

Let's Go Deeper...

Wednesday, May 25, 2016

I plumbed the depths of church membership last Sunday. I closed the sermon by saying I want to be a member of the body called the Church for three reasons:

1. I want to be a member of something in which, in Paul's words, **"the members... care for one another."**
2. I want to be a member of a body where **everybody matters** and everybody knows they are precious, valuable, indispensable. In Paul's words, **"the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect."**
3. I want to be a member of a body that has Jesus Christ as its head and heart. According to Paul, to be joined to Jesus, join yourself to the Body of Christ, the Church, whose **members are joined to one another and to Jesus by blood**. Am I right? Are not the members of the body-- the organs-- joined together and enlivened by blood? It's the lifeblood of Jesus, the head and heart of the church, that courses through all the members giving us life. I want to be a part of a body where the members are joined together by the blood of Christ who poured himself out for the members *and whose members are willing to do the same for one another*. That last sentence is a mouthful.

When did you first understand that being a disciple of Jesus Christ calls for sacrifice? When I made my confession of faith 44 years ago and signed on as a disciple of Jesus Christ I sure didn't understand that to follow Jesus requires sacrifice. Nobody said to me, "Welcome, disciple David! Disciple James was put to death with a sword. Disciple Andrew was bound to an x-shaped cross and died of exposure. Disciple Peter was crucified upside down. Disciple Bartholomew was flayed alive with knives. Disciple Simon the Zealot was sawed to pieces. In fact, disciple David, all but John of the original disciples died for their faith and though John lived to old age, he did time exiled on the Isle of Patmos for being a disciple. I wonder what sacrifices you'll be called to make as a disciple of Jesus." Nobody said anything like that to me.

When did the light go on for you that discipleship calls for selflessness and sacrifice? The light went on for me 23 years ago. It was the spring of '93 when I went to a revival in Newton Grove, North Carolina, on a whim I can tell you about later.

They sang several hymns and then the preacher, after apologizing for the publicized preacher's absence, preached a sermon that retold his friendship with a man named Elisha.

It was while he was a seminary student twenty years earlier that he met Elisha. Elisha was a Ugandan who had been sent to seminary by the Anglican Church in Uganda to get a Masters of Divinity degree. Elisha was being groomed by the leadership of the church to become director of Christian Education for the 3 million member Anglican Church in Uganda under the leadership of Archbishop Jenani Luwum.

Accepting his church's call, Elisha bid farewell to his wife and children in the capital city of Kampala and flew to the United States for the three years it would take him to get his education. Due to the distance to his homeland and the absence of financial resources, Elisha's contact with his wife and family would be limited to one phone call per week during the duration of his studies.

The preacher at the revival said he got to know Elisha in the seminary cafeteria where they worked side-by-side in the refectory's kitchen washing pots and pans together. He said, you really get to know someone when you labor side-by-side with them for three years in close quarters. We became friends.

During those years in Ugandan, a man named Idi Amin took power through a bloody coup and eventually declared what amounted to war on the Anglican Church in Uganda. At one point, the preacher recalled, Elisha received word that "there were so many murdered Anglicans in Lake Victoria that the crocodiles couldn't eat them all." Elisha anxiously stood by as reports that Amin's persecution was drawing closer and closer to the capital city of Kampala, where the Archbishop who had sent him to seminary resided as well as his wife and children.

The preacher recalled the day Elisha received word that Archbishop Luwum had publicly rebuked Amin for the atrocities committed against the people of Uganda, whereupon Amin tortured and killed him. At that point, the Suffragan (Associate) Bishop number two man) fled the country. What's more, Elisha hadn't heard from his wife and children in three weeks. His hope was that they had fled to the jungle. But he didn't know.

According to the preacher, that's when Elisha's countenance changed. He said, "We knew what that meant: Elisha had determined to return to Uganda." He told his fellow seminarians that with the Archbishop dead and with the suffragan Bishop having fled the country, his people were "like sheep without a shepherd." His church had sent him to the United States in order to receive an education that would fit him for leadership in the church. He now had to return and lead.

The preacher said when Elisha shared his decision with his fellow students, they decided to have a send-off for him. A party in the dormitory with cake and punch and such. The preacher remembered the students surrounding Elisha, saying, "See you later, Elisha." "You'll be back. We know you will." "We'll be praying for you."

With that, four of the students, the preacher included, drove Elisha to JFK airport for his flight back to Uganda. According to the preacher, he hugged his dishwashing brother long and hard until he was being called to the gate. Said the preacher, "Once Elisha turned toward that jet he never looked back."

Said the Preacher that night at the revival at the little church in the middle of the tobacco field, "I worked side-by-side with a man willing to be a martyr.



And to this day when I'm washing dishes, it's as if he's standing right next to me." "In those moments," he said, "I realize that I have no excuses for turning away from the challenges which face me as a follower of Jesus Christ."

Then the preacher stepped down to the base of the chancel steps and he said, "God doesn't call everybody to die for their faith. But God does call everybody to live for it."

He said, "Occasionally the sacrifice Jesus calls forth from his disciples takes place in one moment at one time. But it is usually the case that disciples of Jesus Christ are called to make a series of small sacrifices day in and day out throughout their lives that add up to a lifetime of faithful, sacrificial service."

Then he extended his hand and said, "Does anybody want to give their life to Jesus tonight? I invite you to come and stand with me as we rise and sing a hymn of invitation."

I went forward that night and gave myself again.

I had come to understand as a 33-year-old what I didn't as a 13-year-old-- that all the first disciples and all present-day disciples of Christ worthy of the name are called to be ready and willing to live lives marked by selflessness and sacrifice.

I want to be part of a body where the members are willing to live like that. God help me.