

The Message for Sunday, June 27, 2010

Title: “Doing Difficult Things”

Scripture: Luke 9:51-62

I. Difficult things... I recently read how to catch a porcupine. An experienced woodsman once advised: “Watch for the slapping tail as you dash in and drop a large washtub over him. The washtub will give you something to sit on while you ponder your next move.” (*Bits & Pieces*, September, 1989, found at www.sermonillustrations.com)

I could have used that advice the day a possum got loose in the church kitchen in Lewisburg. He was discovered by the kitchen crew who cooked lunch everyday for our pre-school. One of them came running to the office shouting something about a large rat loose in the kitchen. Rounding up that possum was more difficult than one might imagine.

A lot of things in life are difficult. In 1978, Dr. Scott Peck wrote a book entitled, *The Road Less Traveled*. (published by Arrow and reprinted in paperback in 1998 by Touchstone) It has sold over ten million copies. The book opens with the phrase, “Life is difficult.” (M. Scott Peck quotes (American psychiatrist and Author, 1936-2005; http://thinkexist.com/quotation/life_is_difficult-this_is_the_great_truth-one_of/340871.html)

One of the reasons for the popularity of the book is that *life really is difficult*. Each of us faces difficult things every day. When I was a child, one of the most difficult things that I had to face was the memorization of the multiplication tables. As a youth and adult, one of the most difficult things I have had to face is attempting to control my weight. All throughout my life, I had have to deal with difficult things. And you have, also.

As to what is most difficult—well that seems to vary from person to person. And yet, after doing a little research, there seems to be some agreement that rearing a child is the most difficult job in the world. Your list probably contains some things that probably do not sound all that difficult to me; and that is because each of us is unique, our situation is life is unique, and how we react is unique.

II. Jesus asked difficult things... Not a one of us is exempt from having to do difficult things. It has long been my opinion that one of the most poignant verses in the entire New Testament is the opening verse of the morning’s scripture lesson. Verse 51 says, “When the days drew near for Him to be taken up, He set his face to go to Jerusalem.” (Luke 9:51) Jesus knew what awaited him in Jerusalem. He knew that once he got there, He would receive His public condemnation and execution. It had to be a very difficult thing to do. But, the passage is about His followers also having to do difficult things.

In my new *Wesley Study Bible*, there is a note on that verse. It says, “Many people are unable to follow him on that journey.” And then, the note continues by saying, “The cross is crowded out by the cares of life.” (Abingdon [Nashville], 2009, p. 1256, *ad loc.*) The rest of the passage in Luke goes on to bear this out.

One of the very first things Jesus did after turning to go up to Jerusalem was to pass through a Samaritan village. It was a difficult decision to stop at that village. For nearly

700 years, there had been a great deal of enmity between the Jews and the people of Samaria. There, at the Samaritan village, the first of his stops on the way to Jerusalem, Jesus was rejected.

The disciples asked Jesus to approve of the destruction of the village. But, Jesus rebuked them for their hostile intention and simply turned away from the village. Naturally, this prompted conversation while they were on the road.

Someone said to Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go."

And what then follows is a very difficult passage for many to deal with, or even accept. Jesus imposed some very difficult expectations toward people who first wanted to take care of person issues before following Him.

It was then that Jesus said, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." (Luke 9:62)

I am, by no means, a country boy. But, even I know what happens if a person attempts to plow by looking backwards. The row will never go where it was intended; nor will it ever be straight. When Jesus made that last comment, he was saying that if you want to be one of His disciples, then you can not become distracted by the things of this world.

It is a harsh saying; and, it is one of the most difficult things Jesus asks us to do. And about that, I want to make these few comments.

III. Life is hard... The first thing I want to say is this. The late Chicago journalist, Sydney Harris, once said, "When I hear somebody sigh, 'Life is hard,' I am always tempted to ask, 'Compared to what?'" (Sydney J. Harris, 1917-1986; http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/s/sydney_j_harris_2.html)

Next to William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe is renown as one of the most influential playwrights of Elizabethan England. He once wrote a poem entitled, "The Compassionate Shepherd to His Love." (published in 1599, 6 years after his death)

In it there is the verse that reads,

"There will I make thee beds of roses,
And a thousand fragrant posies,
A cap of flowers, and a kirtle
Embroider'd all with leaves of myrtle."

While his poem is lauded for its style, many poets and critics have argued that life is no bed of roses. In spite of that, the idea that life might be compared to a bed of roses seems to have taken off. It has captured the minds, imaginations and hearts of many, many people. Somehow, especially in my generation—the generation that gave us hippies and drop-outs—there is a good segment of the population that believes life is, or ought to be, a bed of roses. I refer, specifically, to a generation that has "milked the fire" out of the concept of entitlement. The contemporary culture seems to have gotten the idea that if certain conditions are met, we can somehow achieve a kind of earthly perfection—especially if there is enough money involved.

Life is not a bed of roses. Life is difficult; and we are often faced with difficult decisions. I think of the child whose parents are getting to the point in their lives where they are becoming incapable of making sound, healthy decisions. A number of us have

had to face dealing with living conditions or financial conditions brought on by what age does to the mind and body.

I think of the parent who is having trouble with a child—of any age. Sometimes, children in their 20's and even their 30's can have more significant problems than smaller children who are still in grade school. There are many difficult decisions to be made concerning a child who refuses to get a job, or who can not keep a job. There are many difficult decisions to be made concerning a child who is experimenting with illegal, habit forming substances—or who is struggling with addictions.

I think of the difficulties that arise out of the many surprises life brings. What can make a day more difficult than learning that you are diagnosed with a medical condition, you are facing a divorce, or you are losing your job?

And then, there is this. I know that a marriage requires doing difficult things. It is difficult to give someone else all of your attention when you have had a lousy day at work. I know how difficult it is to give up something you wanted because your spouse or one of your children—or a parent—needs something.

Well, that is the first thing I want to say. Life is no bed of roses. Life is difficult.

IV. Facing your difficulties... The second thing I want to say is this. Recently, our youth studied a book entitled, *Do Hard Things* (Alex Harris & Brett Harris, Multnomah Books [Colorado Springs], 2008). Chapter 8 begins with the story of a youth named, Tyler.

Tyler thought about graduating from high school early. But, he was not sure he could do it; so he did not try. After high school, Tyler had a couple of ideas for a business start-up. But, he did not want to risk losing his money. So, he did not start a new business. He also considered going to college so that he might become an environmental engineer. But, he thought he might change his mind before he could finish the degree. So, he stayed home and did not go to college. By the time Tyler was twenty-one years old, he really hadn't *failed* at anything—because difficult things had kept him from doing *anything*!

Fear of difficult things often paralyzes us and keeps us from facing life. I'm sure the Disciples thought Jesus was out of His mind when He first set His face to go up to Jerusalem. Every one of them knew in his heart that Jesus was going to his death—and they might be going to theirs. But, the difference with them is that they went with him—in spite of their fears and their objections.

I do not need to know what it is, but I want you to ask yourselves this morning: “What difficult thing am I facing and possibly trying to avoid—by not doing anything?”

First, I want to assure you that difficult things will not go away simply because you refuse to face them. I also want to assure you that you are not the only one who has had to face difficult things. And, you will not be the first person to risk failure if you attempt something difficult. But, I also want to assure you that the only way a problem does not get solved—one way or another—is if you refuse to deal with it.

And then, let me say this before I move on to my third point. A very wise person once said, “Some people complain that God put thorns on roses, while others praise God for putting roses on thorns.” (Anonymous, quoted in a sermon entitled, “A Choir for the Complaining,” Sunday, June 21, 2009, www.homileticsonline.com)

You can face your problems with the attitude of a defeatist, or you can face your problems knowing that with God, all things are possible—all things! Remember: There is a world of difference between “difficult” and “impossible.” Your partnership with God makes the difference in whether it is impossible or merely difficult. For God, there is no problem too big.

V. For God... The third thing I want to say is this. Attempt something difficult for God. In this age of many sermons being about self-help, it is difficult to find illustrations that talk about overcoming difficulties when witnessing for your Christian faith. And, that is because people are so concerned about their own survival and success that they often simply miss the call that God places on our lives to witness to the Gospel.

Perhaps you love music and would like to sing in a choir, ring hand bells, or lead a choir. But, going to those weekly rehearsals is a discipline you have trouble considering. Maybe we can move a little deeper. What about the difficulty of getting your children to participate in a church activity? The success of any church’s children or youth program does not ultimately lie with the effectiveness of the director. It lies in the determination of the parent to stress participation with a positive attitude.

Consider your title. You know my passion for cars. A long time ago, I discovered that I could afford a used Porsche or Jaguar, or one of those magnificent 1947 MGs—if I did not give on a weekly basis to the ministry of the church.

Wow! I could be driving a Porsche! It could have been a difficult thing for me to give up a Porsche had it not been for one thing. I believe that following God requires making difficult decisions and doing difficult things. And, I want to follow God more than own a classic car.

Relatively speaking, all of those examples I gave were small things. I have discovered that the small things usually are more difficult to face than the big things.

Attempt something difficult for God!

VI. It is well... In 1871, Horatio Spafford (1828-1888) was a fortunate man. He was a successful attorney in Chicago, and had invested heavily in downtown Chicago properties. He was happily married and had four daughters. And then in April of 1871, there was the Great Chicago Fire. It destroyed everything the Spaffords owned. And yet, they were comforted because they had all escaped the horrendous fire.

Just two years later, they had a son. But, he died several months later. In the midst of their grief, they were given an opportunity of traveling to Europe with Dwight L. Moody for his next evangelistic campaign. They planned on going to Jerusalem and the Holy Land following that.

Just before Thanksgiving of 1873, Horatio put his wife and four daughters on a ship bound for Europe (the *Ville de Havre*). His plan was to remain in Chicago, finish up some business, and then sail to meet them several weeks later. A week after his family departed, Spafford read the horrifying headlines in the paper that the ship carrying his family had struck another ship in mid-Atlantic and had sunk.

On December 1, Spafford received a telegram from his wife. It was only two words: “Saved alone.” His four daughters were lost. Spafford boarded the next ship for Europe.

As he crossed over the Atlantic, words of consolation formed in his heart. He could not get them out of his head. They were, “Even so, it is well with my soul.” Once on the other side of the Atlantic, Spafford penned the words to that great hymn.

Most of us remember the words to the hymn, but let me simply read a verse that is often left out of most modern hymnals:

“For me, be it Christ, be it Christ hence to live:
If Jordan above me shall roll,
No pain shall be mine, for in death as in life
Thou wilt whisper Thy peace to my soul.”

But, that’s not the end of the story. The Spaffords eventually moved to Jerusalem and established a ministry outreach to people of all nationalities and races who did not know the reality of Christ’s love and His peace like a river. (This story is available from many sources, particularly biographical articles on Horatio Spafford, and on his hymn, “It Is Well With My Soul.”)

What the Spaffords had to face was as great a difficulty as any parent will ever face. But, with God’s help they not only were able to do a difficult thing for themselves, they also did a difficult thing for God.

Attempt difficult things. You can do it because God is your partner. Amen.

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