

March 22, 2015

5th Sunday in Lent

John 12:20-33

(Preceded by the skit "Don't Give Up" by M.K. Boyle)

I chose this skit to start our sermon time because it symbolizes our lives of faith for today. Supposedly we live in a free country and we should rejoice in our faith, but living a life of faith still isn't easy. Sometimes you feel like the second mountain climber - you work and struggle and give and sacrifice and feel like you're exhausting yourself but you look around and realize you haven't actually gone anywhere.

Now the first climber gives the second one some good advice - take off your backpack. Get rid of the extra burdens that you carry that you shouldn't be and the trek will become much easier. We hear messages like this frequently in church: Don't succumb to the worries and burdens of the world. Don't get caught up in looks or status or money or power. Put your trust in the Lord instead. Don't let your life be burdened by pointless things. We'll even say don't let your life be burdened by your sins, your fears, your worries, and your anger. Give up these things to the Lord and be free of them. We talk

about unburdening ourselves because God has done the heavy lifting for us.

It all sounds great. So you rid yourself of the selfish and pointless things of the world. You unburden yourself of fear and anger and the desire for revenge. You put the important things in God's hands. But what happened to the second climber after the backpack was removed? Did she suddenly leap for joy and climb effortlessly? Nope. The burden continued.

We can laugh at the situation as presented by our mountain climbers, but it is all too real. Even when you do everything right you don't seem to experience the joy and freedom and energy that is promised. Plus, there are certain things you just can't unburden yourself from.

If you're a senior citizen you may be living on a fixed income. Meanwhile you medical expenses and complications that you cannot control. A doctor may tell you the treatments and medicines you need and you have very little control over them.

Costs can skyrocket and you have no say. Neither can you get a job and earn significantly more money.

Somewhat younger people have problems of their own. They may be in the sandwich generation - providing care for their parents at the same time they are providing care for their children - torn in two directions, trying to be at least basically responsible on both fronts but all too often feeling like a failure. Talk to a person in this life situation about getting rid of a burden and what is he or she supposed to get rid of? Neglect children? Forsake parents? What about honor your father and mother?

Move younger still and you find adolescents and children burdened by peer pressure, by pressure to learn and grow and excel. Kids are overbooked to the breaking point. In some cases their parents may be pushing them too hard. In other cases they are pushing themselves. If they want to make the team, if they want to get the much needed scholarship, if they want... On and on goes the list of things.

We may find that we are wearing not just one essential backpack but many essential backpacks. And even if we do succeed in getting rid of them it still isn't easy.

What to do? What to do? Are we hopelessly, helplessly trapped in our world? Perhaps we aren't being tempted to be wasteful or evil or naughty. But we're still being killed by the necessity of being good and productive. Perhaps we are overburdened by good.

Turning to our gospel reading may give us some guidance here. Jesus says some now very famous words, "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in the world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor."

In and of itself that is a recipe for disaster and burnout. But Jesus didn't stop there. "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say - 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name."

This second part of the saying is where we have to focus. Consider the couple years of Jesus public ministry. He starts off by going from town to town preaching, performing miracles and gathering disciples. Then there is a turning point at the Transfiguration. Jesus then sets his sights exclusively on Jerusalem; ultimately the crucifixion. Nothing turns him from that path. People ask him to go other places and do other things. They ask him to stay and to heal others - all good things. But Jesus knows what he is called to do - that one thing - journey to Jerusalem and the cross.

Perhaps we burn out doing good because we lose sight of what that one or a couple things are that we should be doing. Jesus wasn't called to solve all the world's problems. He may have been called to save the world by his crucifixion, but he didn't solve all the world's problems. You aren't called to save the world. You are called by God to do a few things. The rest is for other people to do.

Those few things are not static. You don't somehow figure out God's will for your life and then be stuck there forever and

ever. Jesus wasn't always focused on the crucifixion. He did different things at different points in his ministry. The seasons of life will give us different things to do.

Over the years we've had several programs at church to help us discern what God is calling us to do. Some may have been helpful. Some may not have been. I recently came across a book called *Living on Purpose* by Christin and Tom Sine. I haven't read the whole thing but they give a few simple ideas to start off discerning what one or few things you are called to do. I want to share three of their ideas.

One, make a list of those scripture passages most meaningful to you. Whatever they are, what parts of the Bible stand out to you the most. Maybe you know why. Maybe not. But pull them all together.

Two, create a family mission statement. You know how a business or organization may have a mission statements. (Our church's mission statement is to live and share the love of Christ.)

Well, create a mission statement for your household. Why do you exist? What do you intend to do? Work out a mission for your family - whatever it is.

And three, consider your mission from the point of view of the distant future. As an elderly person will you be able to look back on your family's mission and be satisfied with what you've done?

The first mountain climber knew the goal - get to the top of the mountain. With energy, focus, patience, and discipline it can be done. The same goes for our lives. May you be like the first mountain climber. The journey may not ever be easy, but it will accomplish that which God seeks to accomplish. Amen