

Message for May 29, 2022

Philippians 3:17 – 4:1

While rummaging through my files recently, I came across a clipping from years ago entitled “Seeking the Perfect Minister”. It is a bit dated, but it is humorous and supposedly describes what a search committee thought that their next minister ought to be like.

“The perfect minister preaches for exactly 15 minutes. He condemns sin but never upsets anybody. He works from 8:00 a.m. to midnight and is also a janitor. He makes \$100 a week, wears good clothes, buys good books, drives a good car, and gives \$100 a week to the poor. He is 28 years old and has been preaching for 30 years. He has a burning desire to work with young people and spends all his time with the seniors.

The perfect minister smiles all the time but with a straight face because she has a sense of humour that keeps her seriously dedicated to her work. She visits church families, shut-ins and the hospitalized every day. She will also spend all her time evangelizing the unchurched but will always be in the church office when needed. This is the perfect minister and if this describes you, please send your profile to our interim moderator.”

This was obviously written tongue in cheek; there is not nor ever has been a perfect minister. Indeed in my experience most ministers are well aware of their failures and shortcomings. Can you imagine then a minister being brave enough or foolish enough to get up in a pulpit and say to his or her congregation, “Listen to me! From now on I want all of you to be just like me!” I can only think of one person who would dare say that, and that person was St. Paul.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul told them that they should try and model their lives on his. Right after saying this, Paul then went on to tell them that there are two basic orientations or philosophies of life. The first is to live primarily for oneself with the attitude being that I am number one and I will spend most, if not all of my time and resources looking after me! This attitude is

summed up by asking, “What will you do for me rather than what can I do for you?”

The second basic approach to life said Paul is very different. It means trying to be like him or, more to the point, trying to be like Jesus. And even though Jesus was the Christ and the Son of God, he didn't go around demanding that others treat him as such. Rather Jesus was humble and put others first; he did so simply because he loved and had come to serve rather than be served. Paul insisted that being geared primarily to oneself or to others are the two basic choices or orientations to life, and that everyone has to make a choice between the two. Paul begged the Philippians then to choose wisely but he also hoped and prayed that they would live up to what they truly were, the citizens of heaven.

This is a part of what Paul had to say to the Philippians and there wasn't anything particularly new in what he wrote. Indeed, Jesus himself had taught much the same thing. One thing that Jesus did do however was emphasize the difficulty and challenge of being one of his disciples and striving to live a life of service. Jesus knew full well that this doesn't come easily or naturally which is why he said that trying to live as one of his followers was like trying to enter a city through a narrow gate; it was hard. How hard? The word that Jesus used for trying to do this is best translated as 'agonizing'. If we take it seriously, it is not easy to live as a Christian. Rather it can be hard, challenging, and perhaps even downright agonizing at times! In the end though, and it doesn't matter how young or old we may be, we are left with a fundamental choice as to how we will live our lives. Which then is our basic or core approach to life? Do we take the easy way and live primarily for ourselves? Or do we opt for the harder more challenging way, God's way?

In a sense we have already answered this question. If we were not at least interested in living God's way, then you probably wouldn't even be reading this message right now! The important thing that we have to realize though is that choosing to live God's way is not a once and for all choice or decision and then that is the end of it. Rather, it is an ongoing process. In the words of the great Scottish scholar of days gone by, William Barclay:

“It is easy to think that once we have made a commitment of ourselves to Jesus Christ we can, as if it were, sit back as if we had achieved our goal. There is no

such finality in the Christian life. A man must ever be going forward or necessarily he is going backwards.”

Barclay was absolutely right; when it comes to our lives as Christ's disciples there is no standing pat because we are always either going forwards or backwards. In fact whether we are going forwards or backwards is revealed each and every day by the things that we say and do. Our everyday behaviour proclaims what we truly believe. As a person once said, if we really want to know what a person truly believes, then don't watch their mouths and listen to what they say. Rather watch their hands and pay attention to what they are doing. That is the point of this old story.

There was once a man who owned a magical ring and whoever wore it became so honest, sweet, and caring that everyone loved him or her. The ring had been in the family for generations and been passed down from one generation to the next. One father though had three children and the question arose as to which one would inherit the ring when the father died. The children started to argue bitterly over who should get it. The father thought about this long and hard and finally came up with a solution. What he did was have two exact copies made of the magic ring. These copies were so good that no one could tell the difference between them and the original. He told his children that the rings would be randomly distributed amongst them after his death and that no one would know who had the real ring. At the end of a year though, everyone would know who had it because of the way in which they had behaved. The children agreed to this and after their father's death, the rings were distributed, but what happened? At the end of a year no one knew who had the original ring. No one knew because all three of the children lived as if they had it.

The moral of this old tale is obvious. What we truly believe and what we truly are is revealed by what we say and do. If we truly believe in Christ and think of ourselves as being his disciples, then this will be reflected by the things we say and do each and every day. We will take our faith seriously and strive to follow the teaching and example of Christ, even when it seems to be agonizing

at times. But of course as we all well know, none of us can live the way God wants us to all of the time. Even with all the willpower and all the good intentions in the world, we inevitably get it wrong; we do so simply because we are only human. But when we do mess it up, all is not lost. It isn't because as St. John said:

“If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

If we confess then we *are* forgiven, and it is this, the forgiveness of God, that enables us to pick ourselves up and try again. It is this that sets us free to live our lives in hope and without fear. We can learn from our mistakes and journey on, secure in the knowledge that when we are less than successful living the lives that God wants us to, we can and in fact will be forgiven. This is the great liberating promise of the gospel; that we don't have to travel through life weighed down by a guilty conscience and regret for the past. We are free to move on simply because, as St. Peter wrote:

“He himself bore our sins on his body on the tree, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.”

And so we are.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, you have called us to be your Son's disciples, and this means that amongst many things we will be a praying people. Hear us now as we do just that.

We give you thanks for this May morning and the beauty of your creation that surrounds us. We thank you for the richness and goodness of your creation, even as we remember and pray for those for whom your creation has not been so good. We especially pray for all those whose lives were, and still are so dramatically affected by last weekend's storm, coping with the downed trees and the loss of power. We pray for those who lost their homes and those who lost so much more, including loved ones. We pray as well for all those who lost their children, grandchildren, friends, spouses, or colleagues in the horrific massacre his past Tuesday in Texas. Comfort all those who are grieving and grant healing to those who have been wounded whether it be in body, mind, or soul. We pray for our American neighbours as one mass shooting follows another, even as they appear unable or unwilling to do anything to change things.

We pray this day for all the other places where there is so much death, pain, suffering and heartache. We pray for the people of Ukraine as the war continues; the people living there and those who have fled and are now refugees in their own land and elsewhere, including our own.

We pray for our land and especially our province as the election enters its final stage. We thank you that we can choose who we think would be best suited to govern, praying that you will help us to choose well.

We thank you for our church family and also the larger church of which we are a part. With the General Assembly beginning next Sunday, we pray for all of the commissioners as they wrestle with the contentious issues before them. Guide them we pray. Grant that charity, respect, and unity may prevail. To this end we also pray for the Moderator and the Clerks of Assembly.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen