

August 3, 2008  
Joshua 24:14 *et. seq.*  
Luke 24:13-16, 28-31  
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### “You Bet Your Life”

The assignment Peter has given the retired clergy for this summer’s preaching series is for each of us to reflect upon his or her summer vacation, and to preach on some insight which has come to light on our journey. That sounded great, but Norma and I haven’t had a vacation. Oh, we went to a wedding in Wisconsin, and spent two days with the Mantheys at their summer home, but our vacation really begins tomorrow when we leave for California.

That doesn’t mean our summer has been wasted. There’s a lot of beauty right here at home. We especially have enjoyed Norma’s garden this year, and the trees in our backyard finally have gotten tall enough to give us some real shade on our deck. So come on over. Things generally start around five, and dinner is whatever you bring.

One thing has occurred with Norma and me simply because I’ve been a pastor so long. A lot of couples whom I’ve married are now celebrating their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary and they look us up. One couple said they Googled us to see if we were still alive. The point is a number of them are inviting us to their parties: God bless ‘em all!

Last month at one of those celebrations, there were five couples present whose marriages I solemnized over 50 years ago...all still married! We got to talking, and the subject came up about the pre-marital counseling sessions which we had prior to their weddings. I was interested in finding out what I had told them 50 years ago—maybe it would be something I could still put into practice myself. “Commitment” is what one of them said he remembered right off. *Commitment!* And the others joined in, “*Yes, commitment.*” One husband recalled that after our first meeting he knew he was betting his life on this marriage. He was betting his life. I like that. “You bet your life!” I had 34 weddings that year and six of those couples are in church here this very morning.

But I’d like to skip now from 1958 to 1970. That was the year the record-breaking movie was “*Love Story*” starring Ryan O’Neal and Ali McGraw. Some of you are old enough to remember, and to remember that when the couple in that story got married, they wrote their own wedding vows instead of using the traditional liturgy. They wanted to make the service more personal, and actually it was very touching. In fact I thought it was great. But apparently, so did thousands of couples across the country that were planning weddings. That year

in our church a number of couples asked if they could write their own vows. What could I say? "Yes! But only if you bring me a copy of the vows in advance: I think I'd like to read them first."

There was only one couple who posed a problem. They altered the vows to read: "...for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health, so long as we both shall love...instead of "so long as we both shall live." Uh oh, I thought.

"Well, this will be our first marriage," the bride said, "and we certainly wouldn't want to stay married if we thought we weren't in love." Uh oh. We scheduled another appointment, that couple and I, but someone else performed that service, and I understand it was done rather quickly before they fell out of love. As beautiful as that "Love Story" movie was, I was glad when that fad with writing-your-own-vows had run its course.

## I I.

Or has it? If the basic problem is with commitment, that problem is still very much around. Perhaps it has always been with us. Not just with marriage vows, but with every covenant—even our covenant with God? Is there within all of us a propensity to lose commitment? That's apparently what happened with those Israelites in the Old Testament. Even after they reached the Promised Land, they had problems holding fast to what they had committed. Joshua discovered that the land God promised them was already occupied by tribes of people who believed that that land was *their* land. They didn't know about any God who promised it to strangers. In fact they didn't know the God who had made that promise. As far as they were concerned, these Jews were illegal immigrants, who needed to be shot or sent back to Egypt.

Well, Joshua and his people occupied the Promised Land all right, because Joshua was a warrior, but it meant one battle after another. (And the irony is, by the way, that that same struggle is going on today in the Promised Land.)

In due time, however, a deeper problem occurred with those Israelites. The Israelites had this perennial tendency to forget *their* God (if you please) and even to lapse into one or more of the pagan cults which existed among those people whom they met in their new land. You see, it is one thing to assimilate geographically. But it is another thing to be able to keep your faith when you and your people are a minority in the land, any land in which the popular culture doesn't share your faith, or doesn't hold any obedience to your God and his laws. If you are a minority in a society where "anything goes" (if you please), it is not so easy then to keep your commitment to God. In fact many commitments aren't easy to keep.

Some years ago, before the iron curtain came down, our church in Avon Lake sponsored a refugee from Czechoslovakia. Vit Slavisky. A brilliant teacher, he had been a devout Christian and refused to join the Communist party. He became a marked man, and in the middle of one night, in fear for his life, he hiked across the border and made his way to a refugee camp. Before Vit came to us we knew he once had been active in the Catholic church, but since now he was sponsored by the United Church of Christ, we wondered what church he would want to attend in Avon Lake. He was Catholic but after all, we were his sponsor. "What's the problem?" he said. He was glad to go to both churches and the truth was he couldn't believe we had even given that a thought. The issue in Czechoslovakia was not are you a Catholic or are you a Protestant? The issue was, Do you believe in God? Are you committed to God? Are you betting your life on God and His love? Or are you a Communist, betting your life on the government? Or, have you chosen to bet your life on nothing...to simply wait and hang around and hope someday to be in a secular society where "*Anything Goes?*" Choosing a church wasn't the issue. God was the issue: your commitment to God!

"Choose ye this day whom you will serve, but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

Dear friends, commitment is still the issue. Here in our country there aren't exactly pagan cults to lure us, and certainly communism isn't attractive. But we don't need pagan cults for our commitment to be jeopardized. The force of the popular culture does it here in our land. That's the attraction. The Gallup poll claims most Americans believe in God, but the popular culture says otherwise. Our priorities are not God's priorities, and we know that. The glitzy advertisements that hook us, the pressure of our peers, keeping up with the neighbors, loving violence. You say you don't love violence, but an awful lot of Americans love it...they want it on TV, they want it in the movies. And there's the idea that while our money doesn't buy everything, for anything else there's Master Card. We don't purport to put money first, but we always seem to want more of what money buys. Read the morning papers, watch the newscasts, scan the catalogs. All of that stuff shakes loose our commitment, and much of it is spelled mammon. Most commitments aren't easy to keep.

### III.

How does one stay faithful then? So much of it begins in the home. Commitment has a lot to do with what we learn there, what we teach, and how we live there. That's what Joshua was trying to tell his people. "Choose ye this day whom you will serve...but as for me and my house...our family...the people who live here, the children we give birth to, and teach and influence...we will serve the Lord." I think today Christian parents should teach their children that

as Christians we are a minority people. There must be times in your family, I know there have been in mine, when we as parents say things like this: "But that isn't what our family does." Or "But you are one of us; you are part of this family, and our priorities are different." Or, "That isn't what we believe; that isn't what we stand up for." Much of it begins in the home.

For us, in our tradition, that means of course baptism; it means Sunday School, Christian nurture at home and at church; and it means especially *confirmation* when we hope young people are ready to make their own commitment.

Some young people are not ready. They have fulfilled the requirements, but they say they are not ready in their heart. And I believe most pastors understand that and honor it. The parents may struggle a bit with the decision their son or daughter has made, but the church understands. And my experience over the years is that many of these young folks in good time come back to the church and declare their faith

But after confirmation, and after a year or two of college, sometimes sooner, when our young people, quite on their own, choose new friends, and join new circles, and look toward life away from home, the question comes again: "Choose ye this day whom you will serve." When one faces the decisions of "job versus calling," of salary, of marriage and family and life style, the whole issue of commitment stirs once more. "Choose ye this day whom you will serve..." When people have asked me, and they so often do, "Are you a born-again Christian?" My answer is "Yes, again and again and again, and probably again."

Here's another way to stay faithful. It's my final thought this morning. Keeping close to the personality of Christ is what helps me most now in my own struggle with commitment. I didn't used to think so; I used to think that I could be faithful in my head—I wasn't so concerned about my heart. I wanted to keep my faith rational, not emotional, keep it philosophically or scholastically. ..simply know the book of God, and not be so concerned about knowing the person of God. I always got pretty good grades with the book stuff, and I guess I thought I could bet on that.

I even used to believe that "In the Garden" - that favorite hymn of so many people - was the drippiest of tunes, and the most emotional song, with perhaps the poorest theology in our hymnal. After all, God is God of all creation and not simply my special "chum" who walks with me and talks with me and tells me I am his own. Really!

But I've come full circle on that. The tune is still drippy, but the most compelling and winning way to keep our commitment to God is to know the person of God. To feel that God is close, that he does love me, and that I love Him, that He will

help me if he can, that he will walk with me and talk with me and tell me that I am his own. I, and all of his children, but the "I" is important to me. It's the link with God who I have come to know. My dad's favorite hymn was "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," and I guess that's where I am now.

And dear friends, that's why we have communion. That's why we call it communion. We draw that close, we to God, and God to us. We feel that we are at the table with Christ. Of course it is not my table, or simply your table. It stretches around the world, but Christ is there personally, with each of us. He does walk our journey with us and talks with us and tells us we are his own. That's why we have communion - and that's why he commanded us to do it. He wants to be known to each of us in the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the cup, so that we are born anew, and are able to bet our life on his power and love.

"Choose ye this day whom you will serve, but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." Amen.