

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, September 9, 2007

Sermon Text: Luke 14:25-33

Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

This is a difficult Gospel lesson, but I hope at the end of this message you will understand it better, and I hope that I explain it properly. It's about priorities.

I had a secretary once, not here, at another church, who looked at my cluttered desk, which is much like the inside of my brain, and said an unusual thing. I expected her to say the standard secretary type comment. Oh, you need to be more organized! How do you find anything, etc., etc.? Instead, she said, “Oh, I love your desk. It reminds me of my late husband. How I wish I had not bothered him and complained about such a trivial thing. If only I had him back, I wouldn't say a word.”

Death has a way of putting things into perspective. Now, what puts our life into perspective? Our priorities. Material possessions can get into the way of our priorities and what the neighbors think can get in the way, and tradition can get in the way. Oddly, the cross rarely gets in the way. This odd-sounding Gospel lesson is saying that everything, absolutely everything, should take a backseat to following Jesus Christ. Now think about the cross as a symbol and a reality all at once. Taking up His cross takes both hands. There's no handle on the thing. You can't carry it like a briefcase. We have to set down some things in order to pick it up.

In some traditions, it is in the remembrance of baptism that many Christians make the sign of the cross to cover them and to remind them that they are covered by the cross of Christ. No, that's not just for foul shots you see sometimes in the NBA. It is to remind you that you are baptized, covered by the cross, that we are bought and we are paid for. That is the harsher way of saying redeemed by the cross of Christ. It was not an easy path for Jesus to follow after God's will while on this fallen earth, and neither will it be for us if we closely follow.

I love this ever so slightly sarcastic quote, or it may be an ironic quote. You decide at the end. It's a quote from the philosopher and theologian, Soren Kierkegaard. Listen carefully. It took me two times reading it to get it, but you'll only get it once. He said, “I went into a church and sat on the velvet pew. I watched as the sun came shining through the stained-glass windows, and the minister dressed in a velvet robe, and opened the golden-gilded Bible marked with a silk bookmark. And he read, “If any man will be my disciple, let him deny himself, take up his cross, sell what he has, give it to the poor, and follow me. I looked around, and nobody was laughing.” I suppose that's more irony. Do we, marked by Christ's cross, have the ears to hear this?

You know in the earliest church, we had the two baptisms today, in the earliest church there are records that some Christian communities had new adult converts strip naked just before entering the baptismal water. The symbolism was that they should not carry into

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their new faith and way of life, any remnant of their former life, that they should come up out of the pool as if newborn. I suppose they did it at night.

Jesus tells two stories here. I'll begin with the two least-offensive first. About counting the cost. Building and not being able to finish. If some of you are thinking about our building fund, shame on you because we have not *not* paid for it yet! Have hope! The other story is about going to war and being outnumbered, but it's odd because in the Old Testament there are times, and you'll remember if you've been through our Disciple Bible Studies, there are times when God insisted that Israel go to war outnumbered. These are not theological, they are worldly stories to illustrate how worldly things can get in the way of complete hope and trust in God.

Jesus also speaks of parting with our money in the same way that he told elsewhere the rich young ruler that he must part with all of his money IF he was to follow Jesus. Jesus also said you cannot serve God and mammon, God and money, and that you cannot, you'll remember this, you cannot serve two masters. Jesus says in another verse that you will love one master and hate the other, and I want you to remember that love and hate there between the two masters. It is that language that will help us understand the more difficult part of the Gospel. You see I hate to disagree with Jesus, but in our language having two masters does not necessarily mean that we will love one and hate the other. We might hate both! We use the word hate differently.

It is obvious that Jesus means if you have two masters, you will love one of them more than you love the other. Okay. If you are serving mammon or the accumulation of money as your master then you necessarily will put God in the backseat. There is only one spot of the number one priority of your life. If it is money, then it is not God. Recall that at this point in Jesus' life in ministry, He was on the road to Jerusalem, on the road to the cross. Some thought that He would be elevated to earthly kingship and power, and they, I guess, and the crowd wanted in on that. They wanted to catch a rising star, and maybe some of them thought that the power and the wealth would spill over into their lives, and they wanted to be there if it did.

So many of us are willing to give our lives to serving mounting personal debt to buy things, to do things, to have things that seem most important in the moment, and the sad truth is that many of those things are forgotten or broken or devalued or gone before we can pay for them. We give our lives to them.

Now, to the family part. Please note that as in the money and the two masters, it is the same thing. Our word hate means something other than the word translated here into English as hate in your Bible. God is love says the Bible, but in the Old Testament it says God hated Esau and loved Jacob. How can the one whose very being is love, hate anyone, and if you read, Esau turned out okay? The Semitic use of hate carries a meaning that in no way means utter loathing as the word carries that meaning in English. Rather, hate means to love less, to put lower. You must love your family less than you love God, love your possessions less than you love God, and hopefully love your possessions less than you love your family.

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From the scholarly Roman Catholic to a Rhames Bible from the 1500s, there is this commentary. The law of Christ does not allow us to hate even our enemies much less our parents, but the meaning of the text is that we must be in that disposition of soul as to be willing to renounce, willing to renounce, and to part with everything, how near or dear so ever it may be to us, that would keep us from following Christ. Now a more recent linguistic commentary says hate is not primarily a feeling word. It's not an emotional word in Aramaic, which is the language that Jesus spoke. It is really a priority word. It means to abandon or to leave aside, the way a sailor would abandon a sinking ship or a general would leave aside any distraction to win his battle. That doesn't really make it that much better. We don't like to think in terms of abandoning even our family.

Jesus is speaking parabolically, and we don't even use the word parabolically very often, but it means an exaggerated way to make a point. I'll give you some South Carolina definitions. We do that all the time. We speak parabolically whether we know it or not, and most of the time, forgive me, but most of the time I hear it from moms. I hear moms speaking parabolically such as I'm going to pinch your head off. You're speaking in an exaggerated way to make a point, and your child knows the point. Or I'm going to turn you inside out or once I heard through a young high school student, if you fail English, it will be your funeral, but he didn't die. Act up at your grandmom's and I will slap your teeth out. You can't slap someone's teeth out, can you? It's an exaggerated way of speaking to make a point. Jesus is exaggerating to make sure that those following who had only mild interest understood that this faith, this way that He offered is a serious life-changing, priority-changing, costly endeavor. In an odd way, it reminds me of the warning, and I do say warning, that I give the couple in the old traditional marriage wedding ritual. You may not have heard this. Some of you may have heard this. Some of you may have only understood it much later on. It goes like this; marriage is not to be entered into lightly or unadvisedly, but thoughtfully, reverently, and in the fear of God. It's a warning. The old ritual is saying, folks, you need to know that these promises that you are about to make will cost you. Can I get an amen?

He is speaking with authority to allow those who are a little weaselly to weasel out. It says Jesus turned. Picture this. He's walking. He has all of these followers. He turned and He said these difficult sayings, these hard sayings to the crowd. I think when He turned and said these things; those who were mildly interested turned and walked away.

It kind of reminds me of an old Flip Wilson bit where somebody asks him about his faith, and he says yes, I'm a Jehovah's bystander. A Jehovah's bystander. As I said this morning, if you're young and you don't know who Flip Wilson is, Google it on, you'll find it on the Internet. I'm 50 now. All my illustrations are old. Anyway, he went on with it. It was a funny bit. I remember he said something like this. He said yeah I'm for God. I just don't want to get involved. I'll cheer from the sidelines, and whatever God wants to do is fine with me. Go God. God has my full approval and support from over here.

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Jesus turned to the casual followers, and He let them know that it's not a bystander's faith he was offering. Jesus is saying to us, hold all things loosely even your friends and family and loved ones, much less your material possessions. They all go away. Only God stays. Discard the clutter. Discard the invisible crowd. The invisible crowd that you've been playing to and performing for in your mind, and we do that. Put God first, really first, and see how that changes your life and your priorities, and it will.

The late Mike Yaconelli used to say, “Follow Jesus, and He will mess up your life, or don't follow Jesus, and you can mess up your life all by yourself.” If you're not happy with the clutter you have cocooned around your life, the place where your current priorities has landed you, then as I say in my title, eliminate the clutter, or at least push it aside, and elevate the Savior to the proper place – number #1 priority in your life. There is so much clutter. We read magazines to see what we should wear and reviews to see what we should like and what we should drive, and columnists to see how we should vote and how we should invest, and then, and I see this more and more, as we grow older and discard most of our accumulated and now out of fashion stuff, and move into smaller quarters and prepare to die, we ask what was the point. What was the point? Is there a point? I say if there is a God, then there is a point.

It isn't clutter or following fashions of the moment. It is seeking God's will and walking in God's way, and as Christians, we say that means follow in Jesus Christ and the cross, the cross – not as a museum piece – but a two-handed, two-fisted daily conscious effort that defines who we are and what we are, knowing what it took God to come to love us, to forgive us, to make us a way home to our waiting Father. I don't want to leave you hanging about selling and giving away all of your stuff. It needs to take a second priority. It doesn't need to get in the way of your faith, but you can keep your stuff. You can keep your family. If you put God first, you will own it, your stuff, it will not own you. Putting God first and self-centered desires in the backseat is the cost. Self-giving love is the cost.

You know just a few moments ago, the whole congregation and Dan and Kelli and Brabham and Margaret did something huge. They promised to live a life before their children that revolves around the still point of the universe, God. Even though forces and fashions change and scream out at light speed, “Follow me!” they promised and we promised to live before their children and to teach their children an entirely different set of priorities. It is a beautiful and awesome thing, and not just something that we promise and we perform. It is possible that we do that only by the presence and the power of God's Holy Spirit.

I want to close my message the same way I found that years ago on this same difficult Scripture Billy Graham closed a sermon. He said this. I can't find a better way to close. He said salvation is free. Salvation is free, but discipleship costs everything we have. Salvation is free, but discipleship costs everything we have. Eliminate or push aside the clutter. Elevate the Savior, and see how that changes the direction, the tone, the priorities in your life. Amen.