

"Commitment"

1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21, Galatians 5:1, 13-25, Luke 9:51-62

June 27, 2004

After the baptism of his baby brother in church, little Johnny sobbed all the way home in the back seat of the car. His father asked him three times what was wrong. Finally, Johnny replied, "That pastor said he wanted us brought up in a Christian home, but I want to stay with you guys!"

This morning I would like to give you a lesson in Biblical history. Doesn't that sound fun? I remember hating history. It seemed like the most boring thing in the world. But then I had a professor in seminary that began to really bring Biblical history to life. He told about what the lives of the people in those days was like and what they experienced. He talked about places that I had never heard. Of places and people, the names of which I could not pronounce and it was fascinating and real. I love Biblical history. And I suppose that I love it so much because finally I had found my calling in life - found what God had in store for me in that ancient word of God. ----- So I would love to just give you a history lesson this morning about Aram and Hazael and Nimshi. I am sure that they are on your mind. - I probably could not say too much about these people or that place but I could about Elijah and Elisha. All of these are name you have just heard ... and I would enjoy the study and reflections on them but it really would miss the point. Even though they are some of the names in the texts, the scriptures this morning are really not about them - they are about you!

Elijah throws his mantel over Elisha - a symbol that Elisha would have immediately understood as a call for him to become Elijah's apprentice and to be groomed to follow in his footsteps as a prophet of God. And he goes out, kills the oxen with which he has been plowing the fields and leaves to follow Elijah. Would you - could you do it? Could you drive your tractor over to the neighbor and say - 'here, take this - I don't need it anymore - I am going to start a new life?' Could you close the doors of your shop this afternoon and say, 'I am starting a new life.' Could you go home this morning, throw a few things in a suitcase, turn off the electricity, close the door and leave to follow where God leads?

Jesus invited people to become His followers. He said "Follow Me!" But they said, 'It sounds good - but I got a few things that I have to take care of first. I've got priorities that I have to take care of. I like what I hear from you and I will put you on my list. But you have to understand that I have other interests too.' But Jesus said that is not how it works! - Leave the dead to bury the dead - don't put your hand to the plow and then go back - don't start something and then turn away from it. ----- What Jesus has to say is tough stuff!

Christianity call us to a commitment - and we are not great at making those kinds of total commitments.

We were talking about these images in scriptures at our lectionary Bible study on Wednesday (Which you are invited to join any Wednesday) and I told them that it reminded me of one of my favorite stories. It is a story of some farm animals that were talking one day and found themselves to be very thankful for the way their farmer treated them. The farmer had always provided so well for them. And they decided to try to do something nice for the farmer. After long discussion and brainstorming of many ideas it looked like they were ready to settle on providing the farmer and his family with a nice breakfast of ham and eggs. But that idea failed when the pig stormed out saying, "That's fine for you chickens - all it calls for is a contribution on your part. But, as for me, it means a total commitment!"

It is hard stuff. Total commitment is not what we are really willing to do. Many people make so pretty heavy commitments to various things in their lives - some even make them to the church and to God. But

for many, the church and God are areas of their lives that can wait until other things get taken care of. Why would we make such a commitment?

I read about a pastor from Haiti who used a parable to illustrate to his congregation the need for total commitment to Christ. The parable he told was of a man who wanted to sell his house for \$2,000. Another man wanted very badly to buy it, but because he was poor, he couldn't afford the full price. After much bargaining, the owner agreed to sell the house for half the original price with just one stipulation: He would retain ownership of one small nail protruding from just over the door. After several years, the original owner wanted the house back, but the new owner was unwilling to sell. So the first owner went out, found the carcass of a dead animal, and hung it from the single nail he still owned. Soon the house became unlivable, and the family was forced to sell the house to the owner of the nail. The Haitian pastor's conclusion: "If we leave the Devil with even one small peg in our life, he will return to hang his rotting garbage on it, making it unfit for Christ's habitation."

It is tough stuff, this total commitment. And it may seem unreasonable of God to expect such a thing as commitment. But I do believe that when we hang on to the old life and refuse to walk boldly into the new there is a nail at our front door on which the devil can hang anything he wants.

Paul, in the second lesson, lists both the "works of the flesh" and the "fruits of the Spirit". The 'works of the flesh' just come natural to us. They are the things which hang on the nails of our house and start to stink up our lives. But walking in a commitment to Christ we begin to experience what God wants for our lives - a house that is filled with the aroma of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Paul says that it is not about law - it is about belonging to Christ.

A number of years ago Norman Cousins wrote an editorial in Saturday Review in which he reported a conversation he had with a Hindu priest on a trip in India. The man said he wanted to come to our country to work as a missionary among the Americans. Cousins assumed that he meant that he wanted to convert Americans to the Hindu religion, but when asked the priest said, "Oh no, I would like to convert them to the Christian religion. Christianity cannot survive in the abstract. It needs not membership, but believers. The people of your country may claim they believe in Christianity, but from what I read at this distance, Christianity is more a custom than anything else. I would ask that either you accept the teachings of Jesus in your everyday life and in your affairs as a nation, or stop invoking His name as sanction for everything you do. I want to help save Christianity for the Christian."

It is tough stuff, this total commitment. God calls us to it so that we can experience the 'fruits of the spirit. Christianity is not a club or an organization to which we belong but a way of life to which we are called. It is there that we will experience the gifts God wants for us.

AMEN