

"PRESCRIPTION FOR PROCRASTINATORS"

A Sermon By

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TEXT: "And Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God.'"

Luke 9: 62

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
New York, New York
Sunday, January 2, 1983

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INTRODUCTION

This is January 2nd - one day after some of us made our New Year's resolutions. If your resolution was to go to Church every Sunday in 1983, you're off to a fine start. But if it was to go on a diet, watch out - today may be the day you break it. But you can always begin tomorrow.

And that's called procrastination. In Latin, it means "belonging to tomorrow". And all of us can find all kinds of reasons to put things off until tomorrow.

DEVELOPMENT

I had a roommate in college who had a certain ritual that he insisted on following before settling down to study. It was my sophomore year; neither of us liked to study very much and we were both forever devising schemes to postpone studying.

Everything had to be just right in order to study. The temperature had to be perfect or he couldn't get started - not too warm, not too chilly. He'd come back to the room after the library closed, put on his robe and slippers, get the pillows off his bed and arrange them in the chair so that he would have the proper posture sitting at his desk. He'd carefully adjust his special lamp that he had bought that Fall, shining at the right distance from the bookstand, which he had also purchased so his books would be at the proper angle. After sharpening his pencils, he'd then put on an eyeshade, so his eyes wouldn't tire from the glare of the lamp. He'd put ear plus in his ears to keep out distracting noises. He usually liked to have something near by to munch on. Finally he would sit down on all those pillows and - yes, you guessed it. He'd take a short nap. This ritual... procedure could last for an hour.

Bud Schulberg described how it was when he tried to write. Like so many people who do creative work, he found it extremely difficult to get started. Said he:

"When it's time for me to write first I clean the typewriter. Then I go to my shelves and I return all the books that belong to my friends. Then I play with the children. Then I find some friends to have a drink with. And then it's time to clean my typewriter again."

Putting things off until tomorrow. Procrastination is what it's called.

PSYCHOLOGY / PROCRASTINATION

A recent issue of Psychology Today had an article about procrastination. Being a psychological journal, it's no surprise that deep psychological reasons for procrastination were cited.

The article written by two psychologists in Berkeley was based on their study of chronic procrastinators. They claim we procrastinate because of fear and anxiety about failure. They said that people they studied feared that if they were ever put to the test - some exam or performance - they would prove to be failures. They kept putting off preparation so they didn't do well, but they would always have an excuse. They could say, "I didn't do well because I didn't study. I didn't do well because I had too many interruptions, or there were too many demands on my time".

They always had an excuse, so you couldn't say that they didn't do well because they weren't good enough or smart enough. Their creed might be, "better not to have tried at all than to have tried and failed."

These psychologists said that perfectionists are especially guilty of procrastination. Those who believe that whatever they do has to be perfect or they will feel that they themselves are failures. Falling short of perfection in anything that they do is going to mean that their lives are no good. Fear of failure paralyzes them and they can't act. So they procrastinate. They keep putting it off.

ANOTHER REASON FOR IT According to psychologists, fear of failure is the reason we procrastinate. And I suppose that there's some truth to that. I know I have enough of that perfectionism in me to want to postpone situations in which I feel like I'm going to be judged. But I believe there's another, more real reason for our procrastination, especially when it comes to New Year's resolutions.

In the case of those of us who decided a long time ago that we're not going to be perfect in this life, so we no longer try to be perfect, but we still have high standards, we still make our New Year's resolutions, and we still try to live with good intentions, we still try to pattern our life after Jesus Christ... there's no deep psychological reason why we procrastinate. We have simply discovered that it's very hard to begin our lives again. We have set aside great resolutions to begin, we've made pledges that we're going to start over again, we've ready Dear Abby's resolutions for the New Year and said, "they're good and I'm really going to try to follow those rules" - and then...in a few days we find ourselves not living up to them.

We procrastinate because we know it's going to be hard work. It's not going to be easy to turn our lives around - to break a habit, or start something new. It will demand from us a commitment that it is not easy for us to make. It will mean sacrifice on our part. It will mean the rearrangement of some priorities in our life, and with all the demands upon us from family, from friends, from work - it's not easy to rearrange those priorities. We've already made commitments. But if we are going to say "yes" to a new life, then we are going to have to say "no" to a lot of other things. And that probably means that we won't do it - not now. We'll put it off until the time is more appropriate.

TODAY'S TEXT Our text this morning from Luke's Gospel illustrates that propensity in all human beings, so don't feel badly. Jesus calls somebody to follow Him into new life and the man responds saying, "I want to do that, Lord, but first let me go bury my father". And Jesus responds with words that seem to us at first to be very harsh, in fact, even cruel, unless we understand the context of this passage, which is to illustrate that following Jesus means a commitment of our lives and a re-arrangement of our priorities, so that He will be first. That's the point. So when He says to a man, "Follow Me", and the man says, "I want to do that, but first let me bury my father", He says, "Let the dead bury the dead". And another man said, "I want to follow You, but first let me go say 'goodbye' to the folks at home". And Jesus responds with that stiff, challenging word, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God".

You see, Jesus knows all about procrastination. He knows that we can find all kinds of important things to do to postpone our doing the essential thing. He knows

that we postpone beginning the "new life", when we know that we could start living that life today. That's what this business about Christmas and the Messiah means. It means that the Kingdom of God is here now and Jesus is available now for those who want to begin a new life. It's not some time in the future. It's now. That's why He says to people, "Follow Me" - right now, if you're willing to rearrange your priorities and make some commitments and decisions and sacrifices. And oh - that's so hard. And that's why we end up so often - procrastinating.

BEING A CHRISTIAN Sometimes I think we have forgotten that "being a Christian" means that we live with pretty high standards. We're supposed to be growing all the time. We're supposed to be maturing from the time we enter this Christian life until the day comes that we are graduated into that other life. We're always growing - always going on, always giving more, to perfection, as John Wesley use to put it - always becoming better.

That's not fashionable. The standard in our day is simply "acceptable behavior". Do whatever is acceptable behavior. What is acceptable is always changing, and from what I can see is slipping lower and lower. But nowhere in the New Testament do I read that a Christian is a person who conforms to "acceptable behavior". A Christian is a person who patterns his or her life after that which is exemplary - after the pattern of Christ. He's our model, and if we do that then we're going to find that is hard and difficult. We're going to fail at doing it, and we're going to have to start over again, and again and again.

Bishop Francis McConnell, Bishop of the NY Area back in the early forties, use to tell about presiding over a Methodist Conference in West Virginia where it was customary for the preachers to report at the time of the rollcall how many people they had converted in their parishes that year. Well, preachers are poor statisticians and usually end up packing the numbers. You've heard of the preacher's count of the congregation - always 10% higher than what it is. As the preachers reported the number of conversions the number kept growing and growing. Finally the Bishop interrupted the call and said, "I would estimate from hearing your reports that so far you've converted more people than there are in the entire state of West Virginia". One of the preachers stood up and said, "Mr. Bishop, down here you have to convert them several times a year!"

That's true not only in West Virginia. I've found it true in places like New York City. And it's not only true in New York, it was true in Palestine, 2,000 years ago. Peter is the first in the order of disciples. Peter is the leader of the disciples, upon Peter Jesus built His Church. He's the example for us. His story in the New Testament tells us that the journey of faith is not upwards and onwards, the journey of faith is up and down. And there were at least three occasions recorded in the Scriptures where Peter had to begin all over again. He failed and had to pick himself up and start over again. And if Peter had to do that, I think it's probably likely that you will, too.

CLOSING And that's why Jesus said the important thing is to start and then don't look back, that is, don't give up. Keep on going...forward. And when you stumble, as we all do, get back up and keep on going. Begin over again. That's the pattern of the Christian life. The Christian life is not upward and onward, but rather it is "up" and "down", beginning and falling and beginning over again. Maybe that's why Jesus said that if you can't do that...if you can't, when you put your hand to the plow, keep going, then you're really not fit for the Kingdom of God.

It came to me as great encouragement when I came across a prayer written by Theodore Parker Ferris. Ferris was a man I admired greatly. For 30 years he was the great Rector, the great spirit of Trinity Church in Boston, an extraordinary preacher. I had the privilege of often hearing him preach when I was a seminary student in Boston. Whenever he came to New York for Lenten services I would always try to hear him. The prayer I use before my sermons here was the one he used.

When he died in 1972, and his papers were gathered together, it was revealed that Theodore Parker Ferris was a man who had many private struggles. Nobody knew about it, but he had his "ups" and his "downs". They found among his possessions a prayer written on the back of a beverage list from American Airlines. He had written it while he was flying to make a speech somewhere - a perfect prayer for pilgrims. It's a perfect prayer for you and for me, those of us who try to live by high standards and find that we have to begin over and over again.

It's a good prayer for a New Year's communion service and I hope you'll try to remember it as you kneel at the altar and receive the elements this morning. Let me read it to you as our closing prayer at this point in our service.

"Lord Jesus, I would like to be able to do myself the things that I help others to do. I can give them a confidence I myself do not have and I can quiet their anxieties but not my own.

What do I lack? Or, is it the way I am made? I want to be free to move from place to place without fear. I want to face the things that have to be done without panic or tension. You did it and you made it possible for others to do it. You didn't count on drugs. You trusted Your Father. You didn't turn away from life, nor did You seek pain or death. You met each day as it came. You mastered life by living from within.

I would like to do the same, but by myself I can't. I would like to think that You can be with me and in me and that with Your help I can do better with the days that are before me, and the year that beckons.

Lord Jesus, increase my trust and my faith.

Amen"