

Wesley United Methodist Church

March 18, 2018

“What Have You Got to Lose?”

Jeremiah 31:31-34, John 12:20-36,

Years ago, when the Betty Crocker company first began selling their cake mixes, they offered a product which only needed water. All you had to do was add water to the mix which came in the box, and you would get a perfect, delicious cake every time.

It bombed. No one bought it and the company didn't understand why, so they commissioned a study which brought back a surprising answer. It seemed that people weren't buying the cake mixes because it was too easy. They didn't want to be totally excluded from the work of preparing a cake; they wanted to feel that they were contributing something to it. So, Betty Crocker changed the formula and required the customer to add an egg in addition to the water. Immediately, the new cake mix was a huge success. Unfortunately, many people make the same mistake when it comes to “packaging” or presenting the Christian religion. They try to make the call of Jesus Christ as easy as possible because they're afraid people won't “buy” it if it seems too hard.

You hear it said all the time, from well-known gospel songs and best-selling books to earnest evangelists on national television or even on your doorstep. “All you have to do is tell Jesus that you love him. All you have to do is accept him as your Lord and Savior. All you have to do is pray. All you have to do is ask for what you want in the name of Jesus and it will be done for you.”

“Do you feel that something is missing in your life? Do you feel that your worldly ambitions and material rewards aren't enough—do you have all that and still feel empty inside? Well, all you have to do is turn to Jesus! All you have to do is let Jesus into your life! He'll give you the spiritual sustenance you're looking for and when you add that to the material success you already have, you truly will “have it all.” Whenever you hear someone say “All you have to do” in relationship to the Christian faith, walk away as fast as you can! You don't want to buy a religion where you don't even have to break an egg, where it's all premixed for you in the box. That kind of faith has an immediate appeal, but lacks the depth to sustain you over the long haul of Christian living.

Jesus didn't “package” himself in this way. Jesus said a number of things about the blessings of faith and he talked about asking in order to receive, but he never presented the overall Christian life being particularly easy. Jesus talked a lot about what God can do for you, but he talked even more about what you must do for God, and that's the part which is usually overlooked in the profit-seeking business of popular religion.

Here in our text for this morning, Jesus describes the cost of Christian living and he clearly is not watering it down to make it tasty or easy. First, he describes his own fate by saying that the hour has come for him to be glorified, but he doesn't use that word as most people understand it—by glorified, Jesus means crucified. Here in this Lenten season, the hour is coming for Jesus to be crucified. Then he compares himself to a grain of wheat. If the grain of wheat doesn't die and lie buried in the earth, it can't yield anything and remains alone. So, too, with Jesus: if he is preserved, safe and secure, he will remain alone. But if he is crucified, dead and buried, then he can rise to bear much fruit, drawing all people to himself. The Son of God must die if he is to bring to the world the gift of eternal life.

Then Jesus applied the same message to the rest of us. He says that we, too, must die in order to live. This is no easy, pre-packaged “cake-mix” religion. Jesus says that if we want to be a Christian, we have to die. We must be willing to pay the ultimate price. Remember my words from last week? You must be born again! Our old-self will have to die and the new-self will rise and bear much fruit.

At this point, many of us are quite willing to back away. “No thanks,” we say, it's too expensive. I love my life too much to lose it and I'm not quite ready to die just yet. I think I'll find something to believe in which is a little less demanding. Or, I think I'll wait for the clearance sale after Easter, I'll wait until the cost of Christian faith comes down to a level I can live with.

Yet when you think about it, we are fully used to the idea of dying in order to live. We are used to the idea of losing something and sacrificing ourselves in order to gain. In fact, we do it all the time in life. Certainly, the people who are flocking to gyms and health spas to put themselves through punishing workouts are making a sacrifice, yet they do it willingly. They try to lose their old bodies in order to gain new ones. In the same way, many people have struggled and suffered to lose their addictions to cocaine or alcohol or nicotine, in order to gain their health. Then there are the gamblers and speculators, from Wall Street to the race track, who are willing to lose enormous sums of money in the hope of winning more.

When we watch the Olympics, what do we see but young athletes who have made enormous sacrifices over the years? They sacrificed a normal childhood for countless hours of hard work and pain and solitary training and they did it all just for that moment when they would stand on the winner's platform at the Olympic games.

A few of us are Olympians, many of us are parents and what is parenthood but a whole slew of sacrifices? You sacrifice all of your privacy and a piece of your sanity. You sacrifice a neat, orderly environment in which to live, where things stay just where you left them. You make a huge financial sacrifice- between children and taxes- you're lucky to have a dollar in your pocket at the end of the day- but you do it all for the sake of something which money can't buy. In these and in many other ways, we are perfectly used to the idea of losing one thing in order to gain something else.

It all makes me wonder: if we are so willing to sacrifice and even suffer for things which matter for us in our worldly lives, why shouldn't we do even more for the sake of our spiritual lives? Why should we shy away from the full meaning of what Jesus said: "If you love your life you will lose it, but if you hate your life in this world, you will gain it for eternal life." In the Message Bible it says, "In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal." The New Living Translation give us these words, "Those who love their life in this world will lose it. Those who despise their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

One man who learned what there is to lose and gain was an eighteenth century slave trader named John Newton. Captain of a trans-Atlantic slaving ship, he had everything this world can offer as he made a lucrative living from the brutal business of buying and selling human cargo.

Eventually, he was confronted with Jesus Christ, and he was converted to the gospel truth which makes us free (John 8:32). He spent the rest of his life crusading to abolish the very business which had proven so enriching. He also wrote a number of great hymns, including a familiar one which goes like this:

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound!
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now I'm found,
was blind, but now I see.

Once, John Newton thought that he was on top of the world, but in truth, he was wretched and blind. He lacked the moral clarity to see that he was nothing more than a cynical business man making money in an evil enterprise. Then Jesus came along and the old John Newton died. A new John Newton was born. An old life was lost and a new one was found. And the fruits of his labor of love remain with us today.

What about yourself? What have you got to lose? Don't be deceived by watered down, "cake mix" gospels which make the call to Christian living seem so easy. You've got to die to yourself in order to live with Christ! You've got to sacrifice and give up to gain. So what about it? What have you got to lose? What about selfishness? Shouldn't we know the joy of living in God's world of caring and compassion, where everyone is our neighbor and we love our neighbor as ourselves?

What about fear? Shouldn't we also lose our fears, the fears that keep us separated from God? Shouldn't we lose our fear of loneliness and fear of love, fear of aging and fear of illness, even fear of death?

What about doubt? Shouldn't we lose the doubts which plague us?
And what about our willful pride, the empty conceit which tells us we don't need God to be our anchor?

A lot of people are looking for the path to faith and spiritual fulfillment, but many aren't finding it. Perhaps they are looking for it in the wrong way. They are looking to gain something they don't yet have.

Jesus says in our text this morning, "Whoever serves me, must follow me." This is the path we are looking for, but we lose our way amid easy answers of "cake mix" religion. Faith is something to be practiced and prepared for eternity.

In Jeremiah 31 we are told that "the time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah... "No longer will a man teach his neighbor or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more"

The Book of Hebrew quotes this passage in explaining why Christians no longer live by the Old Testament regulations. The written law was useful and God-given. But as the history of Israel proved it, it didn't have the power to transform people's inner attitudes. Something more was needed. God would have to change his people from the inside out, putting his law into their hearts through his Holy Spirit.

Serve Jesus this Lenten season by following him. Follow him all the way to the cross where he dies as a grain of wheat in order to be buried and bear much fruit. He says that like him, we must lose our life in order to keep it. So ask yourself, "What have you got to lose?"