

## *The Risk To Do Right*

*This sermon was preached by the Rev. Richmond Webster on Sunday, January 31, 2010 and is based Luke 4:21-30.*

Recently one of our parishioners recorded a video with the Rev. Lee Graham, 2<sup>nd</sup> Rector of Saint Luke's and builder of this church, and it is a fascinating.

Although he is 90 years old, he looks great; and as he tells the stories of the early days of this place he makes the building of Saint Luke's and the surrounding neighborhood seem just like yesterday.

There is a poignant moment in the interview, as the old man remembers the Sunday he made a very risky move. It was an announcement from the pulpit and it happened during the first days of this newly completed building, days that were among the darkest days of the civil rights struggle and particularly in Birmingham, days when churches were flashpoints in the battle over segregation...

The battle came to Saint Luke's in this way: An associate priest from this church was quoted in the newspaper for his views supporting Civil Rights and the protests, and as a result, a letter was circulated among the parish asking for his resignation. Something had to be done, and it was here that Lee Graham made his risky move.

Watching the video, I was moved by the fact that Lee Graham is still so affected by it. His eyes were teary; his voice choked with emotion. Clearly he remembers the day as if it were yesterday, the day he stood in the pulpit of a newly built Saint Luke's (a church that took him more than a decade to build), the day he stood before his wife and children, his friends and neighbors, his vestry and others in the pew who would hold the key to his future employment and said in effect, "If he goes, I go."

Lee Graham describes this as a terrifying experience, and I believe him. But he also added that he felt peace, a peace that assured him that all would be well and that he would be protected, a peace that passes all understanding, a peace that gave him the freedom to do the right thing.

Conflict and pain are unavoidable parts of the human story, and Christianity is no exception. In fact, we've been studying conflict in the book of Acts during my midweek Bible study and this has caused me to conclude that Christianity, at least the form we find in our Bibles, is just plain hard.

What I've noticed these days is that in the book of Acts, conflict appears at every turn, beginning with the same religious court that killed Jesus and now was after them, to Saul before his road to Damascus, to soldiers, and mobs, and kings, and neighbors and family—everyone wants to do them in.

And why not? The same thing happened to Jesus, and if we want to find the root cause of all this trouble we need only to look at this Gospel lesson.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke's Gospel we are told that Jesus went home to preach. Given the challenges of any home town boy standing before his neighbors and family and friends, it appears he did pretty well that day. Pretty well, until he told them something they didn't want to hear.

It was a risky move. Of all the stories from Scripture he could have used that day, he chose two stories to remind them that the gifts of God's love and protection were for all people, not just them. These were gentile stories, or at least stories starring gentile people, and as I pondered why these would have so angered the people of Nazareth I remembered a funny story.

Back when I was a brand new rector in Decatur, I organized my very first Vestry retreat at camp McDowell, and I asked my senior warden to help with the details. When my warden called camp to plan the meals, she was asked if our delegation wanted steak or chicken for dinner. Chicken was slightly less expensive, and since she was frugal (with the church's money anyway) she went with poultry. I knew nothing of the decision.

That night we gathered in the dining hall for dinner along with other delegations who might be there at the same time. There was only one. The cathedral Church of the Advent was there with us, with a huge delegation full of big city types, adding to my anxiety.

Dinner was served by going through a serving line and one my vestry members entered first. "Where are you from?" the woman behind the steam table, asked. "Decatur," she answered. She got a piece of chicken. The next guy was from Advent. "Where are you from?" she asked. "Birmingham," he answered. He got a piece of steak.

My vestry was outraged, and they immediately started telling the serving lady that they were from Birmingham, so they wouldn't have to settle for small town chicken. I think this gets us somewhat to the rage that day in Nazareth; they were God's chosen people but for centuries they had settled for chicken. Now they were expecting a Messiah to deliver steak for them, not give the blessings to everyone else.

That day in Nazareth would be the beginning of all sorts of trouble for Jesus, and the story continues.

"If I were to speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels," St. Paul said, "and have not love, I am nothing." We are so used to hearing this lesson at weddings I'm afraid it's lost its punch, but this lesson too is an invitation to trouble, the same trouble that day in Nazareth, the same trouble that day for Lee Graham.

I'm trying to say that if we can only get past the hearts and flowers whenever we hear these words, then we can consider that St. Paul is joining the age old fight. He is saying,

just as Jesus said, that it is not enough to believe all the right things. We have to do them. This is love. This is Christianity. This is hard.

To be a disciple of Jesus means that we are called to love the world as Jesus loves the world. To love this way means that we cannot hide behind popular opinions or even time honored traditions, but rather seeking to be the people we were made to be. To love this way means we are to remember that we are not the center of the universe, that it's just not always about us, and this invites trouble.

Jesus said in another place that there is a kingdom right under our noses, a kingdom where the weak are strong and the poor are rich and the dead are raised and the hopeless have hope again.

But make no mistake, to find this kingdom we will all have to, in our own way, run into trouble with the world around us. We will all have to risk doing right. At my seminary they like to say, "seek the truth, come whence it may, cost what it will." To find the truth, we will have to love.

If all this sounds good and churchy but not practical, I'll offer an example of how we might find this kingdom beyond the doors of Saint Luke's.

This past week I've been in Sewanee with a group of other pastors, economists, and theologians, all studying the intersection of faith and money, and looking to see if there is a morality behind our financial transactions and economic systems.

I'll be honest. Being a college setting I was expecting a bunch of neo-marxists to tell me that money was bad, but in fact our discussions were pretty good. For instance, the earthquake in Haiti has dominated the news and truly it is the natural disaster of the century.

But this event has also raised a new awareness of the abysmal state of their world before the earthquake. In terms of basic human safety, basic human rights, basic human need, too many nations are simply left behind.

With this in mind, many Christians are coming to new conclusions about money, that it is simply a tool that can be used for good or ill, that it is flavorless, like tofu, and can become whatever we put into it. Money can be used for good.

Here is my point. From the very beginning, our American business model has been based on the concept of risk and reward. But these days, Christians are beginning to consider a third element, and that is the element of purpose.

Simply put, as we climb, ever so slowly, out of this global economic mess, it is not enough for Christians to generate wealth, but rather to build an economy while seeking the good of others. To use my tired analogy, too many in this world don't even have

chicken, and so we insert love (in the way St. Paul describes it) between the risk and reward of our daily business.

As Christians we can simply ask the question. “How can my money help me to honor God, love my neighbor, and make me a whole person?”

In our city there are small credit unions battling the payday loan industry. Deposits are federally insured, and while the return may be slightly less than competing banks, the social impact is dramatic. As best I can tell, it is a win-win. In fact, my reunion group made a small deposit with one of these, just to enter the fight, but this is just one example.

We can invest in companies that add value to our community, protect people, build sustainable societies at home and abroad, and the list goes on. Our money can be our witness. We can join the fight.

I’ll say this again. As Christians we are called to do something, not just believe something. If we are business people, then we can become Christian business people; if we are employers, then we can become Christian employers; if we are doctors, then we can become Christian doctors; if we are neighbors, then we can become Christian neighbors; if we are parents, then we can become Christian parents...

We can be at the top of our games, St Paul said, and if we have not love we are nothing.

Which reminds me to finish telling you the story: Lee Graham didn’t lose his job. The vestry refused his resignation, friends and neighbors rallies to support him, and this church began moving forward through the darkest of days.

But let us never forget that almost 50 years ago, a pastor stood in the church and took the risk to do right. The character of this church as a place of kindness and tolerance and generosity is his legacy. What will be our legacy in this world as we seek God’s kingdom. What will happen when we join the fight, and take our risks, and love this world?

Lets get busy, and see.