy. He wants us to hate life. And he does it by trying to

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instill doubt and fear and despair. He wants us to hate our lives so that we will either turn to fleshly lusts or even take our own lives through suicide.

No, Jesus is not singling out our family members or our own life for hate. Rather, Jesus is doing two things. First, He is using extreme language to get our attention - so we can remember the message. Such language causes one to do a double take – when we hear it, we think, “Say what?” It helps the hearer remember. Second, He wants us to remember because this is the most important truth about following God, namely, when compared to our love for God, our love for others must be “zero” in comparison. For example, if you ever took Calculus, you know that if a number has as its denominator the symbol for infinity, that number becomes zero. It does not matter how big the numerator is, doesn’t matter if it has a million zeros attached. The number is zero because it (the numerator) can never come close to infinity as the denominator. In the same way our love for God must take total precedence over our love for anyone or anything else in this life. Moreover, since everything is ultimately the Lord’s, and we don’t own anything, we must always be ready to surrender it all to Him on a daily basis.

WE ARE STEWARDS

You see the truth is we are only stewards. God owns it all, He is just lending it to us to use. And we are stewards for only a short time; of our children 18 years maybe 20; of our work 35 years maybe 40; our homes, 40 year maybe 50; of our bodies, 70 years, or if we are blessed may 80 or 90 years. And then it all goes back to God or someone else.

The Bible says it is required of stewards that one be found faithful (**1 Cor. 4:2**). A steward doesn’t have rights, a steward has responsibilities. And so Jesus is telling us that we are going to be good stewards we better always check with the owner. And sometimes the owner is going to want us to give up what He has given us for the sake of His Kingdom. And that means surrendering our relationships, our possessions, even our own lives for the sake of the Gospel. Like the old spiritual “I surrender all,” we need to have the attitude which says “I surrender all.” And that means everything we have must take second place to the work of the Lord. Jesus said, “*Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness?*” That is what really matters.

Does that mean we have to literally give away everything we have away? No. Notice how this is different from what he told the rich young ruler, Jesus told the rich young ruler that he must sell all his possessions. That was because the rich young ruler was basing his relationship with God on works. Jesus said, “*If you really want to be good, then sell your possessions and give to the poor and come follow Me.*” And if you really want to follow me with the other disciples then you will need to get rid of what you have.

Now many of the disciples had to literally give up all their possessions to follow Jesus. Certainly that was the case for the apostles. But simply having money and possessions is not the issue. In fact earlier in Luke’s Gospel we find that there were some wealthy women who were supporting the work of the Gospel out of their means (**Lk. 8:3**). Obviously, they had not sold all their possessions or had given all their property away, otherwise they would not be able to support the work of the Lord on an on going basis.

COUNTING THE COST

So it may mean giving it all up literally, or it may mean keeping our possessions but surrendering them in our hearts. The truth is if we are to follow Jesus it will cost us something. That's why Jesus gives the illustration of the builder who prepares to build a building and the king who prepares for battle. You have to count the cost. You have to be willing to sacrifice if you are going to accomplish anything in life and it is no different with following Jesus.

Now as you might suspect, when Christ was on earth, many people were following Him because of what He could do for them. But many were following Him only for that reason. They weren't following Him because of who He was.

Jesus is letting people know that if you want to follow Him, there is a cost involved and that cost may even involve their own lives. That's why Jesus also said that if you want to follow you must be willing to take up your cross. The cross at that time was the symbol of crucifixion, a tortuous way the Romans used to execute people. Jesus is saying then that you must be willing to die for Him. That, my friends, is true devotion. It's all or nothing.

And God does the same thing for us. He gave up His Son for us. He did it to show us His love, but He also did it to give us an example of what following Him is all about. Remember Abraham? God blessed Abraham with a son, Isaac. And God told him to take his son and sacrifice him on Mt. Moriah. Why did God do this? Again to remind Isaac and all of us that we need to be willing to give it all up for the Lord. But also to prepare the world for when God gave it all up for us. ***“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son that whoever believes in Him, should not perish but have eternal life.” (Jn. 3:16).***

THE BLESSING OF GIVING IT ALL UP

But the good news is that though there may be a cost, God promises us a blessing when we sacrifice for Him. Do you remember what Jesus said would happen to His disciples who left everything to follow Him?

Mark 10:29: “Truly I tell you there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, but that he shall receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life. But many who are first, will be last; and the last first.”

Jesus said in **Lk. 6:38: “Give and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over.”** But giving always costs something.

I am reminded of the story of Gary Kildall. In 1973, he was responsible for writing the first popular operating system for personal computers, named CP/M. IBM approached Kildall in 1980 about developing the operating system for IBM PCs. But Kildall snubbed IBM officials at a crucial meeting. The day IBM came calling, he chose to fly his new airplane. The frustrated IBM executives instead turned to Bill Gates, founder of a small software company called Microsoft, and his operating system named MS-DOS. Today Gates is worth over 50 billion dollars. Of Kildall, who has since died, author Paul Carroll says, “He was a smart guy who didn't realize how big the operating system market would become.”

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Friends, when it comes to God's Kingdom we often fail to realize just how important it is and how big it will become for us one day. God comes calling with an offer of a lifetime, but we find other things to do. And we miss out on His blessing because we were not first willing to give back to Him.

The truth is God will bless us as we give of ourselves, as we give of our time and as we give of our resources for sake of the Gospel and His Kingdom. Who are the people we remember most? The people who have taken the time to be with us and to do things for us and with us. And when we start giving we impact the world around us. And this starts in our families, it continues in the Church, and then should overflow into the community. That's how we change our world.

But it is on God's terms, not our own. And it begins when we recognize that everything belongs to the Lord, and that we are only stewards. We are stewards of our bodies, our family relationships, and our relationships at church, work, and school.

HAVE YOU SURRENDERED ALL?

Now let me just say that none of us have had our lives threatened for being followers of Christ. That day could come. But we all face the challenge of putting God first when it comes to our daily lives, our relationships with others and our possessions.

When it comes to relationships it means letting people know you are a believer, and doing what is right. This may break up such relationships but know this for every relationship you lose God is going to bless you with many others. Because we belong to a spiritual family much greater than any of our earthly families. Does it mean walking away from our responsibilities from our own earthly families. Absolutely not. God does not want us to shirk our responsibilities in order to do something we think God is calling us to do.

When it comes to our possessions, the best way to let God know all that is his is simply following the tithe; giving at least ten percent to the Lord's work. The sad truth is that the majority of Christians do not tithe. I was listening to a message given by Chuck Swindoll the other day and he said that the average rate of giving by Christians is 2.8% of their income. Can you imagine what would happen if Christians tithed? People aren't just unwilling to step up to the plate, they are unwilling to put it in the plate!

So my friends the difficulty is not in understanding what Jesus is saying or even remembering what Jesus is saying, the difficulty is in doing what Jesus is saying. And yet, if we are to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ, there is no other choice. It is all or nothing.

So on this day may we take an inventory of our lives and ask ourselves the question? Are we willing to give it all up for the Lord? Are we keeping the Lord first in our life, in our relationships, and in what we have? We can only answer that question ourselves. God knows. It's between Him and us. It is all or nothing.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN!