

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
13^h Sunday after Pentecost
09-08-19

Old Testament Lesson

Proverbs 18:4-10

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

Luke 14:25-33

Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." (NRSV)

Strong Towers

If you travel by car on improved roads in our fair state, you sometimes have a view along the way that does not vary by much. However, you do see some items placed intentionally on the roadside. Over many years, I have been impressed with the sincere, but somewhat sad, memorials along the roadside which mark the location of the death of a loved one from some type of traffic incident. They pop up along the side of the road with flowers or a simple cross, likely placed there by families and friends of those they would have us remember. Often worn by time and weather, they are markers of tragedy, lives lost for unexplainable reasons, and unfulfilled dreams. I recognize them as **roadside memorials**.

But, there are **other memorials** along the roadside. They are of a much different nature, but still significant if we pause to consider how they might have come to be there. These are the decaying frames of unfinished **building projects**. Since I see some of them frequently, I try to imagine what they might have been **intended** to become upon their completion: a new store or an expansion of an old one. At other times, they seem to be new homes or additions to existing homes.

Apparently, these are projects that stopped long before they became unintended displays that catch the attention of passing motorists. The wood in the uncovered framing becomes weathered and grey. The plastic insulation wrap is torn loose by the weather, flapping haphazardly in the wind. The grass has grown up around the project, and shoots appear among the now untidy stacks of concrete blocks and bricks. A large pile of sand is usually nearby, with scattered weeds growing to varying heights, waiting for brickmasons and concrete mixers that will **never come**.

We can only imagine that these bare-bone structures started with the best of intentions and were begun in a wave of **optimism**: a promised raise or bonus or a project to fill time that had been set aside after retirement. But, all of them stop before they are completed. The causes are unknown to us. But, we know enough of life's ups and downs to consider the "**How?**" for such a stoppage: a sudden **reversal** of financial fortunes, a nasty **divorce**, the loss of a job, a sudden illness, an unrelated **injury**, the sudden **death** of a family member, or even a **change of heart** about the scope of the project. Some form of mental illness, such as severe **depression**, might have stopped life in its tracks.

For whatever the reason, after months and years the evidence of the change remains fully **visible** for all to see, including our glance at the roadside along a highway as you and I travel to wherever. Perhaps, something like this, such as an **unfinished tower** in a vineyard, was **visible** to Jesus of Nazareth and his followers as he and they **traveled** in Palestine as depicted in our scripture lesson this morning. We can only guess at specifics, of course.

Here, we find that **Jesus is teaching** his followers along with a crowd of interested onlookers, as he makes his way to **Jerusalem**. Apparently, various people have wanted to join with them. As Jesus has grown in **popularity**, he has formed a sort of "road show" and all manner of people are among the crowd. Jesus knows what **awaits him** when they arrive in Jerusalem. He mentions the **cross** and issues a challenge about the serious business they are undertaking. Because of the prospect of his own death, Jesus wants to convey the depth of **conviction** that will be required to become a **disciple**. Jesus uses language which is **frank**, honest, even downright cruel.

"Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children,
brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple."
"Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."

Luke 14:26-27 NRSV

Reading this, we seem to understand, if only a little: this is **serious** business! Just to make the point, Jesus expands on the **commitment** required and begins to talk about building a **tower**. The words from *Proverbs* this morning would have been familiar to those present with Jesus. From our Old Testament Lesson:

The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous run into it and are safe.

Proverbs 18:10 NRSV

Some who study this text hear and see the word "tower," a brick or wooden structure rising above the ground, and immediately think of **the cross**. While that is a common view, I believe Jesus had something else in mind. He used the prospect of **building** a tower as an example of **poor planning** and indeterminate **will**, lacking **dedication** to the project.

"For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost,
to see whether he has enough to complete it?
"Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish,
all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying,
'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' "

Luke 14:28-30 (NRSV)

Jesus is telling us, in a somewhat confusing collection of verses, that the **ministry** that he began will **continue**, because so many **did** take it so seriously. And, because **God** was in it!

That dedication and the knowledge of working in **God's kingdom** kept those early disciples engaged, so that they could continue the **mission and ministry** of Jesus. The **early church** took this up, as well. So, now we might ask:

Did everyone following Jesus take the words he spoke seriously, even literally? Very likely, most of them did not. But, the ones that did became the **natural leaders** of the movement that Jesus began. They responded to Jesus with the determination that he **required** of them. Jesus knew that God would continue to **support** them, so that they would become the **strong towers** that were completed **in Christ**. They were the ones who took the full measure of what was needed for the challenge and responded in ways that they could **never imagine**.

If you are like me, you listen intently to these words of Jesus and draw **inspiration** from them. Once we recognize this, we often **act on it**. But, Jesus **warns** everyone there, and us today, that it will be difficult to finish what we start. He knows this because of our human condition: our **imperfect nature**. Like my projects at home, I started them with such enthusiasm, but they soon lose momentum. Then, it falls into the category that grows around my house: of **former** projects. My imperfect response started with **good intentions**, but soon lost out to other more pressing concerns. That is just how things go, we might say.

Sadly, most of us handle **our faith** and **our commitment** to God in much the same way. This brings in the full meaning of these words from Jesus along the roadside. As hard as Jesus is working for success and as much as he wants all of his followers to remain faithful to his ministry, he knows that they, like you and me, are going to **fall short**.

That tendency to **falter** in our commitment to God, to our neighbor, to our community, to our study of scripture, and so many other things all contribute to the purpose of gathering in study and worship. As a **community of faith**, we are far more effective in **supporting others**, and we are far more likely to benefit in our own **faith development**, when we are in communion with one another and living in loving, **mutual support**. This tradition of study, prayer, scripture, and communal worship come directly to us from Judaism. We also gather, because it was the model of the **ministry of Jesus** and the early church. We are coming together because there is always more to **do**, more to **learn**, more to **give**, and even more to **receive**. This takes dedication. How much dedication? Well, we come back to another verbal take-down from Jesus:

“So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.”
Luke 14:33 (NRSV)

It seems that Jesus was throwing down an **ultimatum**: Don't say that you are going to follow me, unless you are willing to **give up** everything. The disciples took this pretty literally. The fishermen left their nets and their boats and immediately followed Jesus (*Luke 5*). They lived together in the idealistic description of that first community of faith in Jerusalem after Pentecost. They sold their possessions and shared everything **equally** among the community (*Acts 2*).

That sets the bar pretty high, doesn't it? Well, few of us are going to do that. But, that **extreme** example in scripture serves as a **reminder** that we could always **do more**, especially when it comes to our **material** possessions. Jesus knows that we need continual **reminders** from God to stay on track. Our sacraments, baptism and the Eucharist, the Lord's supper, serve as a means of **remembering**: from Creation to Resurrection and the birth of the church. And, we bring the story of **God and Christ** into each celebration.

We do this because our project of **building the church** continues. It is the **strong tower** that will **not fade** or crumble, because it **originates** outside this world, this reality; and, it is **sustained** by the **power** of God, which is more **vast** than you and I can imagine.

In our scripture lesson, it would seem that Jesus would have us build **strong towers**, literally; and, that God would prefer that we not start the project at all, unless we are convinced that we can **finish** it. That is one understanding. Indeed, this strong tower of **faith** is what we need. But, I believe that most of us have figured out that part of things.

I will offer up a slightly different take on these intriguing lines of scripture in our lesson this morning. **God's Word** today conveys to us, unmistakably, that while we have **faith**, what we often lack is **conviction**. After all, we are human beings: uniquely made, but **imperfect**. God **created** us. So, God **knows** this. Two thousand years ago, Jesus of Nazareth caught a glimpse of our **weakness**, our **frailty**, and told us all about it. He explains elsewhere: He counters **Peter's profession** of undying loyalty and foretells that Peter will **deny Jesus** not just once, but three times before dawn on the day of the **trial and execution** of Jesus.

Like Peter, we have our shortcomings. Despite these, you and I are still **treasured** and **sought** by God. Despite our failings, we get something **completely different** in Jesus Christ. *The Scots Confession* put it this way:

“...it behooved the Son of God to descend unto us and take himself a body of our body, flesh of our flesh, and bone of our bone, and so become the Mediator between God and man, giving power to as many as believe in him....”

In sending the **Word of God** to us, we can see through Christ's example, that **God's love** does not go away; **it is** the strong **tower**! In the same way, **Christ's call** to us as the church **never fades** or wanes. In fact, because God and Christ are so **committed** to us, we are better able to understand the many statements Jesus made about **staying true** and continuing to trust in God and in Jesus Christ.

Among a crowd of anxious followers in Palestine, Jesus noticed a tower nearby and painted a stark picture of extreme situations just to lay out how **difficult** it was to follow him. And, Jesus is telling us that we are likely to **fail**. If we look at ourselves honestly, we can understand that we often do. But, we are given the **means** in Jesus Christ to continue to come to God, to recall **God's Word**, to take heart, and **start** again. So, you and I and believers around the world **return each week** to celebrate the source of never-ending goodness and **grace** that is Almighty God. The commitment which comes from faith creates the drive within us to put up buildings for worship and study, to **build community** through a spirit of cooperation, and to come together **sharing** our faith.

And, Christ's words **remain** with us, asking us if we are ready to **work for the Gospel** message, to look to God for **guidance**, to seek God's **strength** in our failing courage, to feel the **hope** that is Christ, to go out and do the **work** we are **called** to do for the **kingdom**. God remains **present** for us, continually **giving** from the storehouse that resides **deep** within each one of us.

Come and open your hearts and minds to the **work of God** which we find only in Jesus Christ: the **strong tower** that **never falls** and **never fails**.