

Devotion

Luke 14:25-43

Whitefish UMC

September 5, 2010

- † “Their devotion was perhaps most evident in what they gave up to carry out their mission: Dr. Thomas L. Grams, 51, left a thriving dental practice; Dr. Karen Woo, 36, walked away from a surgeon’s salary; Cheryl Beckett, 32, had no time for courtship or marriage.
- † Most of all, the 10 medical workers massacred in northern Afghanistan [early in August]—six Americans, one German, one Briton, and two Afghans—sacrificed their own safety, in a calculated gamble that weighed the risk against the distribution of eyeglasses and toothbrushes, pain relief and prenatal care to remote villages they reached on foot.”
- † So begins the article in the New York Times, August 9th, detailing the deaths of a team of aid workers for the International Assistance Mission, working in Afghanistan to live out its members’ faith and to embody a tribute written at one member’s memorial service. It read: “When people cry for punishment—an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, we commit to offering eye-care and dental care to any who suffer.”
- † “Though many of the victims were Christians and worked for Christian organizations, friends and family of the victims denied the Taliban’s (who claimed responsibility for the massacre) claims that they had been spies or proselytizers. ‘They try to be the hands and feet of Jesus, . . . not the mouth of Jesus,’ said one friend.”

- † One of the members of the ambushed team, Dan Terry, had worked for 30 years for the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries in Afghanistan. He first visited Afghanistan as a child and returned to make it his home and to raise his family there. Known throughout his life as a peacemaker and friend to the poorest of the poor, Dan Terry knew that to reach the center of a society, you must begin on the edges. One of his colleagues noted that Victory through Surrender by E. Stanley Jones, the pioneer United Methodist evangelist, was Dan Terry’s favorite book.
- † “Victory through surrender”—now there’s a paradoxical phrase if you’ve ever heard one. It’s almost as difficult as “lose your life to find it;” or “take up your cross and follow me.”
- † Let’s face it: these are not the easiest of statements of Jesus in today’s scriptures. In fact, they are even more demanding than those from last week’s worship—those that Jerry Bechtle called one of the “hard sayings of Jesus.” Makes a pastor want to say: “Come on—don’t you know it’s September and people are church shopping now!” These are not scriptures or stories or sayings that make it easy or particularly inviting for people to want to be part of a church that seeks to follow Jesus.
- † But Luke says that large crowds were following Jesus that day. What were they seeking? Perhaps a teaching that may help make sense of the hard and tragic nature of life; a healing for illnesses borne over the years; forgiveness and acceptance in the face of moral failure or social rejection.
- † Or maybe they sought someone who would get rid of the “powers that be” and restore political independence from Roman occupation; perhaps they wondered whether this man might be the long-awaited Messiah. Whatever it was, large crowds continued to follow Jesus—until, of course, that Friday that is paradoxically called “Good.”

- † We may not be a large crowd this Labor Day Sunday, but we are here, looking for meaning and a way to make a difference—despite the demands of our busy schedules and our conflicted lives. Yet how can we possible even begin to follow these demands of Jesus: to put him ahead of family; to give up our possessions; to take up a cross in order to be his disciple?
- † More importantly, do we even want to try? As John Thomas, former head of the United Church of Christ, writes: “This hard saying of Jesus reminds us that Christian discipleship is more than being part of the large crowd of good church members. It means being ready when God pulls us alone out of the crowd and confronts us with what the hymn writer calls "the moment to decide in the strife of truth with falsehood for the good or evil side," confronted just as Jesus found himself alone only a few chapters later in the Garden of Gethsemane in his own moment of decision. Who knows when that moment or those moments will come for us? But rest assured, they will come.”
- † There is a cost to discipleship, as Jesus says. And the most famous book on the meaning of discipleship was written in the 1930’s by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian who tried to lead his church in resistance to the Nazis and who ultimately was martyred in the waning days of the war for his part in a conspiracy to murder Adolf Hitler.
- † A few years before being hanged in a prison yard in the closing days of the war, Bonhoeffer wrote: “Where will the call to discipleship lead those who follow it? What decisions and painful separations will it entail? We must take this question to him who alone knows the answer. Only Jesus Christ, who bids us follow him, knows where the path will lead. But we know that it will be a path full of mercy beyond measure. Discipleship is joy.”
- Discipleship IS joy, but--

- † Discipleship is also a process—it doesn't happen all at once. It takes time and involves both false starts and modest successes, as we grow in our faith journeys to live into the fullness of our humanity. We can learn to live in the holiness that abides in each one of us, the imprint of God's divine image.
- † As disciples, we learn to face life's challenges and joys with a spirit of love, hope, faith, and peace that leads us into an ever deeper relationship with Jesus and a life lived in his example. Emilie Townes writes: "In the process of becoming living disciples, we must, as Jesus states, also learn to give up all our possessions—our need to acquire, our yearning for success at all costs, our petty jealousies, our denigrating stereotypes of others, our prejudices and our hatreds, and more—and follow the way of Jesus, as we place ourselves on an ever-treading potter's wheel to examine our thoughts, words, and actions.
- † These possessions keep us further and further away from the Christlike walk to which Jesus invites us in discipleship....At the heart of discipleship is transformation. The cost of discipleship is not just becoming accumulators of new information about life and living it fully, or changing our behavior in regard to Jesus' teachings....There is no driftwood in discipleship, as we are called to live lives of complete devotion to God.
- † As part of this transformation, the cost of discipleship means entering into an intimate relationship with God in Christ that teaches us that obedience to God is not blind. It is a thought-provoking and deliberative process in which we grow in our ability to ask the tough questions about life and living, not only of God but also of ourselves."
- † And yet, there is great joy in this kind of devotion to something and someone who calls us into our best life, our best self. As Bonhoeffer,

despite bearing ultimate costs of discipleship said, “The call to discipleship is a gift of grace and that call is inseparable from grace.”

- † That grace, of course includes salvation—the gift of deliverance from a life without meaning, the gift of forgiveness and the gift of forgiving others because of it.
- † At the memorial service for Dan Terry, the United Methodist aid worker killed in Afghanistan, several passages from scripture were read, including the Beatitudes, Jesus’ saying that “Greater love has no one than to lay down his life for a friend.” In addition, several Afghan proverbs were read, including “When two bulls fight, it is the shrubs and other plants that suffer;” and “Twenty faces are hurt by one slap.”
- † I don’t know if today’s scripture was read, but it certainly could have been. None of us here today has lived out Jesus’ hard saying about the cost of discipleship more fully than Dan Terry. And most of us aren’t willing to even try. So how do these words of Jesus apply to us?
- † I love the fact that when Dan Terry was on leave from Afghanistan, he would return to Trinity United Methodist Church in Sequim, Washington, where his parents (also missionaries) spent their final years. There he would join in the men’s Bible study and share with others their faith journeys. He was known as “Mr. Fix-it” around the church, because he liked to help with repairs at “his home base.”
- † The members of Trinity UMC in Sequim, though not in Afghanistan with Dan Terry, were important, too—as are all members of the body of Christ. One of his friends said: “He was a United Methodist gift to the humanitarian cause in a country that has known bloodshed and pain for decades.”

- † That church, and our church, supports the work of people like Dan Terry and many others. When we offer ourselves here, we also allow and make real the gift of compassion, peace, and justice and hope around the world.
- † When we don't respond to hatred or resentment in kind; when we forgive someone even when they don't deserve it; when we put aside the prized possession of our past hurts and release it to Jesus' healing and grace, we begin the process of taking up our cross, of giving up our possessions, of putting aside unhealthy attachments and following Jesus.
- † We can't do it alone or by our own will. We need bread for the journey. We remember that Jesus walked the path before us and does it still. For we remember that on the night....
- † Amen.

Sources:

Elliott Wright, "Dan Terry, Killed in Afghanistan, Remembered as Peacemaker,"

<http://gbgm-umc.org>

Rev. John Thomas, "No Joy for Those Unwilling to Accept the Cost,"

<http://day1.org>

Emilie Townes, "Luke 14:25-33, in Feasting on the Word, 2010.