

Abundant Life with a Capital "L"

Luke 9:18-27

November 18, 2007

Today is Thanksgiving Sunday; a day when we stop and intentionally remember how blessed we have been by God. On this coming Thursday, we will do what our American ancestors have done since before we were even a nation: we will feast and give thanks for this land and for the God who has brought us this far.

It is also our Consecration and Commitment Sunday. I planned it this way. This date for the presentation of our 2008 commitments was intentional because by our commitments to the work of God through Calvary United Methodist Church, we demonstrate our level of gratitude.

If you remember the last few weeks, we have been talking about our commitments. We have said that we make a commitment to God because God has made a commitment to us. Our commitment is judged in four areas: our prayers, our presence, our gifts, and our service. God uses us through all four of those areas of discipleship.

Commitment is something that is necessary for success in any endeavor in life. I graduated from college with the intention of going straight on to seminary. I had been accepted out at the University of Denver, but the problem was that I had no money. Toni and I had been married for a year and had absolutely no savings and no way to go to school. So I wrote them and told them that I needed to put seminary off for a year. They were very gracious and told me that they would hold a place for me in the next year's incoming class.

Now I was faced with the prospect of finding a job. I had a brand new bachelor's degree in my pocket but couldn't find a job anywhere. I wish someone had told me in high school that a BA in sociology is just not all that marketable.

So I went to work at Pizza Hut. I showed up at seven o'clock every morning to make 40 pounds of spaghetti, a couple of hundred pounds of pizza dough, chef salads, and pizza sauce. I chopped forty pounds of onions, forty pounds of green peppers, and fifteen or twenty heads of lettuce.

Now there is nothing at all wrong with working at Pizza Hut. It is honest labor. But my heart wasn't in it. I just wasn't committed to it and didn't do my best.

After a couple of months, I found another job. I was hired by the Fort Wayne State Hospital and Training Center as a security officer working the 11:00 pm to 7 am shift. I had worked there part time while I was in college as an Activity Therapy Assistant and so had some experience with working with retarded individuals. Our job as security officers was to pick up medication boxes from each cottage and take them to the pharmacy where they could be refilled for the next day. The rest of the night was simply being available to respond to emergencies. Every once in a while we would have to transport a sick

resident to the hospital or help subdue a resident who had become violent, but generally we just sat in our van and tried to keep from falling asleep.

Again, that was necessary work and an honorable job, but my heart wasn't in it. I wasn't committed to it and so didn't do my best.

Commitment is important. You wouldn't really think about beginning a marriage without it. You wouldn't think about having children without it. You would waste your time going to school without it. You never do your best on the job without it. And the same thing is true in the church. We can never become all that God intends for us to be without commitment to God's lifestyle and the way of Jesus Christ.

I guess that the first thing I would like you to remember is that our commitment to God comes only after God's commitment to us. Our commitment is only a response to the prior commitment that God has made. And when God makes a commitment, he stands by it.

Back in the 17th chapter of Genesis, God established a covenant with Abraham. Covenant is a legal term. It was a binding agreement between two parties.

No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you...As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations (Genesis 17:5-7, 9).

God has always held to his end of the bargain. God has always upheld the terms of the agreement. God has always been there. God has always stood by the commitment.

Time and time again, it was God's people who broke their side of the covenant. It was God's people who disobeyed, wandered away, worshiped other gods, and rejected God's leadership over them. As a result of their disobedience, the people were cast into slavery twice: in Egypt and again in Babylon. They endured wicked king after wicked king. They were defeated on the battlefield. Their worship became idolatrous, their service almost non-existent, and their faith reduced to legalistic formulations.

In any legal proceeding, if one side of the covenant fails to live up to the agreed upon stipulations, that makes the covenant null and void. But that is not the case with God. Despite continued disobedience on the part of God's people, God stood by his covenant and never left his people alone.

Through God's commitment to us, he expects us to be committed to him. What I would like to do is to offer up five things that explain what commitment means.

First, commitment means that we establish priorities. Luke 14:26-27 says this:

Anyone who comes to me but refuses to let go of father, mother, spouse, children, brothers, sisters – yes, even one's own self! – can't be my disciple. Anyone who won't shoulder his own cross and follow me can't be my disciple.

Now that's commitment. That is establishing priorities. That is putting God and Christ first. Don't misunderstand this. Putting God as your top priority never brings you into conflict with your other key priorities: your husband or wife, your parents, or your children. In reality, it is your ability and willingness to make God your top priority which actually makes it possible to be committed to others as well.

Secondly, commitment always involves sacrifice. I know that sacrifice isn't a word we like to hear too often. And it is a word that we probably don't hear enough. Luke 9:23-24 says this:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.

Real commitment involves sacrifice: always has, always will. Jesus says that if we try to save things for ourselves, we will end up losing them. But if we are willing to lose ourselves by committing to a regimen of prayers, presence, gifts, and service; then we will be blessed beyond belief.

Commitment number one is to establish priorities. Commitment number two involves sacrifice. Commitment number three involves planning ahead and looking to the future. We who call ourselves Christian and who claim membership in a local church are the means by which the work of God will be done on earth. In order to make God's work a reality, we have to plan.

Our financial commitment helps the church plan ahead. The old habit of churches was to build a budget for the coming year and then ask people to support it. We haven't been doing that around here for the last few years. The Finance Committee hasn't even begun to establish budget priorities and plans for next year. That will only happen when all of our commitments are in and tabulated. Then we will know how much we have to work with and will be in a much better position to plan.

Planning ahead is also helpful for the individuals who make their commitments. You will be able to know some of your own financial parameters for the coming year, be able to trust God more with your finances, and will discover how God enables you to keep your commitments.

The fourth commitment obviously means making some choices. We have to choose what is really important in our lives. Each Sunday, we have to make the choice of whether or

not to come to church. Every week, we have to make the choice of whether or not to fulfill our financial commitments.

Don't we tell our children that every choice we make has a consequence? Don't we tell them to choose wisely because if they don't they may have to face some unpleasantness? Making good choices is, I believe, directly related to the boldness of our commitments. Romans 6:16 says, "Don't you realize that whatever you choose to obey becomes your master." You can choose sin, which leads to death, or you can choose to obey God and receive his approval."

Not only are we about to make important choices as we present our commitment cards, but we are also faced with the opportunity to teach our children and our grandchildren about the ways to make their own choices in life.

A fifth meaning of commitment is found in finishing a task and staying the course. Paul writes to Timothy and says this, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race. I have kept the faith" (II Timothy 4:7-8). Commitment means that we continue on with our task of spiritual growth so that our Christian faith continues to expand and mature. I know enough about sports to know that unless teams and every individual on those teams are committed to playing hard until the clock runs out, they will never win.

So there are the five parts of commitment: establishing priorities, sacrifice, planning ahead, making choices, and finishing the task. And yet I think there is one more. It is commitment to each other.

If any church is going to succeed, the members need to work together as a team. Members in every church have to be able to encourage and build one another up. That involves accepting everyone as they are, living in agreement with each other, loving each other, and finding joy in the gathered community.

I have been convinced for a long, long time that no one gets to heaven on his or her own. It requires us to live in community where we learn from each other, teach each other, love each other, care for each other, worry about each other, and rejoice with each other. Being responsible in our prayers, presence, gifts, and service will mean that we are committed to each other.

What we are being offered from God today is life – abundant life with a capital "L." That abundant life is a new relationship with Christ, with the church, and with each other. We are being offered more of that for which we are thirsty.

As we come down in just a moment to present our Estimate of Giving cards for 2008, we are acknowledging that we have had a taste from the river of grace that flows from God's throne. Our commitments are our recognition of the blessings we have received. We commit ourselves and our finances so that the work of God can continue.