

Sermon Text for March 3, 2019

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Judges 16:28-31, Acts 7:51-60

“Do you have what it takes?”

I'm very pleased with where we are as a church, how things are going, how people are feeling about each other. But there is a temptation in any setting where optimism is high that we have somehow arrived, that we have somehow reached a pinnacle, that is not at all where I find myself. I see us on a journey together and along the way we have certain events, some of which we celebrate: preschool Sunday. Others we mourn, those who fall through our proverbial cracks and are wondering if anyone knows what they are going through.

Our responsibility as a church is two-fold: We are a family that is trying to love God with all of our heart, mind, and soul. But equally we have to put the same amount of emphasis of loving our neighbor as ourselves, that Samaritan who reached out to the broken person of God needs to be us. But sometimes as a congregation and as a pastor we may discover that we don't have what it takes to continue down the road toward what the kingdom requires. What does the Lord require but to do justice, to care for the poor and the sick. On our journey together we may find ourselves satisfied with our preschool Sundays or our VBS or our increasing attendance and budget. But are we increasing our opportunity to reach out to our neighbor. We can never be satisfied, but complacency comes easy when things are going well.

In sports do you know what the greatest solution to disharmony on a team is? Winning...., if you are winning then you can sweep things under the rug. You don't have to be united in joining for the same goal. But along our journey we have to continue to push ourselves toward what this church could be, and not rest on what the church currently is. I just felt like I have to say that because I tend to paint a really positive picture of what is happening around here, and it is because I do believe that it reflects reality. But I would never want people to think that I am satisfied with where we are and that we should not push ourselves to do more for our neighbor than what we currently do, we are not doing enough.

Today in our Scripture we see Stephen's last words of his sermon that we have been following over these last few months and also the last words of his life. We have also seen the great Samson and his last words and actions. Both of these two people are known as heroes of the faith who paid the ultimate sacrifice for their faith. They had what it took to follow God even to the death.

Today, we will ask if we have what it takes to follow Jesus and not turn back even if it means risking it all.

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Probably the most analogous story, and so the most disturbing in its commonalities to today's events in Acts is the Samson story. You remember this Hercules like character who was stronger than any other man. His wife who betrayed him and they cut off his hair and he lost his strength and they took out his eyes. Then they used to use him as entertainment.

Well, over time his hair grew back and he wanted revenge. This is where we pick it up in chapter 16. Samson prays to God: give me back my strength just this one time. Have you ever prayed that type of a prayer before? I think it sounds familiar to all of us. Let me have this one thing Lord, and I'll never miss church a single Sunday. It's a great prayer if you follow through with it and you don't set yourself up for failure.

But the reason why he prays this, and this is the disturbing part, was so that: I can die with the Philistines. He wanted to take the house down upon himself, and he did and Scripture states that he killed more Philistines in that one act than all the other days of his life combined.

Stephen's story is quite a bit different, much more passive than Samson's. Stephen had what it took, but in a very different way. His sermon has emphasized how the people of Israel had always turned their back on God's messengers. Historically they didn't have what it took to follow God, but God consistently sent people to give them another chance. Stephen was another second chance that God was sending and he would end up just like Jesus did.

Follow along in the verses. He proclaims Jesus lifted up, exalted, the Son of Man, the Messiah. They didn't want to hear that so they cover their ears, grind their teeth, shout out loud and seize him to stone him. Follow what happens next, as they are

striking him with the stones he prays: Lord Jesus, Jesus is invoked at the hour of death and Jesus' followers are to die like Jesus. Receive my Spirit he cries out. Into they hands I commend my spirit. Remember that on the cross. And then it states he cried out in a loud voice, just as Jesus did: Lord, do not hold this sin against them, Lord forgive them for they do not know what they do.

Today is Transfiguration Sunday but since we are following through Acts we are not reading the Scriptures in the Gospels which depict Jesus and his disciples Peter, James, and John climbing a mountain and there Jesus is transfigured and is seen in the presence of Moses and Elijah, they actually see this scene as Steven sees Jesus at the right hand of God. The result of the Transfiguration was that the disciples would be strengthened to live for Christ, but also so that they could die for Christ, and eventually they do.

Do we have what it takes? The question that we have been asking over these past weeks is do we have what it takes to live like Jesus? Today, do we have what it takes to not only live like Jesus did, but to die like Jesus. That is a very different question. Some of you may remember Jim Jones and the cultic mass suicide that took the lives of so many.

The prevailing thought was that both Jim Jones and his followers were basically insane. In the modern world only insane people would die for what they believe. Where would that put Samson, Stephen, the first Christian martyrs like Paul who died in a Roman prison or Peter who was crucified upside down. How about modern day, where would that put our service men and women who have died for our country. What does that make our Savior Jesus Christ, who died so that others may believe. Do we have what it takes to be considered insane by the world's standards?

Every single day, at least three times a day for three years I would walk into the school cafeteria at Princeton Theological Seminary. Outside of the building at the entry way you see to this day three plaque with 3 names on them: Walter Macon Laurie – Thrown overboard by pirates in the China Sea, 1847. John Rogers Peal – Killed with his wife by a mob at Lieu Chou, China, 1905. James Joseph Reed – Fatally beaten at Selma, Alabama, March 11, 1965. Every single day 3 times a day or more if I was really hungry, the question would be asked of us: do you have what it takes to be one of these who went

before you through these hallowed halls and gave of their lives for the sake of the Gospel? Every day the question came to us: do you have what it takes to proclaim the name of Jesus Christ and his kingdom of salvation and justice to the point where your very life may be required of you?

Being a Christian and following Jesus is not for the faint of heart. We will be hurt by people in the church as well as outside. But once you decide to follow Jesus, there is no turning back. The rejection of God's messenger is par for the course and we should expect it.

When Cortez the explorer landed in Mexico in 1519 he may have been afraid of a mutiny and that his men would get disheartened and turn their back on him, kill him, and sail back. So once they landed he got everyone on shore and you know what he did? He burned the ships. Crazy, insane. By the world's standards no one in their right mind would do that. I don't know if I could do that. But there was no turning back. They were going to go forward in their mission even if it meant dying for it, there was no turning back.

We are not turning back. Brothers and sisters look to the resurrected Christ and in him know that you have what it takes to live this life without turning back. You have decided to follow Jesus, then do it at all costs. Burn those ships and follow him, no turning back. Amen.