

A Testimony to Commitment

October 19, 2008

(Pentecost 23 - Year A)

Matthew 22: 15-22

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

Last Monday night, Susan and I went to a banquet at the Waco Convention Center.

This banquet was a fund raising event for Young Life.

Young Life is a non-denominational ministry that introduces teenagers to Jesus Christ.

Young Life relies on the ministry of volunteer college students, who hang out with teenagers and take an interest in their every day life, helping kids to grow in their faith.

Young Life was very popular in my high school in the 1980s - yet, I must admit, that I was not that attracted to it.

However, my oldest son, Scott, has been active in the Young Life Club at Midway High School.

Therefore, Susan and I attended this fund raiser banquet to support all the Young Life clubs that minister throughout the many schools in Waco.

At this Young Life Banquet, several of the college-aged volunteers got up on stage and took the microphone and very plainly told all of us about their commitment to Jesus Christ and about their commitment to share the good news of Jesus with teenagers.

Then, at the end of the evening, the adult Director of Young Life, who is probably in his late 20s, took the stage.

The director hopped onto the stage, took the microphone and shared with us, in very plain and sincere language, about his commitment to Jesus Christ.

He shared with us his testimony - about how he had given his life to Jesus and how he had given up his small business to go to work for Young Life.

After the banquet, Susan and I got in the car to ride home.

In the car, both of us agreed about how refreshing it was just to hear someone get up to the microphone and to plainly and sincerely say: “I have committed my life to Christ. And I am committed to introducing other people to the good news of Jesus.”

It was refreshing to hear this message from all those college-aged volunteers and from the adult director of the Young Life ministry. And, it made me wonder if, in all the preaching I have done from this pulpit, if I had ever been that plain and clear with each of you.

Therefore, I want to tell you right now:
I have committed my life to Jesus Christ.
And I am committed to introducing other people to the good news of Jesus.

I grew up in a family where the Christian life was important.
I grew up in a family that went to church every Sunday.

Yet, when I was 15 years old, the new assistant rector at our church invited me to become more active in our church youth group. Over spring break that year, our youth group went on a snow skiing trip to New Mexico.

On that ski trip, I received my first glimpse of what a Christian community of teenagers looks like - and I was hooked. During Lent of that year, I began to attend the weekly youth Bible study group.

This Bible study was held in the homes of teenagers in our church, and it was at this Bible study that I realized that God was speaking to me in a very real way.

From that point on, I made my *own* commitment to Jesus Christ. I did not go to church every week because my parents told me to. I went to church every Sunday because I *wanted* to go - to see my friends, to worship God, to be a part of something bigger than myself.

And since those days in the youth group at Holy Spirit Episcopal Church in Houston, I have made dozens of decisions to commit my life to Jesus Christ.

And each of those commitments to Jesus have come when I am deeply committed to other people, other people in the Christian community.

And because I know, from experience, that the Christian faith and life is so completely different and life-giving than the ways of this world, Then I am happy to share the good news of Jesus Christ with anyone.

Therefore, I am just one Christian who has taken this microphone today to tell you, plainly and sincerely:

That I have committed my life to Jesus Christ.

And I am committed to introducing other people to the good news of Jesus.

In today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew, is a punch line that most everyone knows, even those who are only loosely familiar with the Bible.

That familiar punch line is:

“Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's.

And render unto God the things that are God's.”

In the last week of Jesus' life, his enemies try to trap him with a question about whether or not it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, the emperor.

Jesus asks them to pull a Roman coin out of their pocket, which is inscribed with the head of the emperor.

Then Jesus delivers that familiar punch line:

“Give [back] to the emperor the things that are the emperor's,

And [give back] to God the things that are God's.”

I am sure that in many pulpits today, preachers will be interpreting this story in light of the American principle of the separation of church and state.

There is a lot of material that could be mined here, given that we are only two weeks away from electing a new Caesar and given that

Caesar's coins have sure taken wild ride in the stock market as of late.

However, this scripture is not about Caesar.

This scripture is about what Jesus says at the end of his punch line, proclaiming:

“Give back to God the things that are God's.”

Because we belong to God, we are to give ourselves back to God -

By committing our whole life, our everything, to following Jesus Christ.

This morning, we are baptizing Victoria Stout.

Along with Victoria, we will commit *our* life to Jesus through the words of the Baptismal Covenant.

I will ask you several questions in the Baptismal Covenant about how we will respond to our commitment to Jesus Christ.

I will ask you if you will come to church every Sunday.

I will ask you if you will turn around and turn toward God when you fall short of your commitment.

I will ask you if you will introduce others to the good news of Jesus.

I will ask you if you will serve everyone, respecting the dignity of every human being.

To each of these questions, our answer is:

I will, with God's help.

In the Episcopal Church, we rarely have an altar call, where people who want to commit their whole life to Jesus are asked to come forward to the altar.

However, if you think about it, we have an altar call each and every week in the Episcopal Church.

Each and every Sunday we are asked to renew our commitment to Jesus Christ, then we walk up this aisle and answer God's invitation at the altar, by receiving the Body and Blood of Christ, to strengthen us to live out our commitment to Jesus, for just one more week.

Because, each and every day, you and I need to be ready -

Ready to jump up on the stage and take the microphone and give our

testimony of Jesus to a hurting and broken world.

So, don't worry about Caesar's coins and currency.

Instead, commit your life to Jesus Christ.

Give back to God the things that are God's.

Give back your heart, your love, your money, your souls, your bodies.

Give your life, your *everything*, back to God.

AMEN.

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