

Go Mad

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A few weeks ago, when Dr. Battles asked me if I would preach on September 6th, I said “Of course!” (as any recent seminary graduate would). I went back to my office to look up the lectionary text for the day. I opened to the gospel lesson with great anticipation: “What message would God have prepared for me on this, my first sermon at my first call?” Something wonderful, no doubt. I flipped pages fervently to the Gospel according to Luke, chapter 14. And there it was. The text of today's Gospel lesson. “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters....”

I am not aware of any account in the Bible where it says that God or Jesus laughed... but I am sure that God has a wonderful sense of humor, and this was just another example. I ducked and swerved, trying to find a way to avoid even touching on the Gospel lesson for today, but I couldn't shake it. I knew I had to answer the question that came to me, and probably to you: Why would Jesus say such a thing? Was He tired of so many people following Him, and decided this might be a way to thin the crowd? Maybe He was having second thoughts and was trying to get everyone to leave Him alone. Why would He say such a thing?

The answer is that Jesus wanted to make sure that those were following Him were fully aware of the consequences of their actions. He wanted them to count the costs. He was not making a call for blind faith, but for an informed decision. Let's look at the context of the passage: there was a short parable we did not read. It was right before today's reading from Luke. Jesus told a parable of a man who prepared a great banquet, but none of the invited guests would come. They were busy people and had other things to do. It wasn't a priority for them. Maybe later, if they had the time, if it didn't interfere with their plans.

Immediately following that parable, we hear what it costs to follow Jesus. There can be no confusion what priorities Jesus wants from His followers. This is not the first time in the gospel of Luke that Jesus has had strong warnings for those were eager to follow Him. Previously [Luke 9: 57-62] a man approached Jesus, anxious to follow Jesus wherever He goes. Jesus tells him: “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” Another wants to bury his father first, and then he will follow Jesus. Jesus tells him: “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”

Apparently Jesus never attended a Presbytery workshop on church growth. I've only been here a month, and if anyone came into my office with that much enthusiasm, I wouldn't let them leave without finding a way to use their gifts and abilities. Jesus' actions, reminded of the parable of the sower from Matthew 13 [verses 18-24]. You will remember that some of the seed falls on shallow

ground. It grows quickly, but because the soil is not deep, the growth is short-lived. That is not what Jesus wanted from His followers. He wanted to make sure that their soil was deep enough, that they have considered the costs.

The Christian life is not an easy one, it is a costly one. Unfortunately the word “cost” has a very negative connotation to it. Costs are a part of many good things. We are so used to some costs that we don't really even think about them: Athletes accept the costs of practice over long hours and often grueling workouts to get them to their best performance. Doctors accept the costs of years of schooling and long hours to be able to best serve their patients. Parents accept the costs of raising children. This congregation has accepted the cost of the reconstruction of the church building to better suit our needs and the needs of those we serve. Students accept the costs of classwork to help them prepare better for later life.

Moving to Gainesville was a wonderful thing for us, but Tracey and I are now very far away from our families. That is a cost. For Tracey and I, the benefit of moving was the chance to start a new ministry here at in Gainesville, in an entirely new place where life would be very different than we had known it. Tracey's hometown has one stop light. My hometown has less than one-fifth the population of the University of Florida. Just as we did not move to Gainesville without considering the costs, just as this church did not decide to go through this renovation project without considering the costs, Jesus did not want His followers to come without considering the costs.

But what are the benefits? Jesus never promised us a rose garden, but He did promise us that the Spirit would be with us. The Spirit will be with us to help us GO MAD. Did you wonder if I was going to explain the meaning of the title of this sermon — GO MAD? It is a 5-letter explanation of what we can do with the help of the Spirit of God. With the spirit of God we can Go Out and Make A Difference. The Spirit will help us live out the life which Jesus showed us. That is what we are called to do. That is the call of Jesus; that is the cross we are to bear. We are called to live this life, not relying on our own strength but on the grace of God. We are called to love this life with all its turmoil and struggle and heartbreak, with all its confusion and anxiety and uncertainty. We are not called to die for our faith, but to live for it! ***But*** we are called to live for others, not ourselves. That is the cost. That is the call.

And Paul tells Timothy that the call is not just for the adults. However old Timothy was at the time Paul was writing to him, Paul knew that Timothy was young enough that his age would be an issue. Paul tells him very simply not to let anyone despise his youth. The New Jerusalem translation is even richer, “let no one *disregard* you because you are young”. Paul then goes on to instruct Timothy that he must be an example of love — both in what he says and what he does. To the youth of this congregation I echo Paul's words: you are called to be living witnesses. How you treat each other, how you act towards one another, even those who aren't your closest friends, is part of that witness. You are representatives of this congregation, and more importantly you are representatives of Jesus. You too have a calling. Your words and your actions need to be shaped by your faith. It is a high standard, but take comfort in the fact that it is the same standard for you and your parents, and for all of us. We all have the same calling, there is not a different call for each age group.

I do not intend this as a burden to keep you up at night worrying about whether or not you are living up to yet another set of expectations. It is simply how we are called to live. Don't worry about failing at it — everyone in this room has failed at it. The church is not in the business of filtering out imperfect people. If we were, all the seats in this church would be empty — as would this pulpit.

We are in this together; young and old, rich and poor, white and black, and everyone in-between. We have a calling. It is a simple calling: we are called to live as Jesus did. The simplicity of the call does not mean it is easy. It would be easier to live for ourselves, disregarding the example of Jesus. But as Paul twice reminded the Christians living in Corinth, we are not our own, we were bought at a price [1 Corinthians 6:20 and 7:23]. The Corinthian church was far from perfect — yet they were not abandoned. We are far from perfect, and we are not abandoned. Jesus was sent to us out of God's love for us, not to condemn us but to save us [John 3:16-17]. Jesus bought our very lives with His blood. There was a cost for Jesus as well. Nails in His feet and hands, a spear in His side, abandoned by the same enthusiastic followers who promised to be with Him wherever He went. There was a cost.... But Jesus paid that cost, freeing us from that burden, freeing us to live not out of *obligation* but out of *thankfulness*; not out of *fear* but out of *love*. He wants nothing less than our entire life. He wants to be our first priority, above family, above friends, above jobs and above busy schedules. He wants to send us out to spread the gospel, the good news, wherever we find ourselves tomorrow and the next day, in a classroom, in an office, at home, at work — He wants us all the time and everywhere, to go out and make a difference.

As you leave this place to go out, remember the calling to which you were called. Pray for the eyes to see the places in your life where you can make a difference. You might be surprised how many opportunities there are around you every day to make a difference.

Count the costs, take up your cross — joyfully — and GO MAD.

I first heard the title “Go Mad” during high school, referring (if I recall correctly) to a Youth conference in the Archdiocese of Boston. When I remembered that I wanted to use it for a sermon title.