

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, November 19, 2006

Sermon Text: Mark 13:1-8

I warn you as I warned my 8:28 congregation that I know it seems unlikely for me to be able to pull together a bit of Thanksgiving, a bit of Commitment Sunday, and the destruction of the temple into one short sermon. I'm going to try.

The story is told that when Sherman marched to the sea a little old lady refused to leave her home in rural Georgia. She stood on the front porch and she saw the homes and the fields of her neighbors burning across the valley, and as Sherman's army came closer and finally started down the road to her farm, and she just couldn't stand by and do nothing. She grabbed up her broom, and she stood in the middle of the road in front of that army. The captain stopped his marching soldiers, and said, "Old lady, do you expect to win the war with a broom?" She quickly said, "No, but at least I'll show the world whose side I'm on." They told me Wednesday night that I didn't tell jokes well and that I should have a sign saying, "This is supposed to be funny." They may be right. I may put the em-pha-sis' on the wrong syl-la'ble. I'm not sure. Now, that was funny!

Well, she, the lady in this story, true or not, knew that everything was falling down all around her, but she wanted to be doing something for her side. Now, in the Gospel, I want you to picture this scene, for a moment, the disciples were awestruck gazing upon the magnificent temple. They were saying wow, Jesus, look at that! The temple was huge, huge, and stone, and the stone was covered and leafed with gold in places. Loosely translated, Jesus' response was boys, it's just a building. Not one single stone will be left in its place. Every one of them will be thrown down. I'm sure that they thought at first, just a building? Just a building? For the Jewish people, the temple was their identity. It was the one place they could properly worship, the only place they could offer sacrifice. It was thought to be the actual residing place of God. Beyond its religious value and physical magnificence, it was a national symbol of the Jewish people. It would be as if the Statue of Liberty and the White House and the Washington Monument were suddenly gone in this country. For the temple to be torn down to rubble would undercut all the earthly foundations of the faith and of the nation. The temple, as grand as it was, fell down as Jesus predicted.

It fell down as all earthly things fall down, as indeed we each will fall down. All we can do is in some way show the world on whose side we are.

Now, the trustees tell us that if we don't maintain this beautiful old building that it one day will fall down. We hope not today.

You have to maintain things, and that's best done a little along, a little along. The same with our bodies. I've found this out. Most of you know this. I found out a few months ago, I decided since I was approaching 50 years old that I was going to get back into shape all at once. I went to the Y. It's not that funny. I went to the Y. You laugh when I don't want you to laugh! I went to the Y, and I went on a pretty rigorous weight program. I was doing some bench pressing, and I was going a little herky jerky about it,

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and I, uh, my surgery is scheduled December 6. I hurt my shoulder. It is best to maintain things a little bit along. Do what you can a little along and you end up better off.

The same with giving to the church. You should give weekly, w-e-e-k-l-y, weekly, instead of waiting until just after Christmas, thinking it's almost the end of the year, and then being only able to give weakly, w-e-a-k-l-e-y, l-y, excuse me. This is a bad day.

I like the story, I've told it before, but I love this story about the young man who was in love, and he was having difficulty in mustering up the courage to actually touch his beloved so instead of touching her at all, not even holding her hand, he would use words. He said, “Emmy Lou, if I had a 1,000 eyes, they would all be looking at you.” “Emmy Lou, if I had a 1,000 arms, they would all be embracing you.” “Emmy Lou, if I had a 1,000 lips, they would all be kissing you.” Finally, Emmy Lou looked at Homer in disgust, and said, “Homer, stop complaining about what you don't have, and start using what you do.”

Maintain your bodies, that is stewardship, a little along on a regular basis. Maintain your home and your car on a regular basis. These things are good. Maintain your prayer relationship with God every day. Maintain your faith by, my suggestion is at least reading the Gospel of John once a month, at least reading the Gospel of John once a month. Then work up to regular Bible study. We know that God is not contained in any temple, but we forget that God does reside in His children, in His children, in us. Scripture asks do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own. You were bought with a price; therefore, honor God with your body. Maintain your body as the very dwelling place of God. Do what you can while you can for God with your life, your body, and your wealth. This is stewardship.

As John Wesley said, it so memorably about money. He said, “Go ahead and make all the money you can, but don't spend it frivolously. Save all the money you can, and then you'll be able to give all the money you can, and show whose side you are on.”

We are more than admirers of the building here. We are fellow ministers of the Gospel, completely owned, body and soul, by God in Christ Jesus. We were bought with a price.

Frances Ayers said, “If you are a baptized Christian, you are already a minister whether you like that or not.” You may be surprised to hear it, alarmed or pleased or antagonized or suspicious or acquiescent or scornful or in rage, nevertheless, you are a minister of Christ. You may never minister in great ways, but we can all just plod along. We can do some things with what we have.

William Carey was a brilliant linguist and botanist and missionary, and his nephew once asked him how he could be so brilliant. He said he was not brilliant, that he just plodded along, he just plodded along. He said, “I can persevere in any definite pursuit.” We all can do that. We can plod. We can persevere. As we used to say, we can keep on

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keeping on. We can make a plan. We can have a goal. We can do something toward it on a regular basis. Sometimes plodding or persevering is needed even for such things as forgiveness. You probably didn't see that coming, but I believe that. I know this for myself. Some things you cannot forgive all at once. It takes time. We must work at it. We must pray for God's help to do it, and grow into it.

We cannot maintain ourselves as we are, and grow into the image of Christ at the same time. When we pray for growth and faith, we are praying for change, giving up some of what we thought was important for what God thinks is important.

Albert Schweitzer said, “Christian piety of any and every sort is valuable only so far as it means the surrender of our will to God's.” How surrendered are we? Our bodies, our actions, our assets, our memory upon this earth will all fall down. It will all fall away. What remains? What remains is knowing one day, one day, what small things we have done in faithfulness and hope and echoing the love, the forgiveness and grace of Christ, these things will matter to others in their hearts – make an eternal difference, and these things will matter to God. How we have been stewards of our time, our talent, of the Gospel message and of our money.

One Saturday morning, a young boy who lived up North where they have snow, earned his money by shoveling snow. His father asked, “Why are you so slow in leaving the house? It's getting late in the morning.” His dad said, “Why are you so slow? This is how you make your money.” He said, “Oh, I'm just waiting.” Dad said, “Waiting for what?” He says, “I am waiting for other people to get started shoveling their driveways. I get most of my jobs from people who quit halfway through.”

As we grow and show God in our lives, we dare not quit anywhere along the way. The presence of God is not concentrated in buildings. No. The presence of God was concentrated in Jesus Christ, crucified, risen and reigning. Jesus merits all of our commitment, all of our worship, and the focus of our lives. Jesus is not just a memory we find in the Bible in stories. He said in Matthew 18, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst.” Do we live as if we believe that Jesus is actually in our midst? You and I have already been told what to do, and it isn't always easy, and it isn't always risk-free. We are called to take care of all that God has given us, and to take special care to share far and wide the Gospel. We won't leave any lasting monuments, and even if we did, they would last only so long, and then they, too, would fall down.

What impresses others and what impresses God is faithfulness and trust and hope. We can live in a way that shows whose side we are on, and that's what Commitment Sunday is about. What matters most after, I'm almost finished, what matters most; I think sometimes babies just echo the sentiment of what everybody else is not saying, I'm almost finished. What matters most after our short time here is over? What matters is what we did with what we have been given and for whom we did it. What matters is what we did with what we have been given and for whom we did it.

“We All Fall Down”

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Jesus taught us to love God and to love our neighbor. Jesus taught that all we have here falls down and falls away, and so we should put our final hope and our final trust in God, and hold everything else loosely. Decide what matters most, and stick to it. All we can do in this life that lasts is to speak the words of grace and truth and to build up and to maintain the things we value. We gather here to give thanks to God for the gift of life and for the forgiveness of sins and for the ability to forgive others and make for peace. We thank God for the hope eternal we have, to one day be eternally in His arms, in His embrace. Out of thanks and trust in God, we should show in many ways, a little each day, whose side we are on!

Now, one last word. As you commit to God, you also consecrate and make holy, when we set something apart for God, we make it holy. We make holy that part of ourselves – our time, our talent and our money, which we hand over for God’s use. It becomes consecrated.

A church member one time asked her minister, “Will you please tell what the word consecrated means? What does consecration mean?” He held out a blank sheet of paper, and the pastor said to her, “Consecration is when you sign your name at the bottom of this blank sheet, and let God fill it in.” Sign your name on a blank sheet and trust God, let God fill it in as He leads you what to do and where to spend your time, where to spend your talents, where to spend your wealth for things that matter most. Amen.