



## Sermon by Pastor Tim O'Brien

March 12, 2017

New Testament Lesson

Philippians 3: 12-16

Gospel Lesson

John 12: 20-26

### Spiritual Growth

Years ago, when the Betty Crocker company first began selling their cake mixes, they offered a product which only needed water. All you had to do was add water to the mix that came in the box, and you would get a perfect, delicious cake every time.

It bombed. No one bought it and the company couldn't understand why, so they commissioned a study, which brought back a surprising answer. It seemed that people weren't buying the cake mix because it was too easy. They didn't want to be totally excluded from the work of preparing a cake; they wanted to feel that they were contributing something to it. So, Betty Crocker changed the formula and required the customer to add an egg in addition to water. Immediately, the new cake mix was a huge success.

Unfortunately, many people make the same mistake when it comes to understanding what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. It only takes a moment to accept Jesus into our hearts and lives, but becoming a disciple and a servant of Christ takes a lifetime. I mean Jesus came to give us life and give it to us abundantly, he came to bring peace to our hearts, comfort to our souls, a message that would give our lives meaning and purpose beyond anything we can imagine. And yet, we struggle with habits and hurts and hang-ups that pull us away from God. We hit times in our life when the going seems really really tough. And we are told that all we have to do is pray, is focus on Christ, is turn our hearts to God.

And while these are good suggestions and I make them a lot. We can't be serious in thinking that saying one prayer, and never praying again until another crisis will bring us comfort. We can't really think that we are called as disciples to focus on Christ only when it fits into our schedule or is convenient. And we really can't believe that we are called to turn only a part of our hearts or give only a little bit of ourselves to God.

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You don't want a cheap faith where you don't even have to break an egg, where it's all pre-mixed for you in the box. That kind of faith has an immediate appeal, but it lacks the depth to sustain you over the long haul of Christian living.

And Jesus did not "package" Himself in this way. Jesus said a number of things about the blessings of faith and He talked about asking in order to receive, but He never presented the overall Christian life as being particularly easy. Jesus talked a lot about what God can do for us, but He talked even more about what we must do for God and particularly for our neighbor.

Here in our text for this morning, Jesus describes the cost of Christian living and He clearly is not watering it down to make it seem palatable or "easy." First, He describes His own fate by saying that the hour has come for Him to be glorified, but He doesn't use that word as most people understand it - by "glorified," Jesus means "crucified." The hour is coming soon for Jesus to be crucified. Then He compares Himself to a grain of wheat. If the grain of wheat doesn't die and lie buried in the earth, it can't yield anything and remains alone. So, too, with Jesus: if He is preserved, safe and secure, He will remain alone. But if He is crucified, dead and buried, then He can rise to bear much fruit, drawing all people to Himself.

Then Jesus applies the same message to the rest of us. He says that we, too, must die in order to live. This is no easy, pre-packaged "cake mix" religion - Jesus says that if we want to follow, if we want to serve, we have to lose our life!

At this point, many of us are quite willing to back away. "No thanks," we say, "it's too expensive. I love my life too much to lose it and I'm not quite ready to die as yet. I think I'll find something to believe in which is a little less demanding." Or, "I think I'll wait for the clearance sale after Easter, I'll wait until the cost of faith comes down to a level I can live with."

Yet when you think about it, we are fully used to the idea of dying in order to live. We are used to the idea of losing something and sacrificing ourselves in order to gain. In fact, we do it all the time in life. Certainly, the people who are flocking to gyms and health clubs to put themselves through punishing workouts are making a sacrifice, yet they do it willingly. They try to lose their old bodies in

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order to gain new ones. In the same way, many people have struggled and suffered to lose their addictions in order to gain their health.

It all makes me wonder: if we are so willing to sacrifice and even suffer for things which matter for us in our worldly lives, why shouldn't we do even more for the sake of our spiritual lives?

Because our spiritual lives matter. It is our spiritual life as a disciple that surrounds us with purpose – strengthens us when we weak, comforts us when are hurting, focuses us when get lost, and loves us no matter what. This is the relationship, the experience that shapes us into the humans beings God intends us to be.

And it is this relationship and spiritual life that calls us to sacrifice, yes, but more importantly calls us to grow – grow in love, grow in peace, grow in patience, grow in understanding, grow in joy, grow in giving.

And this pursuit of growing in faith was something that John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, was passionate about. In 1729, John Wesley was not yet the circuit riding rabble rousing out door preacher. He was a professor at Oxford University. His younger brother, Charles, so famous for his hymns, was at this time just a student at the university. But it was Charles who was part of small group of four men, who called themselves the Holy Club, who were very interested in going deeper in their faith. So, Charles asked his big brother for help. John sat down and developed 21 questions for the group to pray about, discuss, and hold one another accountable to on a regular basis. And it was because of this intentional plan and method for spiritual growth, that many of their fellow students started to call the members of this little group by a derogatory name – Methodists – because they were so methodical in their faith.

[Go over questions and devotional] However, the criticism wasn't really valid. For what John was trying to do was break out of the "cake mix" religion of his day - of easy answers and no sacrifice. His questions, which flow from scripture, where meant to provoke and make someone struggle – as they honestly examined their spiritual life and their love for God, to look at their Christian

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character in how they love themselves in a healthy way, and consider the true condition of their hearts in how they show love for their neighbors.

These questions were meant to be exercise for the soul. In the same way we lift weights to firm up our flabby muscles, so to do we need to make the time, be mindful, and honestly examine our spiritual life so we can firm up our flabby souls. Because spiritual growth takes time. It takes time to let the words of Christ soak into our minds and hearts. It takes time for us to act and love and give as Christ did. It takes time for us to grow in the likeness of Christ.

John Wesley couldn't have known when he put his list together, but today we know from social scientist that it takes about 21 days to form a new habit. And so I challenge us to take these questions seriously over the next 21 plus days as we form new habits of spiritual growth and depth.

Because really what these questions are about – what spiritual growth is about – what Jesus is calling us to know is that to follow him – to lose our lives, so that we gain new life – is all about repentance. In the Greek, this word is *Metanoia* or literally “to change one’s mind” “to think differently”. Because the goal is that as we follow Jesus we change our minds and change our hearts - we go in a different direction that leads to a change in behavior. A change where we open ourselves up to let the Holy Spirit work in us and through us to shape us and form us and develop in us habits of grace, habits of faith, habits of love. Because the goal of spiritual growth and repentance – that John Wesley wanted through his questions and Jesus proclaimed - is to stop following our own path and make a change to start walking the path God calls us to – to walk with Jesus in the direction of love – the love of God, love of ourselves, love of neighbor. In John’s Gospel Jesus states - By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another. Now this love is a self-less and sacrificial love – it is asking what are the needs of others and how can I help.

So let me tell you about Anton Walicy who was a Polish soldier who served in the army before World War II and then when the fighting broke out he served in the Polish resistance. Anton was a devout Roman Catholic and he knew that something was not right after the Nazi takeover with how his Jewish friends and

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neighbors were being treated. He saw the camps, particularly a larger one called Auschwitz, being built and asked his superiors to investigate, they said there just wasn't enough evidence. So, Anton forged papers, changed his name, and got himself arrested and sent to Auschwitz. He was beaten and abused. After two years, he escaped and made his way to London where he told the allies that over 2 million Jews had been executed. At first no one believed him, but he took the information was instrumental in liberating Auschwitz. So why would Anton do this? Why risk his life and make such a sacrifice? When he was asked, he simply responded, "I looked out this camp and in prayer I knew if Jesus would go anywhere it would be there, so I followed."

For me, this is what inspires me to have my heart and soul and character so shaped and formed and engraved with the love of God – that I couldn't help but follow where Jesus leads. And we may not be asked to lay down our lives for another or do something as dangerous as what Anton did – but there are just as many small ways that we show this love – stay overnight family promise, bake dessert or serve at mealsite, call to someone who is lonely, a card to someone who is grieving, a ride you give someone to the store, St Theresa said – "small things done with great love change the world."

But it all begins with hearing Jesus' words to lose our life – to let go and give up all the distractions – and follow. This is what John Wesley wanted for that little group as they took an honest and serious look at their hearts and lives wanting to be new creations in Christ. Wanting a new direction. This is what Paul wrote about when he said "Not that I have obtained this or have already reached the goal, but I press on to make it my goal because Christ Jesus has made me his own". Because many people are on a path or seeking a path to fulfillment of some kind – to find meaning and purpose and clarity in life through many different way – some healthy and some not so much - and many don't seem to find it. Because the goal we are pressing on towards – the path we are looking for, isn't found among the easy answers of "cake mix" religion or spirituality. Our path – our faith isn't something to be pre-packaged and cooked up in an instant. Faith is something to be practiced every day in every situation and prepared for eternity.

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We are called to take the time and grow in our faith to be a servants of Christ. And this doesn't happen overnight and it doesn't happen without some struggles along the way. For we are called to be a servant who will daily make that commitment to follow Jesus all the way to the cross, where he says to us, "you must lose your life in order to keep it." So ask yourself - what have you got to lose? What part of us do we need to let go of and let die, so that a more faithful part may live?

As we move through all the seasons of life, let us do so as faithful people willing to let go so that we can receive so much more in return - a life filled to overflowing with purpose, with meaning, a life where we come and are ready to follow where Jesus leads. Amen