

September 14th message

Our short Hebrews reading is filled with much. These eight verses cover hospitality, empathy, fidelity, and contentment. I'm sure there is a sermon or two or three in each verse. But what really struck me were verses 7 and 8. "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."

All of us can think back to those who have led us to where we are today in our faith. We can probably all name a few Sunday school teachers, maybe some youth sponsors, a preacher or two, relatives, parents, and others. Consider for a moment one in particular: what makes that person stand out? For me it is that faithfulness that included trying to see the best in everyone and refrained from being judgmental.

We are told to imitate their faith. That can be quite difficult. Some would say life was easier and less complicated in the past and it was easier to be a Christian. And to that I might have to agree to a point. But we are told Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Jesus needs to be the one we look to, not what is trending in our day. The person we just thought of knew that and lived it. We are called to do the same and not be swayed by the false gods of our day. Our gospel reading gives us some direction on that.

I have to admit I like sitting in back in certain places. I like having other people in front of me. Some seating just seems more comfortable. People get used to certain places especially in church. When we attend the mega church in Columbia I follow my son and daughter in law to the same area. Last week I went to church with my mom and she had her spot also. I prefer the back and I don't mind my back to the wall, literally, not figuratively.

I remember a pastor once who roped off the back pews trying to get folks to move closer to the front. Guess what happened? Yep, people just moved the ropes and sat where they pleased; so much for that attempt. Maybe he should

have realized that his congregation were familiar with these words of Jesus and just need an invitation to come up to the front. Maybe he should have just used the scripture to his advantage and said, 'friend move up higher.'

This lesson from Jesus has the heading, The Parable of the Great Banquet in some Bibles. Others refer to it as 'Jesus teaches about seeking honor', and still others refer to it as 'The parable of the chief seats.' A chapter in an older book I have by Neil Lightfoot tells how this is not a parable that tells a story, yet it still is a parable in the true sense of the world because it teaches on the right relationships in the kingdom of God. That lesson is how one must have humility.

In the reading right before this, Jesus had silenced His critics about healing on the Sabbath. Now these same people were watching Him closely, scrutinizing His every move and word. In those days it was customary to have U shaped low tables allowing the guests to eat their meals in reclining positions.

At the head of the table were the most honored guests usually the Rabbis. Then to their right the next most honored guests would be seated. Others were seated in a descending order of importance. The exact time of the meal was not announced, rather it would be general invitation sent to all invited. Because of this some would arrive early and others would be late. Jesus noted how the Pharisees were maneuvering around the table for the different seats. It was in this context that He gave this lesson.

Chances are some of those present had already experienced this. Yet Jesus realizes an opportunity to teach about humility. Humility, now there's a word we don't hear or witness too much these days. Once in a while we may see it with a successful athlete. A truly humble player knows that a variety of factors have helped them be a winner. Those who have teammates will speak of them and how one is part of a team. We also see it with those who serve in different uniforms. These folks have made it their career to be ready for anything and serve where needed. They are gracious when a situation arises that turns out well because of their ability.

But we see so much of the opposite. Unfortunately we see this in many of our elected officials on both sides of the aisle. There was a time when we called these folks public servants. There was a time when these folks would try to get elected as a “humble, public servant.” While it’s easy to look at what’s wrong in our world and be critical, this parable applies to all and there is much to learn.

I help with getting the ball fields ready in the school where I used to teach. Once in a while I’ll visit with the coaches on how things are going. They often speak of how the players are improving. But one of the most positive things I hear in reference to these young men is how they are “coachable.” This might seem strange to hear to some, but it has become an issue, or maybe it always has been, I don’t know. By “coachable” they mean someone who is willing to listen and learn. Sometimes young people will come to a new team thinking they know it all and won’t listen to what the coach has to say.

This can be part of their personality and/or it can be fostered by their upbringing. I wanted to mention this because simply stated humble people are coachable. They know they don’t have all the answers and are open to learning from others. They are in the words of James, quick to listen and slow to speak. Again I have to lament on how we see so much of the opposite in our world. The problem is and I know I say this time and time again, but this has a direct influence on us. We begin to chime in and think being quick to speak and slow to listen is how things should be.

Followers of Christ generally speaking then are ‘coachable.’ They look to the Lord for direction and guidance in life. They realize social status is temporary, here today, gone tomorrow. They know that high esteem and recognition in society is quickly forgotten. Case and point, I’m guessing that most of us watch the Super Bowl every year, but how many of us remember who won three years ago? (It was the Los Angeles Rams.)

Jesus tells if you humble yourselves now, someday you will be exalted. Jesus' advice about seeking a humble seat at the table is not really about the reward, but rather about the One doing the rewarding! It is God who will lift up the humble, who will exalt the righteous, who will grant us our reward in this life and the next.

My study Bible addresses this a bit. It spoke about how service to others is a trademark of a true follower of Christ. It also mentioned how humble people don't worry about social status and look to Jesus as their role model. They also realize their sinfulness and limitations yet they use the gifts and strengths in the furthering of the kingdom.

That's quite a calling when you really think about it and consider all the implications. In the chapter I mentioned earlier, Lightfoot identifies two areas of self-evaluation in keeping one a humble servant of Christ. The first is basically our physical weaknesses. We can do our best to take care of ourselves and maintain our health. Sooner or later for most people sickness or disease comes along and in varying degrees can restrict all our hopes and plans. Along with this come age. Next year I hope to attend my 50 year high school reunion. Like all of you I can remember thinking 68 was really old, now I think of how age is just a number.

But the aches and pains and of overdoing it are beginning to catch up with me. Many of you can relate to this and have dealt and are dealing with much more than I am. Along with this comes the realization aging is very apparent to others. Last weekend mom and I went to a farm where they milk cows and process and sell dairy products. The most popular item to buy is the ice cream type of yogurt they sell. We got ours and while we were looking at the other stuff for sale an older lady asked me if I could help her sit down on one their small benches. I did and then she thanked my mom for sharing her husband with her! Now mom looks good at 92 but I'm thinking do I really look that old????(don't answer that).

The second area one should examine is how one has mental limitations. All of us have worked or known a person some would call a “know it all.” Yep, they’ve been there and they’ve done that. We are living through the information age where just about anything we need to know is available to us. I use YouTube videos at times to help me fix things. They can be helpful if you can find exactly what you’re looking for. While this is available I have found there is no substitute for experience. Actually doing the work yourself is where you really learn.

A big part of our faith is doing the work needed in the world. People are good at talking about problems, but not so good about getting out and working to solve them. We see this time and time again. We are called to serve and we have the perfect example to follow in Jesus.

Even those first followers of Jesus needed lesson after lesson on this. Before Passover in Luke 22 the disciples essentially got into an argument about who was the greatest among them. Jesus must have been extremely displeased to think that after all this time they still didn’t get it. Time and time again He had taught the one who serves is the greatest in God’s kingdom. Even going to the point of taking the role of a house servant, washing the disciples’ feet. Imagine what must have been going through their heads: The Son of God washing my feet! What a lesson that was!

And I’m sure the Lord has plenty of lessons for us. The question is: Are we coachable enough to learn or do we already think we know it all? That’s the challenge for us today. Will we be like young people on a ball team ready to listen or learn or will we turn a deaf ear to what the Lord directs us? The choice is up to us, may we choose wisely. Amen.