

GUILT TRIPPING FOR JESUS

Joshua 24:19-25

Luke 9:57-62

Here it is the Sunday before 4th of July. Pastor's out of town at the General Synod, CE Director's out of town at the General Synod, Choir Director's out of town, the whole choir's out of town on their concert tour of France representing us and the United Church of Christ and having a well-deserved wonderful time. Who's left? This is like the Sunday after Christmas or the Sunday after Easter—the **only** people who come to Church on these Sundays are the most dedicated Christians in the Congregation! **You** are the ones who show up no matter what! **You** are the cream of the crop! **You** are the most loyal, most faithful of all. **You're** the best! You'all answered the call and made some sacrifices to be here even on this "off" Sunday. Give yourselves a hand, you're entitled to some appreciation.

Our Scripture readings for today are about dedication. The first is from Joshua. He took over from Moses. Everyone remembers that Joshua fought the battle of Jericho, but do you recall the rest of Joshua's story? Moses died before he could bring the people of Israel into the Promised Land. Joshua became the leader of a military campaign. God had given the land of Israel to the Hebrews, but there were some other people living there who thought it was theirs, and they were willing to fight to keep it.

The army of Israel consisted of soldiers from each of the twelve tribes. As the army moved through the land of Canaan, it conquered and destroyed the indigenous people. The land that had been allotted to Judah was conquered, but the soldiers from the tribe of Judah stayed with the army

until the territories allotted to Reuben and Gad and all the tribes and half-tribes on both sides of the Jordan were conquered. Then Joshua called all the people together for a great convocation at Shechem—sort of like the General Synod of the United Church of Christ at Grand Rapids—to give all the tribes a set of instructions before the 12 tribes went back to their allotted homelands to make their homes and live out their lives in peace and appreciation for all that Yahweh had done.

Joshua was a mighty leader. This 24th Chapter of the Book of Joshua is his final speech to the people of Israel. I hope the General Synod is hearing such a stirring, triumphant message and call to action. First, Joshua recalls the history of Israel starting from Abraham and the patriarchs, the memories of slavery in Egypt, the deliverance under the leadership of Moses and then the battles that all his audience would remember against the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Jebusites—all defeated by the army of the 12 tribes. Joshua reminds the people that it is Yahweh who has given them all this success in fulfillment of a promise made hundreds of years before. Then Joshua challenges the Israelites. He knows that they have noticed that the defeated natives had worshipped other gods. These native farmers put little sticks out in their fields to represent the gods they believed would make the crops grow and bring the proper rain and protect their way of life. Joshua challenges his followers: “...revere Yahweh, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness, put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve Yahweh. If you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve; but as for me and my house, we will serve Yahweh.”

He really pumped them up. It was a great stem winder of a speech. They all jumped up, “Oh yeah, we will serve Yahweh, for he is our God!”

Then comes the hard part that we heard for the Scripture reading: “You cannot serve the Lord!” And he tells them why it will be so difficult. He tells them how harsh Yahweh can be when people begin to doubt and turn away. But the people come back again and say, “We will serve the Lord!” So Joshua lays the guilt trip on them big time: “You are witnesses against yourselves.” And finally, more contritely, they say, “The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey.” “So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.” He tells them the rules and regulations for what it takes to be loyal followers of God, and then sends the 12 tribes on their way to their own inheritances.

You know how that worked out. Then we get the Judges. People didn’t do right, God punishes them and sends a Judge to show them how to straighten out and everything is ok for a while; but then they go astray again and God punishes them again and sends another Judge. And on and on until the people convinced God to let them have a King. You know how that worked out. People didn’t do right, God punishes them and sends a prophet to show them how to straighten out and everything is ok for a while; but then they go astray again and God punishes them again and sends another prophet. Until, apparently, God gets tired of that cycle repeating itself and decides to make a New Covenant and sends Jesus to proclaim an end to the old rules and regulations and offering a new understanding of how much God is determined to show forgiveness and grace.

Jesus called some followers to help with that message—all the way from the original 12 disciples, right down to the call that each of us received to become Church members. Some people answered the call the way Jesus wanted, some didn’t. Some people fulfilled the call, some didn’t. This

scripture lesson tells us the standards that Jesus set for those who proclaimed—like the original 12 tribes at Shechem—“I will follow God.”

One says, “Oh yeah, Jesus, I’ll be glad to come along, but first let me go and bury my father.” Jesus says, “Let the dead bury the dead.” **Harsh.** **Cold.** Drop one of the most important duties of your life and follow Jesus right now. Another says, “Oh yeah, Jesus, I’ll be glad to come along, but first let me tell my folks where I’m going.” Jesus says, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” “No—
one—who—puts—a—hand—to—the—plow—and—looks—back—is—
fit—for—the—kingdom—of—God.”

You think the Marine Corps is looking for a few good men. You think they’ve got demanding standards. “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” This ain’t no soccer league, folks, where everyone gets a trophy. “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” Who here is ready to answer that call? Your mom ain’t gonna pat you on the back for a nice try. Just showing up for a few games doesn’t get it. “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” Are you sure you want to put your hand to that plow? As good a follower of Jesus as you are, you could do better. I’m reminded of the Midwest farmer back in the Great Depression. The County Agent stops by the farm and says, “Zeke, you come to that meeting at the Grange and I’ll show you how to farm 30% better than you do now.” Zeke says, “No thanks, I already know how to farm 30% better than I do now.”

Can any of us say that we have never wavered, never fallen short? The apostle Paul pretty much covered all the possibilities: “What I should not do, I do. What I should do, I do not.” That sums up all the sins of

commission and omission that weigh us down and remind those of us who have put our hand to the plow that **we are not fit**. Sounds like that old Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards doesn't it? "Sinners in the hands of an angry God." "We are dangling by a spider's thread over the boiling cauldron of hell."

I always say that my only hope of salvation is this: if He takes the mass murderers, I may be able to sneak in with them.

We don't often confront our own unworthiness. It's easy to find someone else to point out our inadequacies, our sinfulness, our failure to live up to their expectations or their rules and regulations. But it's rare for us to confront our own unworthiness. We judge ourselves by our intentions, we judge others by their actions. God judges by the statutes and ordinances; God judges by this standard, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." We've heard the statutes and ordinances, we've heard the Law and prophets, we've heard the teachings of Jesus. We've heard the call to become followers. We've said, yes, we want to follow Jesus. But we don't often confess that we fall short of fulfilling our call. As Joshua said, "We are witnesses against ourselves." That's quite a guilt trip isn't it?

I'm convinced that we must first confront our own unworthiness in order to accept the blessings we have with the proper humility. Did you ever hear someone give an acceptance speech and they say they are "humbled by such a great honor?" I always wonder if they really know what humility means.

One church back east gave a woman an award for her humility, but they had to take it back when she accepted.

Here's one of the blessings we have, **forgiveness**. That is the destination of this little guilt trip—**forgiveness**. The trip wouldn't be worth taking if it didn't lead to the radical good news of the New Covenant. Without the New Covenant the guilt trip leads to shame and despair. It leads to humiliation instead of humility. But our guilt trip leads to the Kingdom of God, even though we are not fit.

Thinking about the General Synod in Grand Rapids this week reminded me of the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith. We don't use it anymore because it sounds too much like a creed for some of our sisters and brothers in the denomination. You may have noticed that I'm kind of Old School about some things. I like the way the Statement of Faith summarizes what's expected of us and what's in it for us to be part of the New Covenant:

God calls us into the church

to accept the cost and joy of discipleship,
to be servants in the service of the whole human family,
to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil,
to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table,
to join him in his passion and victory.

God promises to all who trust in the gospel

forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace,
courage in the struggle for justice and peace,
the presence of the Holy Spirit in trial and rejoicing,
and eternal life in that kingdom which has no end.

Thanks for being here on a down Sunday. **You are the greatest!**
Will you pray with me?