

“What To Put On In The Morning”

Ephesians 6: 10-17; John 6: 60-71

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So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.” John 6:67-68

Since 1930, Pluto has been a planet. Last Thursday, Pluto was dismissed from the pantheon of solar system heavy weights. Yes, Pluto is small and a long, long way from the sun. Yes, it has a terrible atmosphere. But I really hated to see Pluto go. There are many reasons, not the least of which is my worry over what will happen to that memory sentence that school children have used for decades to remember the names of the nine planets- Mars, Venus, Earth, Mercury, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto: “My very excellent mother just sent us nine pizzas.” It worked for generations of school children in science class. What will they say now: “My very excellent mother just sent us nine?” A spokesperson for the Space and Rocket Center in Huntsville lamented last week, “I woke up this morning, and there was one less planet.”

One day, Jesus woke up and realized that his circle of disciples was shrinking dramatically. Attrition had set in with a vengeance. In the beginning, a great many people had orbited around him, basking in his love, listening to his message. But as time went by, his devotees began to find what he had to say more and more difficult to accept. He challenged them about it one day. “Does what I am saying offend you?” he asked. “I know there are some of you who don’t believe what I’m

saying. What I am saying is that ‘unless you are able to eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.’” (John 6:53) It does sound pretty daunting, doesn’t it? No wonder many were ready to take early retirement. No one was dismissed or sent away. The turning back was voluntary. I can’t know what was in the mind of those who slipped away, but I imagine those who did concluded it would be better to live some distance from the light, rather than to give their all to serve the one who was the light.

Remember the movie “Private Benjamin”? Remember the Goldie Hawn character who enlisted in the army after a failed attempt at love? Remember how she told that drill sergeant at boot camp with that winsome smile on her face, “I’m so sorry; there’s been a terrible mistake. I signed up for the other army, the one with the air-conditioned condos and enjoyable trips to exotic places”?

I think of those popular European walking tours where you hike and perspire all day, but then the sun sets, and there is a hot bath, a four-course meal, and a feather bed waiting for you at the country inn at the end of the trail. I imagine that a lot of those who signed on with Jesus in the beginning had no idea what they were getting themselves into. They had no idea how daunting the road would be and how heartbreaking the final destiny; they had no idea that it was only through death that life - everlasting life – could come. Jesus speaks of provisions for the journey. Yes, God would provide for the necessary food and drink, but it would come through sacrifice. “Those who drink my blood and eat my flesh will abide in me and I in them.” No wonder the disciples turned back and no longer went with him. Not all of them, but all but twelve. How many self-selected out? Ten times twelve? Three times twelve? We don’t know; we only know that when the

defection was done, twelve were left, and one of them was possessed of a heart poised for betrayal.

One more word about those former disciples as they disappear across the horizon: Notice that they are *disciples*. They weren't the merely curious or casual. They had really signed on. As someone has written, ". . . these are not folks who show up only at Christmas and Easter. These people have been teaching Sunday school and working in the nursery (and serving on the Session.)" Pillars of the church are disappearing. (1) Pluto is a planet that is a mass of ice and gas and has no capacity to decide, but pillars are people who can choose. A lot of pillars in the early Christian Movement chose to take their leave.

After they were gone, Jesus gathered the ones who were left and said, "Do you also wish to go away?" Well, I don't know; did he say it that way? Was he angry? DO YOU ALSO WISH TO GO AWAY? Maybe I would have been a little angry; perhaps Jesus was too. "They've left me; now you're going too?" Maybe he was angry, but I think that behind the anger was the deepest sadness. (2) Jesus was "fully human, fully God." (3) I believe the defections cut him to the core as did the disbelief, the complaining, the rejections, and the betrayals he endured throughout his ministry. He was fully human. And so when he asks, "Do you too wish to go away?" it's a heartbreaking thing.

I am glad that I myself was not there. I am glad that I did not have to look him in the eye and answer truthfully, because if the truth be told, sometimes I want to go with him all the way, and sometimes I want to turn and not follow him anymore.(4)

When I have to stand up for what I believe and say something that is hard and strong that I know will offend, I would like to go away.

Off and on throughout my ministry, I have wished to go away and live a less complicated life. Balancing marriage and motherhood and ministry has been a daunting thing for me.

Yes, I would like to go away when the denomination that I serve makes decisions that I believe are grace-less and antithetical to the spirit of the gospel of the God I know in Jesus Christ.

When I realize that many people in 2006 are still uncomfortable with women in leadership positions in the church and especially in the pulpit, I think about throwing in the towel.

I want to go away when people get mad about little things that don't make a bit of difference. They argue about them in congregations, and they forget the great ends of the church, such as "the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind and the exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world." (5)

When we get buried in minutia and forget our mission, when daily discipleship is tedious or when its demands are costly, when I am so short on free time and long on committee meetings, then I can identify with those who, one day at the beginning of the Christian enterprise, slipped quietly out of the circle that revolved around the Son of God.

Yet, as soon as I try to slip away unnoticed and give it up, I find someone standing directly in my way, facing Jesus. With his arms on his hips, Simon Peter asks, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.” And I know he’s right, really. Who else is there with the words of eternal life?

There are those who offer an easier path, but if you follow the mantra of today’s culture of narcissism, you will end up in that lonely kingdom of Me, Myself, and I. If you default to despair, then your life is over already, and all you have to look forward to is more of the same, followed by a shovelful of dirt on your coffin at the cemetery. If you fall for the false promises of feel-good religion, then you will get the religious equivalent of cotton candy, which offers one-half of one second’s worth of sweetness and nothing to live on when trouble comes and darkness descends.

“To whom can we go? You are the one who has the words of eternal life.”

Sometimes, I wish the one with the words were easier to live with. I have looked and listened and read and prayed. Across the years, I have come across wonderful ideas and inspiring people, but I have not come close to finding anyone who offers the real stuff. I need the strength of Jesus Christ, because his strength is the strength that underlies all human strength. I need his truth because his truth is the source and corrector of all human truth. I need his peace, which passes all human understanding. I can’t find it in self-help books on Amazon.com. I can’t find it in the rhetoric from the White House. I can’t hear it in the positions of the Democratic National Committee. I can’t read it in Deepak Chopra’s writings.

“Lord, to whom can we go? You are the one...you are the one with the words of eternal life.”

Eternal life is a state of being that begins, not when you are and I are dead and gone, but when we come alive in the here and now to the real presence of the kingdom of heaven. I am thinking of someone I knew who was out of cancer treatments, with one foot almost across to the other side. Every day, he wore a bright red tie, a sign of life, a sign of his confidence, that beyond the worst that death could do, is the best that God could do. I am thinking about visiting a barrio in a neighborhood in a little country in Central America, where the children had no shoes, and there was little food to eat, and how someone had carved on the front door of the tiny hut in which I was visiting, the Spanish words that mean “Jesus lives.”

To whom else can we go to combat the powerful forces in the universe that work against life? When Jesus talked about how daunting it would be to follow him, many turned away, but some stayed. Those who did changed human history. I believe that now we are called to be the world-changers. We are the ones God is asking, in our day, to stand against the cosmic powers that destroy life and community.

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the young church at Ephesus, which was so out of synch with the values of the Roman Empire, and so out of synch with the religious culture of the goddess Artemis, he knew that there were spiritual forces of evil to be faced. Paul was not interested in the content of the Ephesians’ hearts. He wanted to assure them that there was strength from another realm that would allow them to stand steadfast against those forces. He was not interested in going deep with them and examining their faith. He wanted them to know that there was battle gear available. I know the political incorrectness of these martial metaphors,

but I love it when Paul writes, “Put on the whole armor of God.” God will give you what you need to stand against spiritual evil. I need to know how to fight despair when I have personal challenges to deal with. As a community of faith, we need to know how to keep on when the battle is long and the victory is not in sight. It comes down to relying on God’s strength. Paul writes, “Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of God’s power.”

I have said many times from this pulpit that our lives are not about us; they are about glorifying God. What I want to say to you today is that conquering the forces that work against life is not about us either. It is about God’s power to defeat the powers and principalities operative in a broken world, that would keep us from doing what we ought to do and being strong, faithful people able to live each day in joy and praise. The whole armor of God is available 24-7 if we will choose to put it on.

When you get out of bed in the morning, consider fastening the belt of truth around your waist. The Roman soldiers wore a belt into which they tucked their togas so they would not trip when they walked. God’s truth will keep you from stumbling into error.(6)

Put on the breastplate of righteousness. In other words, try to do good; be moral; follow the commandments; live according to the admonitions of the Sermon on the Mount. No, it’s not easy, but possible through the grace of Christ.

As shoes for your feet, put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. This is one of the hardest ones – one of the hardest words that lead to eternal life - this command to walk around everywhere in the gospel of peace. I

like to hold onto stuff. It's hard to let go of bitterness and resentment. It's tempting to go over and over again who did what to whom. But Paul says let all that go; change your shoes, and you will be able to go all the way with Jesus. Drain your heart of bitterness and fill it with the spirit of reconciliation that comes from him who is the Prince of Peace.

And finally, the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Do you know what made the Roman soldiers so invincible? The soldier didn't just hold his shield over his own body. Two-thirds covered him but one-third was held over the person next to him. (7) Invincible. You and I really do need one another here at the church. We help one another just by being here, gathered in faith.

This whole business of discipleship and how daunting it is and how hard it is to follow – I want to make a very practical suggestion to you today. Stop worrying so much about what you believe about Jesus Christ and whether you think every word of the Bible is an inerrant word. Forget all of that for awhile. Be disciples from the outside in. Put on the habits of faith: come to church, sing the songs, help your neighbor. (8) You'll be surprised what happens to you. Some might say that going through the motions is hypocrisy; I call it hope.

I loved the performances of "Evening of Broadway" last week at our church. So much joy, great singing and acting. I learned from the men and women performing. They had practiced their lines and notes, and they became the characters they were portraying. (9) When they put on their beautiful dresses and handsome shirts and made up their faces, they began to live into their parts. That is exactly what Christ is calling us to do.

So fasten that belt of truth around your waist. Put on your peacemaking shoes. Take up the shield of faith. Get into your discipleship from the outside. Then, wait and see what God will do with the inside of you. In the name of the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer. Amen.

(1) “Roll Call,” John Ortberg, *Living By The Word*, Bendis and Heim, 2005, Chalice Press, p. 119.

(2) Ibid.

(3) Brief Statement of Faith, Presbyterian Church (USA)

(4) Ortberg, p.120.

(5) *Book of Order, Presbyterian Church (USA)* G-1.0200

(6) Marva Dawn and Eugene Peterson, *The Unnecessary Pastor*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2000, p. 112.

(7) Ibid., p. 116.

(8) William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, July, August September, 2006, p. 40-41.

(9) Ibid.