



The All and the Only

Sermon Preached at First United Methodist Church in University Place

Sunday, October 7, 2007
On Luke 17:9-10

All through Luke's Gospel Jesus teaches important lessons, difficult lessons, through parables. And now, in chapter 17, especially in verses 9-10, Jesus conveys a new and difficult lesson through a parabola. Jesus talks in a big looping parabola that set off in one direction but then it takes a turn, a major turn, and it ends up going somewhere else entirely

Jesus starts his parabolic message with a focus on the all and he ends it by redirecting our attention to the only. "When you have done all that you were commanded to do, ... you will say we did only what we ought to do."

How can this reflection by Our Lord on the all and the only help us in our lives and in the work we have been called to do? How can this parabola of words help us, especially today, on World Communion Sunday?

Before getting too far into trying to answer that mighty question, I want to offer a caution about words that seem to tell us something so absolute about our own deeds, especially when the absolute words come from Jesus. Is there more than a slight chance that Our Lord is provoking us here? When will we have done all that God expects of us? Surely never. And when will it be right for us to talk in shrinking terms about what we can do for God, to the glory of God? (I have in mind that word only.) Again, surely never.

A few verses earlier in Luke's Gospel, Jesus has encouraged the disciples to start with a faith the size of a mustard seed and grow it into the faith they feel that they need. That kind of invitation to let our faith mature is a gift from God, a gift so much different from our fussing about getting to all or stopping at only. The divine gift is unconditional, always there, at every small moment and every grand occasion that we could ever imagine.

When we acknowledge God's grace in our lives, then out of sheer gratitude we have the opportunity to do what we ought, and leave it to God's immense wisdom to see what is all and what is only in our contributions.

Ah, but the allure of the all is so seductive in our lives. How often do we say to ourselves, if we are students, "During my four years in college I want to experience it all, I want to have it all, I want to see it all, I want to do it all"?

And at Nebraska Wesleyan and other small universities, how often are we old-timers guilty of telling students, in our enthusiasm, that you could do it all and you could have it all if you came to our intimate, personal campus where participation is prized even more than perfection.

Or for that matter, if we are the new president, and even if we are not the new president but we are glad to have a new president, how often do we chime in with “Now all that needs doing will get done, all who need tending will get attention, all that needs to grow will have its increase”?

And in an eternity of college days, it would all be possible, it would all be yours, we would do it all, and having it all would be all right. If eternity were our human time frame.

The only is just as much a trap. Who, me, Lord? I’m too small; too needy, myself; too tired; too giddy; too young; too old; too proud; too much nagged by doubts; too much in awe of your majesty. In a word, human.

I will give a bit of my free time, gladly, but it will not cure AIDS or Lou Gehrig’s disease or even hangnails. And here are my financial contributions, meager though, surely not enough to feed a hungry world or even a village. My kind word? Sure enough, I can utter it, but it will never carry past the next tree let alone across town, or across the wide Missouri, or across the world.

Well, there is an alternative to greedily expecting to have it all, and there is an alternative to demeaning our own worshipful acts with too much only-ness. There is an alternative to telling God, whether by all or by only, even with lots of pleases and endless thank-yous, that we want God to do it for us and do it now.

That alternative is to acknowledge the grace of our Creator God, brought to us through Jesus, our Redeemer, and working always through the Holy Spirit, the Ever-Present Sustainer—a grace that has already been given to us, a gift we could not earn, that we never needed to ask for.

With God’s gift of grace, let us dare to do what we can. Call it all with an excess of boldness, call it only with an excess of modesty; call it my share, your share, our shares; call it anything; but do it, and do it without expecting anything; do it knowing deep inside that it is right to do.

On this World Communion Sunday, let us dedicate ourselves to acting, somewhere between the all and the only, for our neighbors.

My neighbor is the student who feels left out because she is Asian and the campus is very Caucasian, the student who feels on the margin because he is gay and does not know who he can trust to know that, the student who looks insistently down at the ground but hears my hello and sees my smile if only I offer them.

Who is your neighbor? The person you helped during the Lend a Hand to Lincoln project on August 25? The kid in the residence hall who was homesick and needed someone to talk with half through the night? The professor who seems so superior but is just as vulnerable as any student? The shopkeeper in University Place you give business even though the selection is better in the big store at the mall?

At Nebraska Wesleyan we have made many people in many places our neighbors: senior citizens living near campus who receive small grants to fix up their houses, AIDS victims in South Africa, exchange students from Ireland and Azerbaijan, the speaker at Visions and Ventures who began by saying, “I’m depressed,” and we kept listening to him. They

are our neighbors, and so are many other people, some in this sanctuary, some within shouting distance, some within driving distance, some beyond any distance we can shout or drive, yet still our neighbors, sharing with us the use of God's green earth.

Let each of us hear that divine voice that calls us to have a "faith the size of a mustard seed," to only take all that the Lord has given us freely, and only give back all that we possibly can through our loving work throughout the world. In that loving work we will find both the all and the only that are a joy for us to hold, divine gifts they are, gifts we receive every day.

If it is Your wish, Lord, let it be so.