

“The Kingdom Made Simple”
Ezekiel 2:1-8, Acts 8:9-24, Luke 9:57-62
September 8, 2019

Over sixty years ago a series of books were published that became something of a rage in this country: the “Made Simple” collection was designed for those who needed to be self-taught or required a reference book on any number of subjects, from typing to writing to English grammar. Of course, in our day and age we would find such materials a little quaint, because now if we want this kind of help, we reach for another series: the “For Dummies” collection is designed for an edgier age, when we don’t mind fessing up to the fact that we can be real dummies when it comes to “everyday math” as well as “business intelligence” or just about anything else. One of my own students authored one of those books, called “the Qur’an for Dummies.” And if you’re really into self-deprecation, you can always consult the “Complete Idiot’s Guide” to just about anything.

While Jesus had no difficulty saying what He meant, calling some of His opponents hypocrites, He did warn against calling each other Fools (the word Jesus used means “brainless”). But, He was not averse to simplifying matters to get his point across. Most notably, Jesus effectively reduced the 613 rules found in the scriptures of His day into two commandments: Love God, and Love Your Neighbor.

Through the ages, the Church has taken up the cue. Before there were Idiot’s Guides or For Dummies or even Made Simple books, the church put out little books called catechisms which try to reduce all the lessons of the Bible into a short series of questions and answers - a kind of Religion Made Simple reference book. Sometimes we’ve gotten carried away with this sort of thing: the Reader’s Digest Bible cuts out a lot of material their editors thought was less-than-interesting, even though the Bible itself appears to warn us against doing precisely that sort of thing in the Book of Revelation, Chapter 22, verse 19. Look it up!

This morning's Gospel lesson, though, shows that Jesus had a knack for getting to the essentials of the faith. In the six short verses we heard from Luke 9, Jesus tells three short stories, making three very important, basic points about success in the task of building the Kingdom of God:

- 1) Count the cost;
- 2) Strike while the iron is hot;
- 3) Press single mindedly towards your goal.

The reason why Jesus would even do such a thing, by the way, is hinted in our first scripture lesson this morning, from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel.

When God called Ezekiel to do His bidding hundreds of years before the time of Christ, God's message to His would-be servant was much the same as it would be generation after generation after generation. God did not pretend that the task would be easy, or that success would be assured, at least within our own lifetime. God, in fact, painted a bleak picture for the budding young prophet about what lay ahead - "I send thee to a rebellious nation; they have transgressed, they are impudent and stiff-hearted; though thorns be with thee, and scorpions dwell with thee, thou shalt speak My words unto them."

Now why, pray tell, would God put anyone into that kind of situation? Christ answered that question when he said that "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." Anyone who would answer the call of God must realize, flat out from the very beginning, that there is a tough row to hoe.

It was only half-jokingly that a Man of Letters remarked that might explain why God has so few friends, because those whom God would befriend He treats not to eases and luxuries and comforts, but to Crosses.

And so to those who would seek to follow in His footsteps, the Son of Man would say, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but I have nowhere to lay my head." How many would answer that kind of call, knowing the cost? Do we have what it

takes? No rose gardens are promised, no easy way. Be sure, be very sure, that before you embark on this pilgrimage of faith, that you (1) Count the Cost.

Jesus' second story seems rather harsh when He tells the young man that the dead can bury the dead. If we understand the ancient Jewish turn of phrase, it might make more sense to us here today.

To illustrate, there is a story of a young Palestinian Arab who was offered a scholarship to Cambridge University during the period of the British Mandate over Palestine between the two World Wars. It was virtually impossible for a Britisher to enter Cambridge, let alone someone who was of a conquered nation of the Empire. It was the opportunity of a lifetime. The young Arab thought about it. Maybe he didn't understand the extraordinary nature of the offer. Maybe he did not take the offer seriously. Maybe he was too much a prisoner of his own culture and traditions. But his reply was to say "Let me bury my father first."

Now, the young man's father was very much alive and kicking. He would not be in the grave for years, if not decades. What the young man was really saying was this: "I have other matters to attend to - family duties, social obligations, community service. Let me fulfill them first. Then I will consider your offer."

His sentiments were perhaps noble. We might applaud them. But as we all know, occasionally there is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity which must be grabbed immediately, or it is gone forever.

Not long after graduating from divinity school, Susan and I were offered Congregational churches in neighboring towns in Scotland. We did not say Yes. That offer was never renewed. And even if it had been, we soon put down roots in the northwest hills of Connecticut, where our children and now our grandchildren have been born. As the saying goes, "We pass this way but once." When doors close, maybe others open. But all too often, the closed doors remain shut forever.

And so Jesus said, “If you cannot grasp what a great opportunity it is to be part of God’s Plan, then you simply do not have what it takes. So (2) strike while the iron is hot. You may never get another chance.

Finally, Jesus told a third curious story about the man at the plow who looked back ... curious maybe only because very few, if any of us, have ever stood behind a plow to furrow a field. To throw light on the story, there is an even more curious tale from scripture, found in today’s Epistle, from the Book of Acts.

Simon the Magician is a relatively minor character in scripture. But for some reason, his spirit continues to live on in the church, mostly on its fringes, but occasionally closer to its center. Simon was converted to the new faith, but somehow his conversion was not complete. For he had been into magic for the money and for the power. Somehow he thought this religion was just another way of getting him the same things - money, and power.

Simon, of course, didn’t realize that religion really isn’t a means to an end. It is an end in itself. It is the be-all and end-all of life. It is like love in that you do not love for the sake of gain - you love for the sake of love itself. So it is with faith: faith may move mountains, but you do not acquire faith in order to make mountains move. Faith is its own reward, its own reason for being, its own justification.

So Simon got his goals confused. He sought to buy religious power, thinking it was a tool like any other tool - in this case, to attain self-importance and supposed greatness.

But Jesus said that we will only be successful if we have only one goal. We cannot serve two masters, He said. We can choose only God or materialism, but not both. So it is with the plowman Jesus talks about in Luke’s Gospel. If we want to plow a straight furrow, we can only do it if we look straight ahead. As soon as we turn, the motion of twisting our body will pull the plow out of its straightforward course, and we will fail in our task.

So there it is, point three: press single mindedly to the goal. It's hard to get simpler than that:

- 1) Count the cost;
- 2) Strike while the iron is hot;
- 3) Press single mindedly to the goal.

It's so ... simple. Maybe not easy, of course. May God grant us the strength to make His will our own.

Let us pray: