

March 28, 2010
The Federated Church of Hyannis
Dr. John A. Terry, Pastor

RUNNING ON EMPTY

Luke 19:28-40

Philippians 2:5-11

Some years ago a book was written by Gene Smith, a noted American historian. The title was *When the Cheering Stopped*. It is the story of President Woodrow Wilson and the events leading up to and following WWI. When that war was over Wilson was an international hero. There was a great spirit of optimism abroad, and people actually believed that the war they fought was the war to end all wars and the world had been made safe for democracy.

On his first visit to Paris after the war, Wilson was greeted by cheering mobs. When a Red Cross worker in a Vienna hospital told the children that there would be no Christmas presents because of the war and the hard times, the children didn't believe her. They said that President Wilson was coming and they knew that everything would be all right. The cheering lasted about a year. Then it gradually began to stop. It turned out that the political leaders in the United States and Europe were more concerned with their own agendas than they were a lasting peace.

At home, Woodrow Wilson ran into opposition in the United States Senate and his League of Nations was not ratified. Under the strain of it all the President's health began to break. In the next election, his party was defeated. So it was that Woodrow Wilson, a man who barely a year or two earlier had been heralded as the new world savior, came to the end of his days a broken and defeated man.

Jesus emerged on the public scene and was an overnight sensation. The masses lined the streets as he came into town. On Palm Sunday branches were spread before him and there were shouts of Hosanna. Great crowds came to hear him preach. A wave of religious expectation swept the country. But the cheering ended as quickly as it began.

The tide of popular opinion began to turn against him. His critics now began to attack him publicly. The fickle public was turning on him. Soon the

opposition began to snowball. Crowds gathered and screamed and their shrill voices led Jesus to the cross. But it did not bring him to defeat. He faced hate and death, but love and life won.

The only Son of the Father knew the depth of evil and the power of the resurrection. So to the church Paul wrote: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." I think of the prayer of the little girl who prayed, "Dear God, please make the bad people good and the good people nice." A congregation was once exploring options for the floor in the fellowship hall. Everyone agreed that the old floor needed to be replaced, but the argument came when the subject of how to cover the floor was raised. The lowest cost covering was the carpet on sale at the warehouse outlet nearby, but one member of the council objected strenuously.

While the objections were heard, the council eventually voted to purchase and install the carpet. The person who objected commented, "Well, you'll install a carpet over my dead body." Another member of the council was heard to mutter, "That is going to make one heck of a lump." Our unity is not a procedural vote but having the same mind of service and love and sacrifice as Jesus.

"Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped." The Son of God as the servant of the world was rejected in the first century and in every century since. In his work *Paradise Lost*, Milton tells about an angel who sought to be equal with God. For this he was cast out of heaven and now reigns in hell. These are the words Milton attributed to Satan: "Better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven."

There was a man who worked in the theatre and, for a time, ended up on the staff of a large downtown church directing their extensive drama program. At a staff meeting the subject of the annual Christmas party came up. It turns out that it was the custom of that church to have two staff parties, one party for the ministers and other staff members in the church parlor, and another party for the custodial staff in the boiler room.

The church drama director asked why there were two parties. It was carefully explained to him that everyone was sure that the custodial staff was more comfortable with that kind of arrangement. About that moment, he decided to quit that church but first said, "I've got to tell you, having two parties seems very odd to me. Now, I'm not a minister, so it seems strange

coming from me, but let's say there are two parties, one for pastors in the parlor and one for custodians in the boiler room, which one do you think Jesus would go to?"

"He did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited." A man and his wife were not getting along very well. This woman had been getting the cold shoulder from her husband for about three weeks, and finally she confronted him and said, "Admit it, the only reason you married me is because my grandfather left me \$50 million." He said, "Don't be ridiculous. I don't care who left it to you."

"He emptied himself." The story is told of the pee-wee baseball game. When the young boy got up to the plate he looked over to the coach, and he saw the coach give him the signal to make a sacrifice bunt. He then promptly proceeded to take three big swings and strike out. When he came back to the dugout the coach asked him: "Didn't you see me give you the signal to make a sacrifice bunt?" "Yes," the boy replied. "But I didn't really think that you meant it." Jesus, we know you talked about bearing our cross, but do you actually mean that?

In a world of people who are full of themselves, Jesus emptied himself. Christ freely laid down his own life to obtain everlasting life for us. We, in turn, are called to live lives that honor that sacrifice. During World War II, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor and scholar, could have continued being comfortable and well paid in New York City. Instead he chose to return to his native Germany and was martyred for opposing Hitler. Bonhoeffer wrote a book entitled *The Cost of Discipleship* in which he wrote about what he called, "Cheap grace."

He said, "Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church. We are fighting today for costly grace. Cheap grace is the grace we bestow upon ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline. Cheap grace is a grace without discipleship, grace without the cross. Costly grace is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him."

"He took on the form of a slave." In the bathroom at a popular coffee chain someone once wrote "What Would Jesus Do?" on the wall. Another person wrote directly underneath that, "Wash His hands." Then a third person

wrote, “And your feet.” We wash our hands for our benefit. We wash the feet of others for their benefit.

The late conductor Leonard Bernstein was once asked, “What is the most difficult position to fill in the orchestra?” He thought for a while and replied, “The position of the second violin.” It seems that everyone prefers the prestige of the first violin. However, for the musical sound to be complete there is a need for the second violin.

Recall Jesus’ words, “Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:26b-28) “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. Those who give their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” (Mark 8:34b-35)

“He humbled himself.” Benjamin Franklin one time decided to adopt a system whereby he would achieve moral perfection. He listed twelve virtues on twelve pages of a book, with each page divided into seven columns. His system was to concentrate on a virtue for a week’s time and list, in each of the seven columns, the violations of that virtue that he had suffered during each day. His list read: temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, and chastity.

He showed his list to a Quaker friend; and the old gentleman observed that it was a fine list, but it appeared that Franklin had forgotten one virtue, without which all of the other virtues would become vices. He had forgotten humility. As an afterthought Franklin added humility to the end of his list, last, but that’s not where it comes in the Word of God.

Jesus challenged his disciples with a parable: “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor ... [Rather] when you are invited, go and sit at the lowest place, so when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher.’ ... For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Luke 14:8a, 10a, 11)

“And he became obedient to the point of death.” For a Jew, there was no more undignified way to die than on a cross. In the book of Deuteronomy, it

states: “Anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse.” (21:23b) Jesus willingly became cursed. As the author of the letter to the Hebrews tells us, “Although Jesus was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” (5:8-9).

To the very end, Jesus was obedient to his mission. In his last dying words, he forgave those who killed him and he committed his spirit into God’s loving hands, which he believed were there for him even in the darkness of that afternoon. In his offering of himself, he has saved our souls.

There is a story from the time of Oliver Cromwell in England. A young soldier had been tried in a military court and sentenced to death. He was to be shot at the “ringing of the curfew bell.” On learning this, his fiancée climbed up into the bell tower several hours before curfew time. When only mute sounds came out of the bell tower, Cromwell demanded to know why the bell was not ringing.

His soldiers went to investigate and found the woman cut and bleeding from being knocked back and forth against the great inner walls of the bell. They brought her down and, so the story goes, Cromwell was so impressed with her willingness to suffer in this way on behalf of someone she loved that he dismissed the soldier, saying, “Curfew shall not ring tonight; love has saved yet another life!”

The life of Jesus is a life self-emptying, a life of loving and giving and sacrifice. To all who worship and follow him Paul wrote: “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

The life of a disciple is a double movement: a life of dying with Christ and a life of rising with Christ; a life of emptying ourselves and a life of utter fulfillment; a life of taking up our cross and a life of rejoicing; a life of dying and a life of rising again; a life of service and a life of praise to his holy name.

Let us pray: Oh God, by your Spirit, draw us into Christ that we might share in his humble ministry of giving this great love away until every knee bows and every tongue confesses he is Lord. Amen.