



SERMON: Church of the Holy Spirit, Jun. 8, '08

Too often we “pietize” today’s Gospel, to avoid its full message for our lives. “Pietize,” of course, isn’t a real word. But, what I mean is that we too often make Jesus’ invitation, “Follow me,” a matter of personal piety, rather than social responsibility. Really, the truth we would like to avoid is that accepting Jesus’ invitation to follow also means leaving old ways behind. Though we like to think of ourselves as good Christians, faithful followers of Jesus, that – failing to leave old ways behind – is precisely where we fall down a lot of the time, usually without realizing it, and it is what keeps us from actually following through on the promises and responsibilities of being a serious Christian in today’s world.

Matthew followed Jesus; Matthew accepted the invitation. But, let’s not forget what that meant: it meant leaving his tax booth. It meant giving up a way of life that he came to recognize as unfaithful, unrighteous (not right), and unjust, ultimately a way of death rather than life.

The same is true of Abraham, Paul’s great hero of faith in the Letter to the Romans. Abraham accepted God’s invitation to go to a new land. But, going also meant leaving. Where Abraham’s act of faith became meaningful wasn’t simply in going; it was the leaving. Abraham had to leave the way he used to live. He had to leave nearly everything about his life as he knew it up to that point. He could take some of his family, and some of his possessions. But, that was about all. Otherwise, he had to do that thing that is perhaps the hardest, but ultimately most necessary, for us to do, at least for adults: he had to change.

We take the bite out of the Gospel, and the ancient Hebrew tale, if we imagine Matthew or Abraham dreamily following God’s command into some happy and holy life of discipleship and faith, where they could still be basically who they always were, just happier and holier. That’s not what the stories are telling us. They are telling us that accepting God’s invitation to ways of life, and of justice for all, means changing, and leaving old, comfortable ways behind.

“Leave the place where you are comfortable, and come to a new place that I will show you.” What does this mean, for us? Something enormously important it means for us today has to do with our environment, the material world that supports our life. God is calling us loud and clear to come to a new place in our relationship with the earth, to leave behind a lot of old ways that we have gotten very used to, and we are resisting this change very powerfully, avoiding it and putting it off for fear of what it will mean, and specifically of what it will cost. We don’t want to leave the way we have been living; but, not leaving is killing us, just like it was killing Abraham, ultimately, to stay in Ur, or Matthew to stay in his tax booth.

One thing I hope everyone will do this week is look at a Web site called, simply, www.350.org, the numeral “350” dot “org.” You will find there description of the problem that carbon emissions into the atmosphere are causing, what happens when the carbon that is in the earth and in us gets into the atmosphere at rates greater than 350 parts per million (ppm – the significance of the number 350). What happens is exactly



SERMON: Church of the Holy Spirit, Jun. 8, '08

what is happening right now, this summer, as the carbon level in the atmosphere is at 387 ppm, and climbing. For centuries, almost since Europeans began coming to North America, explorers searched for the legendary “Northwest Passage” – a westward passageway by water north of Canada from the Atlantic to the Pacific. None was ever found, until last summer, when for the first time in recorded history the Arctic Ocean melted enough to open this passage. It will be open again this summer and even wider. This past week I was at a conference on this subject of the consequences of global warming, caused by carbon emissions, for, not only the polar bears, but the parts of the world where food is becoming increasingly scarce – because there is a direct connection, and where the United Nations is trying desperately to enlist our help in meeting its Millennium Goals. The incentives for us not to respond faithfully, responsibly, and justly to global warming and the MDGs are great. If you get the Sunday Boston Globe, maybe you saw the article in last Sunday’s Parade magazine about how the melting of the Arctic Ocean, and opening of the Northwest Passage, may soon result in lower prices in the United States for commodities like gas and food, because it will open up oil and gas reserves beneath the Arctic to easy mining, and it will be cheaper to ship import items to the United States through the Arctic Ocean rather than across the Atlantic or Pacific. The only problem is that what makes this wonderful new world possible is the melting of the Arctic. Without the ice cap less heat is reflected off our planet, more is absorbed, the globe gets warmer, and everybody dies. In the article one scientist was quoted as saying that, from a ship on which he traveled through the Arctic Ocean last summer, he saw two amazing sights: one was an image of the sea bottom, which revealed unmistakable evidence of large untapped areas of escaping natural gas; the other was a lone polar bear drifting on a 30-foot-wide piece of ice. Two summers ago, the article said, “that animal could have walked on solid ice back to land, but now it was doomed.” One group of scientists at the conference I attended last week told us it is conceivable that, at the present rate of increase in parts per million of carbon into our atmosphere – 387 and climbing on this hot June morning, the Arctic may be melted by the summer of 2013 – just five years!

The largest percentage of this carbon comes from us, the United States. What is worse, though, is that we are aiding other countries in becoming high emitters. Our coal export docks in the Mid-Atlantic states and on the Gulf Coast are at virtually full capacity this summer; they haven’t been like this for twenty years. These economies are booming, as are Appalachian coal fields that haven’t produced this much in the same length of time. But, it’s coal, and the kind of Appalachian coal that burns even less cleanly than coal from other sources. We are shipping it in tremendous quantities to India and China, where this dirtier coal burns even dirtier than it would elsewhere. In the present moment, we are improving our depressed economy, and even enabling a certain kind of global development – albeit a wrong kind. But, in the not so distant moment we are killing our planet, and everyone and everything on it.

Becoming environmentally responsible in the most radical way isn’t just something trendy, the next cool (ironically) issue with which to get onboard. Using “green energy,” “going green,” recycling, paying fair prices for commodities, isn’t just the 60’s or the 70’s all over again, or the latest leisure-time cause of well-to-do American suburbanites, and not even just about the polar bears (though at a distance they’re cute).



SERMON: Church of the Holy Spirit, Jun. 8, '08

This is something that deeply connects us with people in far-away places, who have a lot less of everything than we do, including, importantly, power. What we are doing to the earth directly affects, negatively, the ability of people in Africa and Asia to produce enough food to eat, and sustainable places to live. That's injustice, and that is why God is at our door this morning, inviting us to come, to follow, and most of all to leave – to leave behind the ways of life in which we have been very comfortable for a long time. It is perhaps the most profound and practical challenge of faith, with which Christians have been confronted in many generations. Last week Congress rejected, and the President promised he would have vetoed, environmental legislation related to global warming, because, they said, it would have cost too much, we would have had to pay too much for things we like, because, in other words, we would have had to leave too much behind. – Just suppose Abraham had acted like that, or Matthew. Then where would we be?