

GETTING COMMITTED

--"You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last" (Jn 15.16)

If ever there were words written that held significance on the occasion of a "New Members' Sunday," surely, it would be these.

After all, this is a Sunday where a group of people separate themselves from the general congregation for purposes of standing before that body and making certain public pledges--about not being co-opted by the dark ways of the world, about resolutely walking instead the path of God, about formally uniting themselves with that particular community of believers and, in so doing, declaring their intention to participate faithfully and to share generously in its fellowship and in its ministry.

These are tall promises, made in the plain sight of so many other witnesses; and, deeper than that, in the plain sight of God. They are no less than vowing to make some tangible contribution to the coming of God's order on earth.

If that were straightforward and simple to accomplish, the kingdom would have already come with fullness--yet here we are, still struggling, at both inner and outer levels, with the same problems that have beset humanity since its first, vague inklings of there being a God.

Today, then, is a day of getting committed--to a place, to a people, and to an idea that we should and that we can make a positive difference in the world. When Christ appoints us "to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last," it is this broad range of limitless possibilities that is being referenced.

--I may be the naive optimist, but I think that all who have ever stood before some gathered congregation--like Sue and Jim and Ken this morning--and freely offered their "I do's" and "I wills" were serious about it, sincerely meaning what they promised. Whether it was at our original Confirmation or at some previous transfer of our affiliation from another congregation, back at the beginning we have all had every firm, heartfelt intention to be the best member possible.

This is not to say, of course, that, given the genuine intent that we have back there at the start, we all manage to follow through on and sustain the promises that we make. Honest intention at the outset doesn't always translate into bearing any fruit, let alone fruit that will last--as the rolls of the "inactives" at any church, at every church, sadly demonstrate, slowing and weighing down many a congregation, and bringing others to a final grinding halt.

In this fall from enthusiastic to indifferent, from optimistic to jaded, from committed to uncommitted, what exactly happens to those once-dedicated people?

--Frankly, there's a lot that works against our ever measuring up to the promises that we make on such a day as this. While we may originally mean what we say, very quickly those intentions are drowned out by the chorus of competing, even conflicting, desires and demands. There is nothing that so constellates the darkness against us as taking a stand in favor of God. Just as soon as we have willfully declared our allegiance to God, that which is opposed to God quickly asserts itself--to get us to forget our promises, and to get us actively to undermine our best efforts.

That's how insidious the darkness is, always testing the seriousness of our private intent and our public declarations. Any silly rationalization or flimsy excuse can serve to pull us off the path of going and bearing any fruit at all.

It's quite subtle, you know, but if we're secretly looking for some way by which to distance ourselves from our congregation, have no fear. That way will present itself in good time. If one is looking for an excuse not to live out one's commitment, there will always be one immediately at hand. For we are surrounded by imperfect people, and sooner or later someone will do (or not do) something, will say (or not say) something, that will afford us the perfect justification by which--despite those well-meant promises once made--to slide away, become estranged from the fellowship once loved and valued, never to darken the sanctuary doors again.

It's true: Getting committed is easy; remaining committed is apparently very difficult. Spiritually speaking, the key to remaining committed consists in knowing the voice of darkness and then ignoring it. It consists of recognizing the voice of darkness and then choosing to do the opposite of what it is counseling. Not to know it, not to recognize it, not to ignore it, not to push back on it, is to find oneself inevitably under its influence. Where remaining committed is concerned, therefore, let us beware of the excuses that we use to gravitate away from being here and from being active here. They're all suspect, every one of them.

--Admittedly, this is some pretty heavy stuff. But there is very good news here, too, and it is to be found in the first of the two sentences with which we began. You may recall it: "You did not choose me," Christ says, "but I chose you." "You just think that you have chosen me," Christ suggests to us. "In reality, a long time ago, I chose you."

Being the "chosen" rather than the "chooser" assures us that God will never, ever un-choose us. It means that, if it had to be done all over again, God would choose us once more--despite ourselves, despite our undesirable qualities, despite our history of "hot air" and failed commitments. God would choose us over and over and over again, because God sees in us something special and unique by which to change the world for the better. It's all about that.

Any contribution to that end of making the world a better place to live, no matter how small or insignificant it may seem to us to be, is the evidence of our being a conduit for the surging life of God--the evidence, as John depicts in this morning's reading, of our being the willing branches connected to an extraordinary core vine, which persistently sends its animating, rejuvenating juices along to us and through us.

Oh, to be sure, there is the continuing wrestling with that darkness within us, but God never, ever tires of the possibility of the fruit that can emerge from us. God never, ever gives up on that dream.

--If true, all this must mean that there is joy in heaven this day as three here act on their decision to join the rest of us committed souls at St. John's United Church of Christ, and as, through Sue and Jim and Ken, we are pointedly reminded of our own call and commitment here.

There's a world hurting out there. There's a difference to be made. And God looks to make that difference through us. With a little cooperation and effort from us, God can and will do something remarkable! Do you believe that?

Always the final question boils down to the same: All things considered, are we doing our parts? Or will the world remain unchanged, and will darkness prevail?