Sermon Text for August 4, 2013

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Judges 16:28-31, John 12:20-26

“Being willing to give it up”

After church last Sunday Stacy and I got away for a couple of days to Annapolis for a belated anniversary trip. We chose a hotel that had a pool and a hot tub. It was really nice. Our last morning before we left we decided to take a swim and as we approached the pool we could hear a child just crying and screaming and basically very unhappy. When we walked in there was this younger than 2 year old in the water with a teacher and his mom was on the sidelines watching as this teacher dunked the kid repeatedly, then tried to get him to float on his back. It was a mess, he was losing his breakfast in the pool from all the water he was drinking, he was screaming, we decided to stay in the hot tub and not try out the pool that morning. There were two other kids on the edge of the pool moaning as they knew they were next.

But then one last time the kid was dunked and she told him to swim to the side, and he did. He was helped out the pool and just kind of collapsed on the edge of the pool. Him mom swooped him up, dried him off, the next kid went into the water just screaming like you wouldn’t believe, and as the kid left the pool area he waved to the teacher and said bye bye.

The object, apparently, was to get the kids to give up in the water, break their fear because the more willing they were to give it up, the better prepared they would be for the water. Of course, in the meantime it left emotional scars on all of us. Today both of our Scriptures speak of heroes who were willing to make the ultimate sacrifice, to give it up. Now one was for an act of vengeance, Samson, and we addressed that last week, the other our Savior Jesus Christ, for the sake of producing the fruit of salvation for all of us. A much better example and let’s see if we can follow in his footsteps.

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I’ve been meeting every couple of weeks with a friend of mine, we went to Bible College together and he is now a pastor. We are actually planning a book that we are going to write together, but we have no idea what it is going to be about. But he is one of those people who is very willing to give up what we would call a normal life for the sake of serving Jesus Christ. He left a position as a principal of a school to become a pastor of a small church that is only able to pay him half time. His wife left a good position as a nurse to help raise two inner city kids ages 6 and 9 that they have just adopted this year.

His life went from normal to chaos, but he is absolutely convinced that Christ has called him to give up what the rest of have, or at least what most of us have in order to serve Him in a different and maybe even more profound way.

But are we all called to dramatically change our way of life, are we all called to the martyrdom of Samson or the simplicity of John the Baptist, or to follow Jesus’ command to sell all we have and give to the poor. Are we all called to be St. Francis or Millard Fuller the founder of Habitat for Humanity. If not then what does it mean for us to be willing to give it up and to value our life in Christ more than our life of comfort or the security of normalcy.

To set the stage for our Scripture in John, Jesus has just entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and so the Jewish crowd goes wild in receiving him. But then today we find Greeks, who represent the other half of the world, seeking an audience of our Savior. The fear of the Jews in 11:48 and 12:19 has come true that everyone has believed in him and the whole world is going after him. They approach Philip who has a Greek name to see if Jesus would see them.

Jesus responds not with a yes or a no, but with a lesson. He gives them the lesson of the grain of wheat having to die in order to produce fruit. He teaches them that now Jesus is going to be glorified as was promised with the man born blind and with Lazarus that all this would lead to the glory of God. Death, Jesus states, in and of itself leads to glory, specifically in his case.

We are not called to martyrdom like Samson, or at least we shouldn’t be looking for it as if that is the only way in which we can truly give it up for Christ. I’m not real crazy about his suicide bombing technique, this act of revenge did not lead to the fruit that Jesus is talking about. Our willingness to give it up is for the sake of our lives being enriched and the lives of those around us being enriched as well.

If you look at vs. 26 you find Jesus stating: Whoever serves me must follow me. This word serve is diaonein in Greek. Deos that sound familiar? At the root of dying to ourselves, at the heart of losing our life as we know it has to be not only a love for our Savior Jesus Christ which motivates us, but a servant spirit, a reaching out to others in care and concern merely for the sake of them seeing Christ through us.

Success in the eyes of our Savior in these verses is being willing and able to give it up. What do we need to give it up? What is it that gives you pleasure? Is it trying to keep up with the neighbors or is it being satisfied with who we are irrespective of what is happening around us. Is our love of life built around being able to amass wealth, or getting ahead in our job, or is it being satisfied with our call and our station in life because that is where God has called us to be.

Following Jesus is a matter of letting go which is so contrary to modern culture and the church and its members have bought into it. We are so focused on those sins that we can easily point our finger at that we miss the fact that we love our life, and our comfort, and our home, and our family, and our vacations so much that this message of giving it up rings hollow and doesn’t seem to make sense.

Let’s ask ourselves what is it that keeps us up at night? Is it the fear of being able to pay the bills? Is it a relationship that is spinning out of control, is it anxiety over a medical condition. Not being willing to jeopardize our position in this town or fear of what people might say. You fill in the blank. Our desire for control inhibits our letting go. We have to continually be reminded to let it go and allow God to take control. Let it die so God can work a miracle. Jesus tells us today that if our life is the focus, we are going to lose it no matter how hard we try to keep it just the way we want. But if we life for Jesus and our desires are his desires, and a servant, deacon heart and spirit guide and direct us then we will keep it for eternal life. What a promise.

When Ignatius the Bishop of Rome who succeeded Peter was about to be martyred by Emperor Trajan it is said that he cried aloud: “I am the wheat of Christ.” We are not called to be martyrs for the sake of being martyrs. In fact we are often called to speak out against injustice and oppression, to fight it as opposed to let it happen. This just might shake up our life as we know it. But we are called to identify what is drawing us away from Christ, and to let it go.

Today we will be taking communion together. We remember the death of Christ which contrary to cultural understanding, was the greatest victory ever known. Jesus was willing to lay down his life, give it up for our sake. The least we can do is be willing to give up one thing that is a stumbling block in our relationship with Jesus. For each of us it is something different. What keeps you up at night, what goals do you have that don’t serve the kingdom, but just are self-serving, what secrets do you have that not even your wife or husband knows?

Before you take the bread whisper whatever that is that you are unwilling to give up, whisper it and give it up, and allow yourself and allow the bread and the juice, the body and the blood of Christ wash away the sin, give you a spirit wanting to give it up for the sake of the kingdom. Amen.