



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“WE WALK BY FAITH, NOT BY SIGHT”

Scripture Lessons: Judges 6:36-40; 2 Corinthians 5:6-10

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, October 25, 2020
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2 Corinthians 5:6-10

So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord— for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For all of us must appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

This year's Stewardship theme is short and sweet. It comes to us from 2 Corinthians 5:7...“for we walk by faith, not by sight.” Unless someone has been living under a rock for the last 9 months or so, it is undeniable that this global pandemic has been challenging in more ways than one.

I am so glad to see Jim Wilkinson here this morning. Jim, I hope you don't mind...this past week I had the opportunity to sit down with Jim and his daughter, Karen, and we began to plan the celebration of Molly's life – a life well lived – a life that was cut short due to COVID-19. Our prayers remain with you, Jim, and I'm so glad you are here! Perhaps others of you have been sick yourselves or maybe you know someone who has been sick. There's anxiety around children being back in school; some family budgets are in disarray due to layoffs or downsizing or industries that are slowed to the point closure. If you have watched the wonderful video our Stewardship Team put together, then you know that these days seem far less than ideal to talk about stewardship – to talk about what God may be calling us to give to the work of Christ's Church. And I suppose it would be a lot easier if we were not the church. I mean, if we were simply an organization, a group of people gathered around a common cause or some loose affiliation to this or that. If we weren't the church – if we were not the Body of Christ – ah, it would be so much easier for us to focus on the one side of the ledger...that side on which we see the figures written down and which don't seem to add up.

Indeed, if we were a people who walked by sight and based our decisions upon what we see going on in the world around us, then these days might easily qualify as ones in which we would dare not broach the subject of giving, much less giving sacrificially. But as 2 Corinthians 5:7 reminds us, "...We walk by faith, and not by sight," and that serves as a wonderful reminder for us, especially within the context of stewardship, that every single season of life is an occasion to both affirm and respond to what God has accomplished in the life and ministry, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord! Nevertheless, so often in life, that which we see or cannot see, it has a way of stopping us in our tracks...it keeps us from walking in faith.

Thomas said to the other disciples: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." Perhaps Thomas was not altogether different from Gideon who wanted something to go on – a sign...something he could see that would assure him that God would, in fact, deliver Israel. "I am going to lay a fleece of wool on the threshing-floor;" Gideon said. "If there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said."

Gideon offered a variation of that same request a second time...and in both cases God did provide a sign, as God in Christ most assuredly provided a sign for Thomas as well. Jesus said, "'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'" But listen to what Jesus says next, "Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'"

We base so much on what we can see, don't we? And praise be to God, in Jesus Christ we have seen so much! When Jesus was approached by the disciples of John the Baptizer and asked, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another," Jesus responded in this way: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them." Jesus was all about exhibiting the kingdom of God in ways that the world could see...so it is certainly understandable if not unavoidable that we would want to see more? But there's a limit to what we can see and what we will truly discern on this side of heaven, for ours really is a mirror through which we see dimly. I'm afraid that the more we insist upon sights and sounds and experiences to dictate the measure of our faithful response to God, the more we begin to sound like the Sadducees and the Pharisees of old who said: "We are unwilling to believe that God is at work in your life...show us a sign," to which Jesus responded, "An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah." It is as if Jesus' were saying, I am the sign...there is nothing else you need to see...I am it! What's more, just as Jonah was swallowed up by the fish and spit up again after three days, so it is that I will go to the grave for three days, and on the third day I will rise again.

Jesus lets it be known that no other sign needs to be sought and no additional word needs to be spoken! It is not altogether different from the lessons learned from story of the rich man and Lazarus. Both men have passed from this life to the next and while Lazarus was seated very near Abraham, the rich man is in a place of torment, and he calls out: "Father, I beg you to send [Lazarus] to my father's house – for I have five brothers – that he may warn them, so that they

will not also come into this place of torment.” But Abraham replied, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

Ah, those Sadducees and Pharisees, what kind of sign do they want? And would they believe it even if they saw it? At the end of the day, there is no better sign for them or for us than the very fulfillment of the law and the prophets -- that being Jesus the Christ. Ah, if the life and death and resurrection of Jesus will not serve for them as a sign of God’s power and of God’s love then nothing else will.

Friends, listen to how the Bible defines faith. In Hebrews chapter 11 we read: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.” In other words, our spiritual life is not just about how we walk, but how we live and move and have our being...by faith, and not by sight! Oh, make no mistake about it, our sight will inevitably fail us; but faith, by God’s grace, sustains us!

So what does all of this mean on a day like today when we are also prayerfully considering our call to stewardship? Well, to begin, at a very basic level -- and I know this may sound a little bit redundant -- but it really does have to do with faith, because, at the end of the day, stewardship really is a spiritual matter. That’s why we don’t spend our time talking about what the church needs in order to pay its bills and instead choose to focus on what God is calling us to give to the work of Christ’s Church. That’s why we don’t give based upon whether or not we like or dislike a project that has been undertaken or a mission cause that has been supported. Think of it this way - our decision to give is not based upon the merits or the lack thereof with regard to anything - anything at all - that we see in the world or in the church. No! We give based upon what is going on in our hearts; we give based upon the merits of Christ!

I love the words from that great hymn “It is Well With My Soul”...and I can’t wait for that blessed day when our “faith shall be sight,” but that doesn’t mean that our faith is any less real right now or that it shouldn’t be expressed in any less a tangible way. The Apostle Paul didn’t say we “will” live by faith or that we “ought” to live by faith - he says, “We live by faith!” Presently! That is our reality! And what that means for us, is that we are called to trust in God and in God’s word and God’s promises...right now -- not waiting until tomorrow, but yielding today, and knowing in our hearts...and this is important...knowing in our hearts that, by God’s grace, we are that provisional demonstration of God’s kingdom for the world...we are it!

Ah, I wonder if we ever truly think about that deeply enough; that we -- the church called forth - - that God has determined that we are a primary expression of the kingdom of God for others! I think that is a big part of why we are called to give generously, because inherent in who we are and who we are called to be, is a capacity to reflect something of God’s generosity. Consider how that awareness adds a whole new dimension to those altogether familiar words that the Apostle Paul speaks a few chapters later...“Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

We often think about giving as beginning with us and with our decision; but, in actuality, it starts with God and with God's decision to love us, and while there is no way we could ever give in a way commensurate with God's love, the Bible does give us some guidance on this. In the Bible, the patterns of disciplined giving to which we are called often come in the form of tithing, that giving of 1/10th of one's income to God's work – and that is an altogether wonderful and appropriate faith commitment for which God's grace empowers us...it is something for which we should all strive.

And I know well the pondering that goes on in the silence of our hearts: "What if I can't do that?" "What if I am at a place vocationally where I have a strong suspicion that my financial circumstances may change in the coming months." Or, "My spouse lost his or her job and we have a kid in college...c'mon, I have to put food on the table." "And, yes, you do!" So hear me say this as well, "Be at peace!" Maybe this is a time when the church can be financially supportive of you. It's not a sign of weakness to ask for help – we have a COVID-19 Relief Fund set up for mortgage and utility needs, and that process is handled with great care and discretion. A pastor need be the only one who know, so please feel free to talk with one of us if we can be of help in that way or in any other pastoral matter.

To be certain, each of us are given blessings. I think back upon the parable of the talents...each servant was given a different sum of money, a talent as it were. And we need to keep in mind that each of those servants faced uncertainty in their life, the eventual return of their master, the prospect of losing what they did have; it was hard for them to see what was going to happen in the future. Two of them lived by faith, but one of them lived by fear...and that fear, interestingly enough, was directed at the owner; but the owner had never shown anything but generosity, giving the servant the talent in the first place.

The point being, God's posture toward us as his children is one of gracious forbearance. There is nothing in the divine countenance that would suggest that God doesn't love us and or that God doesn't want what's best for us. And God has given all of us talents -- God has given us time and energy and substance -- but, lest we forget, all that we have and all that we are, it still belongs to God; we have it on loan but for a precious and brief amount of time. That which we cannot see; that which would seek to instill fear in our hearts; oh, pray we never allow it to rule our hearts and render us ineffective for the sake of the Gospel and God's kingdom; because, if our treasure resides solely with us, it does not reside with God, for as the Bible says, where our treasure is, there our heart will be also. As stewards of the manifold grace of God, we are called to be faithful; and while that means something different to each of us, at the very least, it means this: it means that we trust in God's goodness and mercy and know that in our present circumstances is not revealed the fullness of God's glory; it means that we respond to what God has done for us in Jesus Christ our Lord with a life that is both thankful and generous; it means that we walk by faith, and not by sight.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.