

“The committed life”

May 3, 2009

Text: Psalm 27:1, 7-9, John 10:11-18

I.

One of the fruits of the Christian life is that it calls us to lives of *commitment*. That’s an important value in our lives, isn’t it?

Don’t we all want to live committed lives, lives committed to our core relationships and values?

As Christians or aspiring Christians, our commitment is to a particular *way of life*. That *way of life* is the upside-down, alternative world of Jesus.

About this, all the time, Christianity invites us to make decisions.

To begin with, a decision about Jesus and the commitments he calls us to. Then, a decision to be baptized and drawn into the body of Christ that is the Church; and, finally, a decision to be sent into the world to *live out* our Christian commitment.

This commitment is to the core values of Christ: to a love that’s sacrificial and inclusive; a love that overflows with kindness and compassion, humility and forgiveness; a love that sees the big picture and that has a passion for peace with justice for all people.

To be a Christian is to literally *become* these core values. I.e., that’s who we are. We’re not just bystanders, peeking through the fence on the sidelines of life. We literally *are* love, kindness, compassion, and peace with justice.

II.

In a speech in London, years ago, T. S. Eliot was talking about *aspiring Christians*. By that he meant people who want to *become* Christians and who believe in the Christian faith but who never get to the point of *experiencing* it or *living* it ... i.e., where our faith is *not* some abstraction that never touches our heart.

Aspiring can easily become an end in itself. About this, someone commented: *It’s a matter of living forever in the preface and never becoming involved in the story.*

For our faith to have meaning for us, we have to commit to it ... and live it ... and be a part of the story. And that takes courage and conviction and discipline; and other times it takes patience, forgiveness and tolerance. And always, it takes prayer.

During South Africa’s struggle with apartheid, Bishop Desmond Tutu was one of the

most respected voices for change. But even some of his closest friends sometimes got upset with Tutu's implacable tolerance and moderation. At times, they wanted him to be more aggressive with his opponents.

Once of them said once, *At his age, you'd think he'd have learned to hate a little more. The real problem with Tutu, he said, is that he really believes the gospel.*

What the man was suggesting is that Bishop Tutu knows who he is, in the deepest sense, as a Christian. He knows the gospel story and he won't change the script.

When we live a committed life, friends, we don't change the script. Why? Because it's too indelibly imprinted in who we are ... and in our core values. What it means is that we've gotten to know Jesus ... to the point where, we *get it*.

Desmond Tutu *gets it*. He *gets* the gospel. And friends, when we *get it*, we can't *not* live it. Why? Again, because it's too much in us.

III.

The author of John's gospel *gets it*, too. The gospel he proclaimed was a *high commitment* gospel. We can see this reflected in our reading this morning from John 10.

The *I AM's* of John's gospel invite us in, don't they?

I am the **bread of life**. I am the **light of the world**.
I am the **resurrection and the life**.

I am the **way, the truth and the life**. I am the **vine** and you are the branches.
And from today's reading, *I am the good shepherd*.

All of these *I AM claims* in John invite us to a deeper place—a place where we'll never go hungry ... never walk in darkness ... never spiritually die ... never lose our way or be unproductive ... and then, through the *good shepherd*, never lead uncommitted lives.

I am the good shepherd, says Jesus. *The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep*.

The implication, according to John, is that the *good shepherd* is in for the long haul. He's not some fly-by-night friend that really isn't our friend at all ... that we can't really count on ... and in whom we have a very low level of trust.

Trust is so important in our relationships. Who can you really trust in life? Think about it? The list is not as long as we'd like it to be, is it? Seriously, do you trust that many people? Often times, it's certain members of our family and perhaps a few others.

We can trust the *good shepherd*. The clincher for this affirmation is verse 14: ***I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just God knows me and I know God. And I lay down my life for the sheep.***

That's serious commitment talk. *I lay down my life for the sheep.*

IV.

Our core values as Christians are ingrained in us from early on. And as we grow, over time, they become part of who we are. They become part of our identity.

In the United Church of Christ, we talk all the time about being inclusive, about God's *extravagant welcome*. For us, this is a core value. What this means is that everybody is welcome at our church, no matter anything about us.

Every Sunday morning, I stand before you during the *welcoming* time and I say ... *We are the Miami Lakes Congregational Church, **United Church of Christ**, the God is still speaking church ... and no matter who you are or where you are along your life's journey, you are welcome here.*

As a church family, we mean this. This is one of our core values. It's part of what we're committed to as a church.

For a glimpse of what does this looks like, CHECK THIS OUT!

V.

A young college student named Bill had recently become a Christian. It was a powerful moment in his life. A little bit about Bill: he had wild, unkempt hair ... he wore jeans and often wore no shoes. Bill was weird; but he was also brilliant, with a probing intellect.

1. Once Sunday morning, Bill decided to venture into the conservative church across from his college campus. Recently the church had developed an outreach to the student community. Many of the church folks were sincere; they just didn't know how to go about it.
2. So here's Bill, entering the church ... ragged jeans ... no shoes ... wild hair and all. The service had already started ... so Bill is walking down the isle looking for a seat. The place is packed.
3. Soon the congregation is painfully aware of what is happening. As Bill makes his way down the aisle, you can hear a pin drop. Finally, reaching the front and finding no seat, Bill plops down on the carpeted floor.

4. By now, people are really uptight. About this same time, an old usher begins to make his way down the aisle. The usher was in his 80's ... with silver hair ... and a three-piece suit. He was godly man, elegant and dignified.
5. With cane in hand, he approaches the front where Bill is seated on the carpeted floor. Suddenly, he drops his cane ... and painfully lowers himself to the floor next to Bill. It was a powerful moment.
6. When the preacher finally got the service back on track, he commented: *What I'm about to preach, you may never remember. But what you've just witnessed, you will never forget. Be careful ho you live; you may be the only Bible some people ever read.*

That's what being a welcoming and inclusive church looks like. We do whatever it takes to welcome people ... to find room in our sacred space and in our hearts to welcome them and invite them in ... in Jesus' name.

To welcome people in this way is part of our commitment as Christians.

VI.

There are other ways of being committed, too, of course. Certainly, when we stand with the poor and the downtrodden ... with those who lack fair opportunities for education, those who lack health care ... those for whom, in whatever way, the playing field is not level.

- We think of the many deprived groups and groups who have historically been the victims of all kinds of injustice here in the United States.
- We think of the many ethnic groups in other parts of the world—in Africa with all the tribal warfare, and in the Middle East ... particularly the awful suffering today of the Palestinian people.

When we stand with them, we're living a Christian life that is committed—committed to the vision given to us in and through Jesus:

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as God knows me and I know God. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

That's commitment language ...

- the language of sacrificial love ...
- going the second mile ...
- standing where we need to stand ...
- saying what needs to be said ...

- doing what needs to be done;
- all the time—for the purposes of love.

When we live committed lives—along with the Psalmist—we can say:

Know that the Lord is God; we are the Lord's people and the sheep of his pasture. For the Lord is good, his steadfast love endures forever and his faithfulness to all generations.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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