

Tough Stuff (Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18; John 6:56-69; II Timothy 4:1-9a)

Jesus was talking to a crowd in the synagogue in Capernaum. Now, knowing Jesus as we do, we can imagine some of the themes he was touching upon--forgiveness; justice; peace; compassion; hope; love; servanthood. No doubt he was talking about how important it was for his listeners to take him into themselves--to live the way he lived. He said, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them" (John 6:56).

Apparently many of Jesus' followers had already begun to backslide. Some no longer felt as swept away by excitement as they once had. Others had begun to realize that following Jesus was going to actually cost them something. Others now understood that Jesus was not who they wanted him to be. So now these backsliders and apparently others began to turn their backs on Jesus, saying, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?"

The people began deserting Jesus in such droves that Jesus questioned if even his closest followers, his 12 disciples, wanted to also leave him. So Jesus asked the 12, "Do you also wish to go away?"

Friends, let there be no doubt: following Jesus is tough stuff. It requires a sacrifice of our time, our talents, our money. It requires sacrificing our own wants and desires. It's costly.

But being a follower of Jesus goes even beyond giving of our time, talents, money, wants, and desires. It's even tougher stuff than all that! Being a follower of Jesus requires that we not only give but also that we do--that we do the work of the one we profess to follow--the work of Jesus. And his work is tough stuff. It's tough to be forgiving, to do justice for all people, to work for peace, to show compassion, to offer hope, to love, to live as a servant. But being a follower of Jesus requires that we do all this tough stuff--in an effort to change this world into God's kingdom.

Aesop once told a story about a group of mice who lived in a barn. Life was good, except for a sneaky cat who was always trying to catch them. Finally the mice called a meeting to decide how to solve the problem of the cat. One mouse suggested that they hang a bell around the cat's neck so that they would be able to hear him when he got near. All the mice applauded. It

was a great idea! But then it dawned on the mice that someone would have to put the bell around the cat's neck. Who was going to do that? Who was going to do the tough, dangerous work that needed to be done?

Jesus came to bell the cats that were terrorizing and hurting and killing the children of God. There were a lot of cats that preyed on the innocent in his day and time--cats that Jesus knew had to be belled so that they could no longer prevent the peace, joy, and love of God's kingdom. And we all know that the same is true in our time.

In a sermon entitled "Belling The Cat," a preacher named King Duncan told about a woman named Joyce Riley. *She and her neighbors decided it was time to bell the cat. Nineteen young men had died within one year's time on their street, three of them within one week. Two and a half years before, Riley had lost her grandson in a drive-by killing. She was angry, hurt, confused. She asked why, why won't someone do something about all this killing, all this crime going on around the neighborhood? Then, she said, God spoke to her. And God said, "Why don't you?"*

So she...called the police department. She said, "I need some help. What can we do for you and what can you do for us?" The major she talked to answered, "Do what you want to do. Do what you think you can do, and we'll be with you." And so she and some of her neighbors took to the streets.

At last report they had been there two and a half years each Friday night, rain, shine, sleet, or snow. They march there continuously. They used to march and have a candlelight vigil every time there was a death on the street. There wasn't anything wrong with that, said Joyce Riley, but it wasn't getting anything done. You do a vigil, and you go home and nothing changes. So there was more to it than just a vigil. If they wanted the crooks, the criminals, the gun-carrying thugs off the street, they had to go in there and mingle with them, show them they would not be intimidated, and that's what they did.

They marched right in the middle of the drug dealers, the killers, the murderers. They decided the thugs weren't going to run them out. They stayed out there and took all kinds of abuse. They were threatened. The

women were harassed sexually in shameful ways, but they weren't going to run. They were there to stay.

Joyce Riley said she wasn't simply doing her own thing. She was doing God's thing. This, she said, was a vision from God. God said to her, "Go, Riley. You can do it. I'm there with you." Because of this, she said, they weren't afraid of the drug dealers, the guns, not anything....So they stayed. And it is a good thing they did. There's been only one homicide in that area, on those streets, in the nearly three years since Joyce Riley obeyed the voice of God.¹

Another man who belled the cat was a seventy-five-year old man named Carter who drove a taxi cab in Washington, DC. In 1994, Carter picked up a man from Malawi, Africa, with whom he gradually became friends. So in 1998, Carter visited the homeland of his friend. And there in Malawi, Carter saw extreme poverty. He asked God to help him make a difference--to help him bell the cat of poverty. Carter saw that there was no road in the village. He realized that with a proper road, people would be able to get around better. Sick people could be taken to the hospital. So Carter offered to use the money he'd brought to Africa to pay for gas and oil and drivers if the people of the village would do the work. Thus a real road was built.

On Carter's next trip to Malawi, he learned that a young man had been falsely accused of stealing and was stuck in jail. Since Carter knew that God wanted him to bell the cat of injustice, Carter got involved again, and soon the young man was set free. On the same visit, Carter met a boy who needed medical care that he could only receive in a distant city. Carter found a way to make it possible for the boy to get treatment on a regular basis.

On his third trip to Malawi, Carter bought seed for some young farmers. He also got 26 soccer balls donated to the children of the village. He even helped get uniforms for the children, "because in the kingdom of God dignity and pride (in being a child of God) are also important things."

¹ Dynamic Preaching Third Quarter 2009 Sermons, King Duncan, ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., 2009, 0-000-0000-20

On another trip, Carter was instrumental in getting a shopkeeper to give money to treat children who were sick with ringworm. And Carter was also behind the creation of a Bible school that grew from 17-85 students.

Today there are roads, rides, ringworm medicine, seeds, soccer balls, uniforms, and a Bible school in Malawi all because a 75-year-old taxi cab driver from Washington D.C. was willing to bell the cat, to get involved, to live his commitment to God, to do the tough and sometimes dangerous work of building God's kingdom.²

Who will bell the cats of today, if not those who understand who Jesus is and share his same love for others and his vision of God's kingdom? Who will bell the cats of today, if not us?

You know, fifty-six men signed the Declaration of Independence. Their conviction resulted in untold sufferings for themselves and their families. Of the 56 men, five were captured by the British and tortured before they died. Twelve had their homes ransacked and burned. Two lost their sons in the Revolutionary Army. Another had two sons captured. Nine of the fifty-six fought and died from wounds or hardships of the war. Carter Braxton of Virginia, a wealthy planter and trader, saw his ships sunk by the British navy. He sold his home and properties to pay his debts and died in poverty. At the battle of Yorktown, the British General Cornwallis had taken over Thomas Nelson's home for his headquarters. Nelson quietly ordered General George Washington to open fire on his own home. The home was destroyed and Nelson died bankrupt. John Hart was driven from his wife's bedside as she was dying. Their thirteen children fled for their lives. His fields and mill were destroyed. For over a year, he lived in forest and caves, returning home only to find his wife dead and his children vanished. A few weeks later, he died from exhaustion.³ What an example of commitment for all of us Christians!

Now, I know that this sermon must seem somewhat odd to you. Perhaps it seems really out of step with the times. Few preachers today talk about

² Ibid.

³ Brett Blair, www.eSermons.com. Adapted from Kenneth L. Dodge, Resource, Sept./Oct., 1992, Page 5

commitment and the cost of being a disciple. Instead, they preach prosperity sermons--promising those in the pews that if they'll become followers of Jesus, they'll be prosperous! You see, these preachers know that most people today are primarily interested in what they can get out of something. Studies show that most people today want to put "number one" first, focusing on their own freedom, their own comfort, their own leisure, their own pleasure, what they want, and what will benefit them the most. They're more interested in getting than in giving. They're interested in the church only when they need someone married or buried. When they consider joining a church, they do it for what they think they'll get out of it instead of what they can bring, literally, "to the Table."

The temptation is always there for us, as it was for Jesus in the wilderness, to want new members so much that we tell prospective members that they will be prosperous or that they can be followers of Jesus on their own terms. But Jesus never promised bigger houses and fancier cars, and he certainly never told Peter, James, and John that it was okay for them to do their own thing. Jesus, though, did say, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). No wonder so many have always turned their backs on him, saying, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" But, friends, let us be honest about our faith. Let us never kid anyone into joining our church by telling them how easy it will be, for it's tough stuff indeed!

But it's the tough stuff upon which I've seen you build your lives. And it's the tough stuff that I know others outside these walls would also be willing to build their lives on.

So let's not be ashamed of the demands of our Lord. In fact, let's boldly tell others that being a follower of Jesus of Nazareth is not for the faint-hearted! But let's also tell them of the joy that comes from being a faithful follower of the Lord, from doing the tough stuff he asks of us: forgiving; working for justice for all people; working for peace; showing compassion; offering hope; loving; living as servants. And let's tell them of the peace that comes when we can join Peter in saying, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68-69). Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; August 23, 2009