

"WHAT THE GOSPEL IS ALL ABOUT"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

Charles Kuralt was driving up a mountain in Peru when a man suddenly appeared out of the trees by the side of the road. He was wearing a black hood over his head, waving something in his hands and shouting at the top of his voice. Kuralt was terrified. He knew that the man must be a gun-wielding bandit and he hesitated for a moment...trying to decide whether to go forward or to back up and head down the mountain. Just about at that moment the man shouted something again...stumbling and running toward the car Kuralt was driving. The decision made, Kuralt shifted gears and bolted forward...straight ahead. But somehow this strange man changed his course and managed to intercept him on the road. Kuralt drove for his life.

The man reached the car, removed the hood from his face and waved the object he had in his hand frantically as Kuralt zoomed by. Then Kuralt saw what the man was holding. It was a fish. Apparently the man had stayed up all night fishing in a nearby lake and had finally caught something and now was simply trying to sell it to a passing motorist. Kuralt had seen mountain bandits in those moments and yes, he was frightened...terrified. Later he wrote these words about this incident:

"We met as if by destiny....but one of us was from another world and wildly misunderstanding...."

DEVELOPMENT

We've all had our share of such misunderstandings. For instance, you see someone and immediately expect the worst of them because of how they are dressed or where you happen to be. Or, you can misunderstand someone by simply not listening to them. Comics have often portrayed husbands as sitting behind a newspaper at the breakfast table, answering a wife with that occasional "yes, dear...of course"....but not really hearing her. We're guilty of not really listening and a misunderstanding takes place. It happens to us all.

I love the story told about Tom Burns who was on an ocean voyage. It was his first one and he was seated at a dining table with a Frenchman who obviously spoke no English. And since Burns didn't know any French, their meals for the most part were enjoyed in silence. The only time they spoke was at the beginning of the meal. The Frenchman would nod at Burns and quietly say, "Bon appetit". Burns, not sure how to respond, would nod and reply, "Tom Burns".

This was the pattern for three days at sea. But one day a friend took Burns to one side and began berating him. His friend said,

"You ignoramus! That French fellow you eat dinner with is not telling you his name. 'Bon appetit' is simply French for 'good appetite'. That's what he is saying to you...."

Well, Burns was ready at the next meal. When the Frenchman entered the dining room and sat down, Tom Burns nodded at him and said with a smile, "Bon appetit". The Frenchman smiled in return and replied, "Tom Burns!"

TODAY'S TEXT

Misunderstandings are a common part of life. Remember that. It should be no surprise that misunderstandings arose between Jesus and His disciples, not once but a number of times...going in opposite directions.

Take a look at today's scripture passage. Remember Jesus told His disciples several times what was going to happen to Him once they reached Jerusalem. He said,

"The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill Him, and three days after being killed, He will rise again...."

Even though they heard it more than once, I'm sure, the disciples did not fully comprehend what it was that Jesus was trying to tell them. Who knows. Maybe they thought He was giving them another parable, one they were finding hard to understand. Or maybe they were too frightened to think of the implications of what Jesus was saying...betrayal, death, resurrection.

This is suggesting a lesson that we need to learn and that is that we have to be "ready" to receive Christ's message. That's a truism of life. Some children read before others. Some learn their multiplication tables before others at an early age. And some people simply take a lot longer than others in "coming" to Christ.

I was reading about Lee Strobel who was the legal affairs Editor for the Chicago Tribune. Charles Colson in his book, The Body, shares this with us. Although Strobel had been raised as a Christian, he was now a self-proclaimed atheist. At one point in their marriage, his wife, Leslie, had been moved to commit her life to Christ and become an active Christian in a church through the efforts of a friend.

But when Leslie tried to share her new found faith with her husband, he was not at all impressed. He really didn't want to get involved. He didn't have anything specifically against the church. However, Leslie kept urging Lee to go to church with her, telling him that if he came for nothing else, at least he would hear good music while there and would enjoy that. Eventually her tactic worked and Lee went to church with his wife. And the music was great. The people seemed OK. The after church coffee was good, too. But beyond that, the pastor spoke about God's grace that morning....and something seemed to "click" for Lee. It sounded wonderful to him and he came back, but his skepticism still had a strong hold of him. He had to find out about God's grace on his own and so he began...

With his legal and journalistic background, Lee began a rather intensive investigation which took about two years. He researched other religions, he read the Bible, shopped around and continued to come with his wife, Leslie, a couple of Sundays each month. And when Lee realized that he had finally run out of questions, he took the step and made his personal surrender. He made a commitment to Christ.

But it took Lee Strobel two years of searching before he finally received the "message" to step forward - the word of Christ in its entirety. Two years before that defining moment. Some people, of course, take much longer. I remember a man in my early years here for whom it took close to ten years before he took that step. Some people spend a lifetime looking, searching, asking, wondering....some never do receive Christ and make the decision.

We have to be ready to receive Christ, but there is a problem that's of even greater concern than that of "time"...of asking and searching. Let me speak to it.

MANY WHO THINK THEY HAVE CHRIST FIGURED OUT ARE MISTAKEN

Some who think
that they have Christ

all figured out can be mistaken.

Take the disciples for instance. On one occasion while they were making their way through Galilee, Jesus noticed they were having a rather lively discussion behind Him and so He asked them when they arrived at Capernaum, "What were you fellows arguing about along the way?" They were a bit embarrassed for they were arguing about who among them was "the greatest". They wanted to know who would be second in command behind Jesus. Instead of focusing on what Jesus was teaching them, they were busy campaigning among themselves for the "top position".

And Jesus chided them for their foolish behavior. And then you know what He did? He took a child who was playing nearby and placed the child there before them. He wanted His disciples to identify with the child, instead of with power and prestige. He said to them,

"Whoever welcomes on such child in My name welcomes
Me. And whoever welcomes Me welcomes not Me, but
the One who sent Me." (Mark 9: 37)

We have here something of an object lesson to show the disciples how "out of whack" their priorities were. He placed a child in front of them. There is something about a child that speaks to us about simplicity and trust and love.

Manny Lawton was a prisoner of war during World War II. He was captured by the Japanese along with hundreds of other American and Filipino soldiers. He survived the infamous Bataan Death March on which many soldiers died. Andy Liberato of our own congregation was in that Bataan Death March and survived. The year was 1942.

It was about at this point in the war that the Japanese moved some of the prisoners regularly and on one of these moves, Manny remembers many men being loaded into a crowded freight train. Hungry. Thirsty. Ill, many of them....and they had pretty much given up all hope. They were unsure what would happen to them or where they were going. Many of them were questioning whether the price they were paying for trying to help the people of the Philippines was really worth it.

The train they were on had to make several stops along the way and at one of these stops there were some young children playing on the train platform. The doors had been opened on the train, allowing Manny and many of the others to see the children and it also allowed the children to see the prisoners. Soon the children began to hum a familiar tune. They hummed it over and over until the train left. They hummed it because if they had sung the words, the Japanese soldiers would probably have shot them all. The familiar tune that they were humming was "God bless America".

This lifted the spirits of the men more than anything else that had happened since they were captured. "God bless America. Land that I love". And the rest of the journey was not nearly as rough as it might have been. This "musical incident" as it came to be known or called, had fortified the desire of the soldiers to live, and to survive....all because a group of children had shown their appreciation for them. They heard some children sing and their whole perspective changed.

It was this sort of thing, I'm sure, that Jesus was hoping for with the disciples. He wanted them to think not in terms of power but in terms of the powerless - the children. The drive for power has wreaked much heartache in this world, and it is still a constant threat in every part of society. Jesus is still looking for people who are willing to give up their own power to a power that is much greater. What's it to be: loveless power or powerless love?

CHRIST'S CALL: ABOUT SACRIFICE AND NOT SUCCESS

There are many people now-a-days who are tempted to turn the Christian Gospel on its head. They have convinced themselves that following Jesus will make them successful. They're the ones that preach that Jesus will not only provide your every need, but also your every want. They preach Jesus as the "KEY" to prosperous, fun-filled living. These folks are in danger of missing everything that Jesus stood for. Following Jesus will not lead you to success. Rather it will lead you to service. Jesus put it this way:

"Whoever wants to be FIRST must be last
of all and servant of all....."

I heard a story the other day that's worth passing on. It seems the mother of a woman in her thirties suffered a terribly stroke and she took her mother into her own home in order to care better for her. She was loving and attentive toward her mother's every need. However, it was not always that easy and one day the mother and daughter got into a rather heated argument. There was yelling and screaming....at each other for a while and then the daughter went off into another room. Silence settled over the house. Later, when the daughter returned with a meal her mother asked her, "Why are you doing all of this for me....anyway?"

The daughter began listing her reasons and there were a lot of them. She told her mother that she wanted her to get well. She told her that she felt a little guilty for ignoring her when she was younger. She didn't want to have her end up in a home. She wanted her to be near her family. Reasons of this sort...

"Rubbish" said the mother to her daughter. "What do you mean 'rubbish'?" asked the daughter. Again the mother said,

"Rubbish....I mean rubbish. You don't have to have all those reasons. We love each others, and that's enough!"

Yes, that is enough. It ought to be enough. That is what the Gospel is all about. It's not about who chairs the board, or who is "top dog" in this organization or that. It's not about who gets to sing the solo. It's all about love - self-giving love. It is about the kind of love Christ showed us.

CLOSING

The question we close with is this: are you ready to receive the full Gospel message today? Are you ready to "open" yourself to His love, His forgiveness, His challenge? There are those in our churches who have gotten Christ's message all wrong. Nowhere in the Gospel is He promising that He will make you a success. Rather He is asking you to be a servant, for Him and for our world. The Gospel is about love. Christ loves us. We love one another. It's as simple as that. In the words of that mother - that is enough.

LET US PRAY

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence in these quiet moments, O God. Wrestle with us in the deep and dark corners of our hearts, our lives....where shadows of fear and anxiety may be lurking. Remind us that Christ's call has more to do with sacrifice than with success. Forgive us that sometimes we fail to catch what His message is all about. Help us always to be ready to receive Christ. Take the impulses of this hour...the intentions and decision that may be at work within us... confirm them and stretch them. In His name, we pray. Amen.