

## “Buddy - Can You Spare a Dime?”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew's United Church  
For The 17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, September 16, 2018 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Readings: Mark 8:31-38 - Our call to a selfless life.

(by Jim Graham)

Of the many **difficult** passages in the Bible, and in the teachings of Jesus, I find the most difficult words that Jesus spoke are NOT the ones that are hard to understand. Rather, they are the ones that are easy to understand - but hard to **obey**.

History is filled with examples of people who, by discarding their old lives, gained life eternal. Telemachus was a 4<sup>th</sup> century monk who had made up his mind to leave the world and live all alone in prayer, meditation and fasting—so that he could save his soul. That was his only goal. He felt there was something missing from his life and came to the conclusion that in order to serve **God** he must serve **others**.

So he said “good-bye” to the desert and headed for the greatest city in the world—Rome.

There was still an arena in Rome hosting the gladiator games—Christians were no longer being thrown to the lions, but instead, they had to fight and kill one another! The monk was appalled! People for whom Christ had died were being forced to kill each other for the entertainment of the crowds.

So he leapt over the barrier and got between the combatants...and for a moment...they stopped fighting.

“Let the games go on,” roared the crowd.

They pushed the monk aside, but once again he got between them. The crowd hurled stones at the monk, and they urged the fighters to kill him and get him out of the way.

The gladiator's sword rose and flashed...and the monk lay dead!

And immediately the crowd fell silent; shocked that a holy man should have been killed in such a way. And in that instant came a mass realization of what this killing really was. The games, seen for what they were, soon ended and never began again. That was the end of it; the monk's death had ended them.

One author writes, “His death was more useful to mankind than his life.”

God gave **each of us** a life to spend. If we live our lives, always thinking of our own gain, ease, comfort and security...if our single aim is to make life as long and as trouble-free as possible...if we make no effort except for ourselves...then we are losing life. But when we live our lives for others...when we put less importance on personal wealth and comfort in order to do something great for Jesus and for others...we win life!

When Jesus made reference to His up-coming trial and death, Peter “began to rebuke him.” Peter had a different definition of the Messiah than Jesus. Peter sees Jesus as something of a “Jewish Caesar.” The kind of Messiah who would call his disciples to positions of power, privilege, and prestige, but he becomes alarmed when he hears Jesus talking about suffering and dying!

And when Peter confronts him, Jesus comes back with the same intensity.

**“Get behind me Satan!” he says. ‘You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.’**

In our culture of easily accessible pain-killers, it's hard for us to contemplate suffering—even for the right reasons. But Jesus gives us the challenge to think like God thinks, not as we think. And let's not be mistaken; Jesus' healing miracles and His evident compassion for the crowds make it clear that God does **not** delight in human suffering. If you recall, the disciples were sent out to heal as well as to preach the gospel.

Danger lies in our thinking that suffering and self-sacrifice are things to be avoided.

Christians often think that if we just pray enough God will remove all the trials and difficulties from our lives. A family with a teenaged drug-addict is told, “Pray harder and your son will come around.” Wouldn't better advice be to pray for the strength to **care** for their child and for wisdom to find the right treatment and support?

Prayer is very important in healing, but it's much more than that. Prayer is an opening up of ourselves to discover what **God** wills; not an exercise in forcing or imploring God to do **our** will. Prayer isn't a tool to be used in **negotiations** with God - “If you do this, then, I promise to do that!” That's not the function of prayer.

And that is not what discipleship or following Christ is about either!

A disciple is asked to “take up the Cross”; to not deny Jesus when confronted by co-workers, family, friends. We struggle and reject the imagery of losing our life – we picture death! Losing your life doesn't necessarily involve dying – it involves change...giving up old ways of doing things. When we change our attitudes and behaviours – our selfish ideals and personal goals for success - we die to an old way of life. When we pursue acts of service and contribute time and energy to help others, we choose new paths and new outcomes. God doesn't care about the size or value of your car as much as he cares about how many people you offer a ride to church! God is happy that you can provide for your family, but he delights in your efforts to also provide for the stranger in need; the single mom, the widowed pensioner, the beggar on the street.

Christians are called to deny self, but we don't have to invent some fancy form of persecution complex in order to live this kind of life. The Gospel calls us to deny self in order to be more like Christ! Being a follower of Christ isn't a prestigious job.

Jesus asks, “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?” Real heroes make great sacrifices for others; soldiers, firefighters, police who protect and serve, missionaries and volunteers who serve the needy. If a single, one-time sacrifice is worthy of praise, what about a lifetime of sacrifice?

A theology professor asked his students to look across the campus at the schools of medicine and law. Then he suggested that graduates from those schools would make many times more than a pastor, but that serving Christ was where the true riches were to be found.

People think giving to the Lord is like taking a \$1,000 bill and laying it down on the table— ‘Here's my life, Lord, I'm giving it all!’ The reality is that God sends us to the bank and has

us cash in that \$1,000 for quarters. Then we're asked to go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there; a sandwich here, and a meal there.

Giving our life to Christ isn't glamorous. It's done in all those little acts of love, 25 cents at a time! Similarly, God gives us **life** to spend, not to keep. What would happen if everyone just wished for nothing but to comfortably sit at home? What if there had been no explorers or pioneers or astronauts?

What would happen if every couple refused to risk bearing children? What would happen if everyone spent all they had on themselves? The very essence of the Christian life is found in risking life and spending life, and sharing life; not in saving it and hoarding it.

“Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.

What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?” As Christians, we choose to follow not our own will, but the will of Christ...and in doing this we find a freedom and a peace and serenity that **inspires others**.

Jesus never tried to lure anyone to Him by the offer of an easy way; he sought to **challenge** us; to awaken the **boldness** and moral courage in our souls, by the offer of a way that could **not be** any higher nor any harder! When you see immorality at work; when you identify injustice; stand up – show up - step up – speak up! God seeks agents of change.

Following Jesus is not for the faint of heart.

We talk a lot about the Good News, but it's worth remembering that Jesus was executed for living it, and countless Christians have been persecuted for following him. God knows there are plenty of less-dramatic reasons for keeping a safe distance from the way of Jesus: It's not cool. There is no end to it, and it can be both inconvenient and tiring. And let's face it, some of the other followers are annoying as all get-out. It can take years to see "results," and there is limitless potential for disappointment and heartbreak. And loving people for whom we feel contempt is just plain hard!

Here's the thing: All those risky extensions of ourselves, all the long-haul commitment and giving 'til it hurts—that's also where the blessing is, how healing happens, where new, true life is found.

Jesus didn't come to make life easy but to **challenge** us to greatness – to find our purpose; to nurture and serve the children of God. Christianity requires a turning from selfishness, taking up our own cross, and making the choice to follow the example of the Good Shepherd. Amen.