

“Moving Furniture”
Scripture: Luke 9:23-24
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OAKLAND AVENUE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, 9/9/2007

Our Scripture reading this morning comes from the Gospel of Luke. It is a related text to the suggested lectionary reading for today, Luke 14:25-32, which will be used tonight in our Second Sunday Service.

[Bob Littlejohn enters the sanctuary on the piano side] Excuse me, this is Bob Littlejohn, a faithful member as well a part-time staff member doing maintenance and handy-man work around the church facilities.

[Whispered conversation] Sure, Bob, just bring it on in.

As you may note from the sermon title this morning, the theme is “moving furniture” and Bob has something to move. That’s quite a cross that Bob is carrying around. It is weathered from standing on our front lawn each year during Lent. Bob is wearing gloves because it is an “old, rugged cross.” Certainly when hymn surveys are made, one of the favorites often listed is the “The Old Rugged Cross.” The lyrics of that gospel hymn speak of the old rugged cross as “the emblem of suffering and shame.” An emblem...sign...symbol.

[Bob periodically moves the cross in the sanctuary and each time he sets it down, he calls out a different day of the week: “Monday!”...“Friday”...Wednesday...etc.]

As much I like that old gospel hymn, it has one unfortunate tendency: to fixate on the object and not look beyond it. Part of our Presbyterian heritage has been to steer away from emblems and symbols because they begin to get in the way of true faithfulness. For example, does having a cross hanging from your car’s rearview mirror and not those velvet covered dice make the car any safer? Presbyterians have wondered if the emphasis on the emblem was too strong a temptation to make it a talisman, a rabbit’s foot, or a good luck charm.

Our Presbyterian resistance to crosses is such that the original design of this sanctuary did not include a cross anywhere. This pulpit that has the cross carved into the center of it is not the original pulpit—it was plain and simple, without ornamentation. The baptismal font with the cross on it is not the original...the original, as I recall from pictures, was much plainer. The wooden cross there on the baptismal side was crafted by Johnny Faris a few years back as a help in leading the children out for Kinder Kirk. The brass, processional cross hanging on the wall behind the piano is also relative late addition. The original design of this sanctuary had no cross—not in the stained glass windows, not on the walls, not on the furnishings. I suppose the only cross was in the overall floor plan: the transepts create wings that form and cross with the nave and the chancel.

In some ways, our Presbyterian suspicion of crosses is that a focus on the cross takes the focus away from our personal call to discipleship, our personal call to take up our cross. But crosses can certainly be more personal. For example, I have admired wondrous jewelry fashioned into a cross. Now my mind works a bit cockeyed here when it comes to jewelry crosses. Have you ever

considered that jewelry crosses are made in the likeness of an instrument of capital punishment? Sounds some thing that Morticia in the Addams Family would have—she was the mother dressed in that Vampire-esque black gown in the family that majored in creepy weirdness. I can see Morticia showing off her charm bracelet. “This little charm is modeled after the electric chair in Sing Sing (a notorious penitentiary in New York)...and this is a replica of the ax used by the axman of the Henry the VIII to cut head off of Ann Boleyn...and this one is based on the gas chamber from Auschwitz.” Spooky...weird...poor taste? Remember the cross was a particularly brutal form of capital punishment.

Maybe jewelry is one way that crosses become more personal and close to us. I suppose there are other ways. Recently, Dan Holloway, pastor at Unity Presbyterian Church in Fort Mill, played in a “PGA” event: Pastors Golf Association event, an annual tournament held in South Carolina. Dan was put with three other pastors in a foursome. Two of the pastors were very close friends and in churches of a bit different persuasion than Presbyterian. The first thing they wanted to know is if Dan was a Christian. There was clearly some doubt in their minds about whether Presbyterian was some branch of the church of Jesus Christ or some branch of paganism. The fourth person in the foursome was a young pastor, hair on the longer side and sporting a pierced ear ring. He was the pastor in a new, non-denominational startup church, which was characterized as part of the “Emerging Church Movement.” When questioned about whether he, the young pastor, was a Christian, he responded by saying, “I can show you that I am a Christian.” He proceeded to lift up his shirt and there was large tattooed cross on his chest with the name of Jesus etched into his skin. The other two pastors were not impressed and immediately quoted Leviticus about tattoos being an abomination to God. To say the least, it was an interesting round of golf.

A cross...a piece of church furnishing...a piece of jewelry...a tattoo. And then, of course, there is the Roman Catholic tradition of making the sign of the cross. Now I will admit to an immediate Presbyterian bias here...we Presbyterians don’t do such Catholic things. But why not? What’s wrong about miming this sign, this emblem and symbol of our faith? We don’t seem offended by our children miming things in the children’s time. And every time we sing, “I’ve Got Peace Like a River,” I see some furtive hands that go up and want to make peace sign and wiggle their fingers like a river. So hand motions do not bother us. Perhaps we are too quick to let go of such a practice.

Here is the crux of the matter: the cross is for us more a part of our life than an object, or a tattoo, or hand motion. The cross marks the life in the Kingdom of God. You may recall that Jesus was compelled to go Jerusalem to get his cross. His friends warned him not to go, even some Pharisees that did not particularly get along with Jesus, advised him not to go. But Jesus was driven to go to Jerusalem....for his cross.

Back in the 1960’s, Clarence Jordan, the author of *The Cotton-Patch Gospel* and the founder of Koininia Farms in Georgia, which was the birthplace of Habitat for Humanity, was visiting a colleague in well-to-do, uptown church. The pastor of the church was showing Clarence around and showed him very fine cross on top of the sanctuary. The pastor said, “We paid \$10,000 for that cross.” Accounting for inflation, that is about \$80,000 today. The pastor was quite proud of the grand work done by the congregation. Clarence Jordan simply looked and said, “Time was when Christians could get crosses for free.” Like Jesus, who paid not with dollars, but with his life.

The cross is a choice to live faithfully and to accept sacrifices as part of that faithfulness. Crosses are not just any bad thing that happens to us. Sometime Southerners will say with a sigh, “I guess that’s my cross to bear,” referring to something beyond our control. No, the cross comes as we choose the Kingdom, as we choose to follow. And, like Jesus who was compelled to go to Jerusalem, sacrifice is matter of drivenness. There is no casual picking up the cross. To bear the cross of Jesus is costly: it takes time, energy, and resources.

According to sociologists who study the church, there is a generational divide in our drivenness today. Sociologists particularly talk about older and younger generation divide in America today: the older generation is outer-driven; the younger generation is inner-driven. There is a drivenness that can be costly.

Let me give you an example. If you have been around the church much, you will be familiar with the communication that says “There is a need; so make a pledge.” You do so because that is expected, customary, what you have seen done in the past. It is outer-driven...it is what we do around here. I will never forget the member of this church who made a pledge and found that he couldn’t complete it at the end of the year. Most members just let the unmet pledge go by without any communication to the church...a few call and say, “Change my pledge amount...I am not going to be able to meet it” and a few just complete it the following year. Not this member. This member was driven by that conviction that no one should ever look at his signature and wonder whether he would meet the commitment. He had signed that pledge card...he would complete the pledge. He went and took out personal bank loan in order to meet his pledge. No one would ever be able to doubt his signature. That’s outer-driven!

Then there is inner-driven...driven by the inspiration to extend ourselves in amazing ways. Several years ago, I was eating lunch in Assembly Inn at Montreat, and struck a conversation with an elderly woman. Somehow the conversation moved to this woman’s granddaughter. This granddaughter, a young mother, had suffered complete kidney failure of both kidneys and was on dialysis. All the members of her family that were willing and able were tested to see if they would be match for a kidney donation and transplant. No matches. She would be dialysis for the rest of her life...or until an organ donation happen to match her. The word was put out in her church. A member of the church went and was tested and was found to be nearly a perfect match—a mathematically amazing result. So a non-family member with only a passing acquaintance of the young woman stepped up to donate a kidney.

As I was listening to her story, I realized I knew the woman making the donation. I said, “I know this story. This is the First Presbyterian Church of Marietta, Georgia.” The grandmother said, “Yes, how did you know?” “I know this story because that’s where I grew up. My mother was telling me about it. The donor grew up in the house across the street. We went to church together, played hide-and-go-seek together. I know the woman who gave your granddaughter a kidney.

The grandmother said in perfect seriousness and bewilderment: “What kind of person will give a kidney to someone they hardly know?” The grandmother did not understand it: there was certainly no outer expectation that someone would step up and do this. No one would think the worse of anyone who did not go for the matching or went for the matching but decided they could give up

one of their kidneys. No, this was inner-driven. This was the prospect of making a difference in another's life.

Outer-driven...inner-driven: both have amazing capacity to serve faithfully. Such extremes are hard for us to fathom. This is not a question of which is better, outer- or inner-driven. And both have their dark sides. To be outer-driven can finally be hypocritical and oppressive: acting only in the way that others expect. Inner-driven—acting only when your “warm fuzzies” have been rubbed and you are made to feel good...it becomes all “about me.” So yes, there are dark sides, but there is not getting around the call...the choice...the drivenness to sacrifice.

All too often the message of the church is that it is easy. Just say “Jesus died for my sins” and go on doing what you please. Sacrifice is not a popular message. However, I don't know a single family that approaches what we might call “functional” that does not include members who sacrifice. I don't know a single human endeavor that is great that does not involve sacrifice—a sports team, a building project, an outreach, a nation, a church. Sacrifice has a different value, depending on what your economic point of view is.

You see, there is a Kingdom economy and a world economy; there is a grace economy and a money economy. In the economy of the world, you sacrifice and you lose something. In the money economy, you give away money; you have less. The Kingdom economy works differently. The grace economy has a different rate of exchange. In the Kingdom, you give away life, you gain life. If you hold on to life, shelter it, protect it, close it up, and just fritters away. In the grace economy, you give love and love multiplies. You hold back and it just disappears. Remember those words of Jesus about the one who saves their life is the one who gives that life away—that's the Kingdom logic...grace logic.

Can the cross be more than emblem and sign? Can it be the way that we live our lives...giving our life away, even sacrificing our life, because we part of something greater than ourselves? Every national holiday we celebrate those who had made the sacrifice for the nation. We say our nation is better and richer and stronger because of sacrifice. And that's kingdom we call the United States of America! How much more so the Kingdom of God!

You know, I got to preaching before I read the Scripture reading for today. That moving furniture got me distracted. But I wonder if that furniture can move out of this sanctuary into our lives.

Luke 9:23-24: ²³ Then he said to them all, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.

The Word of the Lord...**Thanks be to God!**