

Proper 16B, August 23, 2009

## When the Going Gets Tough

When things are difficult and hard – when the way forward is hidden and the possibility of success seems unlikely, there is an old phrase that people like to quote in an attempt to motivate either themselves or someone else to action. Do you know the phrase I'm talking about? (perhaps some of you will but for those who need a little reminder, here is a cut from the 1985 Billy Ocean song that helped make it famous) Why doesn't anyone play the saxophone like that anymore?

When the going gets tough, the tough get going. It's the phrase coaches and teachers and bosses everywhere love to quote. It's purpose is to *inspire*. The words are spoken in the face of adversity so that those who find the going difficult will find a way to put in the extra effort that is required. It is not certain just when it was first spoken but it is often attributed to both Joseph Kennedy, father of President Kennedy, and to football coach Knute Rockne. It appeals to our inner sense of pride. Tough people, hard-working people, don't quit. They push through and continue on when others find it easy to quit.

I met a man this week who puts this phrase into practice nearly every day. His name is Ron Snell and he is the director of the homeless shelter in North Platte and he is currently biking through all 93 counties in NE to raise money and awareness for homelessness. Ron is not a professional athlete (although he is in pretty good shape!) and many times when he was painfully pedaling up a hill at 4 mph the thought of quitting seemed like the most sensible thing to do. "The only thing that kept me going," he said, "was telling myself *you're not a quitter... you're not a quitter*".

But quitting is sometimes the only option we have. Continuing in the face of difficulty often causes more harm than good. A recent psychological study suggest that people who continue to persist in hard to reach goals may be more likely to suffer from serious diseases such as diabetes and heart disease<sup>1</sup>. The scientists suggest that disengaging from these difficulties may be the most adaptive response for our physical and mental well-being.

I guess some of Jesus' disciples must have discovered this long ago! What seemed like a good thing to them was fast becoming too difficult to continue. Why didn't Jesus just stick to free food for the masses? People loved him then. Why did he have to equate himself with the Living God? Those words are blasphemy! Was he not simply a human being like all of them? How then can people eat and drink his body and blood? Why couldn't he leave well enough alone? The religious traditions of the ancestors had gotten them this far, why did he have to always have to be challenging things? This is not the way a Messiah is supposed to act. A Messiah is supposed to be someone who is easy to follow – someone who you want to follow – someone who does what we expect.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/09/070926094717.htm>

But the infinite God of new birth, new possibilities, and unbelievable faithfulness does what no one expects. The Breath of Life comes to the world in the flesh of Jesus Christ and gives us something we need more than anything else – true *inspiration*. Keep in mind the origins of that word. *In – spire* is to take *in* -or be filled with- *spirit* and spirit is simply *breath* which in turn means LIFE. We stop breathing - we die. Our flesh is useless without breath, without spirit. That is why we call the bible the “inspired word of God”. It brings life! Through these words, God’s Spirit blows through our dry and dusty lives and creates faith, hope and love in the midst of death and despair.

The question of the day is where do we go to get this LIFE, this spirit? Peter confesses that it is Jesus who has the words of eternal life. It is Jesus who will be lifted up on a cross for the sins of the world and it is Jesus who will be raised from the dead by the Living God. **When the going gets tough, even the tough must go to God.** For no one can come even to Jesus on their own. Our tough-minded choices often just get in the way of the surrender that God asks of us. If there is a choice to be made, then it is a choice to let go and follow Jesus into some of the most unexpected, irrational, and unbelievable possibilities. Perhaps you haven’t thought of it in this way, but that is one of the things we are doing in the sacrament of baptism. As parents, we let go of our exclusive claim on another human being and offer them up to God for adoption. As a baptized person, we live in the promise that we are not our own but we have been claimed and transformed by the grace of God.

And that is where the going really gets tough because the way of the cross, the way of Jesus, is never what we expect and very often it upsets some of our deepest held convictions. There is a cost to following but that cost far outweighs the cost of quitting and remaining in the place that we are. God offers something more. God offers LIFE! God offers forgiveness, acceptance, and **inspiration** - the power to truly make a difference in this world. It will come in the most unlikely packages and from the most unlikely people but dying a criminal’s death on a Roman cross is the most unlikely way for God to save the world.

There is no shortage of tough challenges in the world today. The decisions of the Church Wide Assembly of the ELCA this past week will challenge the unity we share as people who are justified by God’s grace in Jesus Christ. It is hard and difficult to live in the midst of our differences and yet, it is God who calls us to faith in the one Lord Jesus. Our communities face economic, political, and social challenges where competing ideas for moving forward often threaten to split us into like-minded groups. But fear of the other is not the way to go. The way to go through difficulties is to *go together* especially when it seems easier to go it alone.

The choice to follow God is a difficult, if not impossible one. Even Joshua recognized that. His people will go back on their word. They will choose easier gods and easier terms because it is impossible to choose God on our own no matter how tough or how determined you are. But thanks be to God that we are not left to fend for ourselves. God, who is rich in mercy, draws us to faith in Jesus Christ and transforms the challenges and difficulties of our lives and gives us the power to change the world. To follow this God is the cry of our heart and the only way to find true and never-ending life.