

TREASURE OF THE TRANSFORMED LIFE

“Filling the Bucket to Overflowing”

A sermon preached by Dr. J. Matthew Burton, Jr.

Central United Methodist Church

February 21, 2010

(**Luke 9:23-24 NRSV**) Then he said to them all, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. {24} For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.

TREASURE’S OF THE TRANSFORMED LIFE: THE JOURNEY

Wow! What an incredible six weeks we’ve had at Central. Time sure goes by quickly. It only seems like yesterday that we started reading, studying, praying and worshipping together using *Treasures of the Transformed Life* as our guide. So many people have approached me to say this is the best thing we’ve ever done at Central. I think that was evident on Celebration Sunday when we gathered for one service in the sanctuary and then enjoyed a celebration luncheon in our family life center. I don’t know about you, but I am so excited about what is happening in our church. God’s spirit is on the move and we are making a difference as a part of God’s Kingdom work. Thank you for your spirited participation and support.

We come full circle this morning. We started this series talking about commitment as a way of priming the pump so the water starts to flow. We’ve talked and read about prayers, presence, gifts and service. Today we are going to continue our celebration of God’s presence and commitment in our lives by turning in our Estimate of Giving cards and Ministry Opportunities Response Forms.

Over the past six weeks, our buckets have been filled to overflowing. We have the opportunity this morning to make a committed response to God’s overflowing grace in our lives. As we prepare to make this commitment, let us remember that we make it because God first made a commitment to us. We’re not initiating this commitment; God has

already done that through Jesus. *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.”*¹

If there is one take away from this past six-week’s study it needs to be this: **GOD EXPECTS US TO BE COMMITTED TO HIM.** God sent his son into this world with the expectation that we would respond. We don’t have to respond; we can choose to reject God’s covenant. God’s hope, though, is that we will respond and receive God’s promise in Jesus.

COMMITMENT

Let me take a few minutes to talk about what it means to respond to God’s promise. First, I want to talk about good intentions and then I’m going to outline five things that we must do in order to be fully committed as God desires. Let me begin with a personal story:

Between my junior and senior year of college, I decided to take a class in summer school. The class was eighteenth century counterpoint, a required class taught the style of eighteen-century composers like Bach and Mozart. Because I took extra hours during my freshman and sophomore years, taking the class would afford me the opportunity to graduate in three-and-one-half years. My dad thought it was a good idea because it would save him a semester of tuition and so he agreed to fork out the extra money for the summer class.

I arranged with my summer employer, Phipps Hardware, to be off two hours a day for four weeks. After two weeks of class, things were not going well. Writing in the style of Bach and Mozart was difficult. I was not committed. I was working full time and spending my time off working on schoolwork, there were other things I wanted to do. I

¹John 3:16, NRSV.

decided to quit. My dad was disappointed and down deep, I felt ashamed that I was unable to follow through.

My intentions were good but I failed. I was unable to follow through. How many times has that happened to you?

The country singer Randy Travis, who grew up just down the road in Marshville, sings about the tragedy of good intentions gone bad:

*Mama always prayed that I'd be a better man than daddy
And I determined not to let her down
Deserted by the man she loved and left to raise four children
We were the local gossip of the town.*

*I promised her that I'd live right and not be like the others
But I wound up in jail on Christmas day
I told her I'd be home and not to worry 'bout my brothers
When I got home my mom had passed away*

*And I hear tell the road to hell is paved with good intentions
And mama my intentions were the best
There's lotsa things in my life I just as soon not mention
Looks like I've turned out like all the rest
But mama my intentions were the best*

*A little boy with big blue eyes a-beggin' to go fishing
I promised him but never took the time
Now they won't let me see him and I sit here a-wishing
Wishin' I could hold him one more time*

*And I hear tell the road to hell is paved with good intentions
And mama my intentions were the best
There's lotsa things in my life I just as soon not mention
Looks like I've turned out like all the rest
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But mama my intentions were the best²

The great thinker and theologian Soren Kierkegaard puts another spin on the problem of good intentions. He talks about how we use the word “yes” as a form of good intention. For example, someone may ask you to do something and you say “yes” with all good intentions. But you never follow through. Listen to how Kierkegaard describes this predicament.

It is the most dangerous thing for a person to go backwards with the help of good intentions, especially with the help of promises; for it is almost impossible to discover that one is really going backwards. When a person turns his back on someone and walks away, it is easy to see which way he is going. That is that! But when a person finds a way of turning his face towards him who he is walking away from, and in so doing walks backwards while appearing to greet the person, giving assurances again and again that he is coming, or incessantly saying “Here I am” – though he gets farther and farther away by walking backwards – then it is not so easy to become aware. And so it is with the one who, rich in good intentions and quick to promise, retreats backwards farther and farther from the good. With the help of intentions and promises, he maintains the honest impression that he is moving towards the good, yet all the while he moves farther and farther away from it. With every renewed intention and promise it seems as if he is taking a new step forward but in reality he is only standing still, no, he is really taking another step backward. The good intention, the “Yes,” taken in vain, the unfulfilled promise leaves a residue of despair, of dejection. Beware! Good intention can very soon flare up again in more passionate declarations of intention, but only to leave behind even greater desperation. As an alcoholic constantly requires stronger and

²www.cowboy lyrics.com

*stronger drink, so the one who has fallen under the spell of good intentions and smooth-sounding declaration constantly requires more and more good intentions. And so he keeps himself from seeing that he is walking backwards.*³

Following Jesus, making a commitment to God takes more than good intentions. Let me quickly describe what it involves.

COMMITMENT INVOLVES ESTABLISHING PRIORITIES

First, Commitment involves establishing priorities. As I move through these five suggestions, I would like us to keep two images in mind, the cross and the ladder. The reason for this is because we too often climb a ladder rather than carry the cross. The cross represents a commitment to Jesus and his ministry on earth. It is a spiritual commitment. The ladder is a worldly commitment. It's about power, position, and recognition. We all climb the ladder to some degree but doing it to the detriment of the cross is a real issue for those of us who call ourselves disciples of Jesus Christ.

What is your priority? What comes first in your life? If I had you take a piece of paper and number the top 10 things in your life, what would it look like? Filling out the Estimate of Giving Card and the Ministry Opportunities Response Form is about setting priorities.

Dr. Howard Olds, former pastor of Brentwood United Methodist Church in Nashville Tennessee who recently died of cancer, told this story in one of his sermons:

One of my favorite church members of all time was a little short, retired telegraph operator who wore thick glasses in one of the congregations I served back in the late 1970's and early 80's by the name of Charlie Hitt. He couldn't hear and he couldn't see. He didn't own a car so he hitch hiked to church. He sat on the

³Soren Kierkegaard, *Under the Spell of Good Intentions*, www.bruderkhof.com

front row and sang about two measure behind the rest of the congregation. Somebody asked Charlie one day—“WHY DO YOU BOTHER TO COME TO CHURCH? YOU’ CAN’T SEE OR HEAR AND YOU HAVE TO HITCH HIKE TO COME TO CHURCH. WHY DO YOU BOTHER TO COME?” With a twinkle in his eye, Charlie replied, “COME SUNDAY, I WANT MY NEIGHBORS TO KNOW WHOSE SIDE I’M ON.”⁴

Setting priorities says something about whose side you are on.

COMMITMENT INVOLVES SACRIFICE

Number two in my list is, commitment involves sacrifice. Carrying a cross is much different than climbing a ladder. In Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s famous book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, he says,

Cheap grace means grace as bargain basement goods, cut-rate forgiveness, cut-rate comfort, cut-rate sacrament, grace as the church’s inexhaustible pantry, from which is poured out without hesitation or limit. It is grace without price, without costs...Cheap grace means grace as doctrine, as principle, as system. It means forgiveness of sins as a general truth, it means God’s love as merely a Christian idea of God...Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without cross, grace without the incarnate Jesus Christ...costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again. It is costly because it calls us to do discipleship; it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs people their lives; it is grace because it gives them their lives.⁵

Bonhoeffer lived his words. He died on a German gallows less than a year after writing these words. What sacrifices are you willing to make?

COMMITMENT INVOLVES PLANNING AHEAD

⁴J. Howard Olds, *The Power of a Personal Commitment* (Brentwood Sermons, November 21, 2004), 2-3.

⁵Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, (Canterbury, England: SCM Press, 1948), 43-45.

Commitment involves planning ahead. To make God's work a reality at Central we have to plan ahead. Part of that process is to ask you to plan with us by filling out an Estimate of Giving Card and a Ministry Response Form. Commitment helps us to plan individually and corporately. The Ministry Response Form helps your church plan ministry. The Estimate of Giving Card helps us push the boundaries of your giving and impacts the powerful ministry of our church. We cannot do ministry effectively unless we plan.

COMMITMENT INVOLVES MAKING CHOICES

Fourth in my list is commitment involves making choices. We have to choose what's important in our lives. We choose to get up on Sunday morning and come to worship. We choose to pray. We choose whether to serve or not and we choose what we give.

If you commit to being in church 45 times a year, serve in particular areas, pray so many times a day or week and give so much money, then you don't have to make a decision everyday about what you are going to do. You've already made the choice. You are committed. All you have to do at that point is follow through. Commitment Sunday is about making these choices so you CAN be committed throughout the year.

I read something about former South African President Nelson Mandela wrote that I had never read before. When he was a young man, he challenged the headmaster of his school over unjust treatment of the students. The headmaster tried to force Mandela to comply but he refused, preferring expulsion to submission. At the same time, he rejected a loveless, arranged marriage. Instead, he fled the countryside where he grew up for the city of Johannesburg where his life in political resistance began. From the perspective of his prison cell almost four decades later, he wrote,

If I had not defied the headmaster, perhaps I would have been safe from all the storms that have blown me from pillar to post in the last 30 years. And yet, with that decision my life also opened

up to much wider horizons, through which I could see the history and culture of my own people as part and parcel of the history and culture of the entire human race⁶.

The freedom Nelson Mandela sought for himself through the choices he made led him to seek freedom for his people. A journey begun in an act of defiance led him first to jail and then to the presidency. It was a costly journey, far from what he imagined his life to be as a young man.

It's hard to realize but the choices you make right now will impact your life and the lives of those around you for years to come. This commitment Sunday is that important. It's like the choice between a cross and a ladder.

COMMITMENT INVOLVES STAYING THE COURSE

Last but probably most important, commitment involves staying the course. I hope you believe in what we are doing at Central United Methodist Church as much as I do. Central is a church that has undergone tremendous cultural change. We have moved from a church that expects staff to plan and do, to a church that recognizes individual's gifts and then releases them for ministry. We no longer coerce people onto committees where they feel ineffective and useless. Instead, people choose to be on teams where they can exercise their passion and use their gifts.

We are a church that is looking into the future and asking how we can be an effective community of faith for generations to come. Thanks be to God! Dr. Mark Trotter who is the Senior Pastor of First United Methodist Church, San Diego tells this story:

Georgene Johnson lived in Cleveland Ohio. She was 42 years old. She was trying to have a good attitude about being 42 years old, so she started running and exercising to keep in shape. She

⁶Anthony Sampson, *Mandela* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 29.

said “I’m not going to look like I am 42, or at least I am going to look like a good 42.”

She did well in her running. She was running farther every day. She thought she would try a little competition and entered a 10K race. That’s about six miles. Nervous about her first race she got up early, arrived at the start of the race. To her surprise there were a lot of people milling around, stretching, getting ready. All of a sudden a voice on the microphone said, “Move to the starting line.” This is it. A gun sounded and they were off, like a huge wave, hundreds of runners, sweeping her up. She was in the race.

After about four miles, it occurred to her that they ought to be turning around and heading back to the finish line. She wondered why they didn’t turn around. She stopped and asked an official, “How come the course isn’t turning around.?” He said, “Ma’am, you are running the Cleveland Marathon.” Twenty-six miles. Her event, the 10K, was to start a half hour after the start of the marathon.

Most of us would have stopped right there and said, that’s it, I’m going home. But to her credit, she kept right on going, finishing the race. She had this to say, “This is not the race I trained for. This is not the race I entered. But for better or worse, this is the race that I am in . . . ”⁷

Jesus calls us to stay the course. Will you? In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

⁷Mark Trotter, “*This is not the race I entered*” (A sermon preached on September 14, 1997, First UMC, San Deigo.)