Call to Commitment
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Christianity has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and not tried.
—G. K. Chesterton

Invitation to Worship: (Meister Eckhart)
The seed of God is in us.
Given an intelligent and hardworking farmer,
it will thrive and grow up into God, whose seed it is;
and accordingly its fruits will be God-nature.
Pear seeds grow into pear trees, nut seeds into nut trees,
and God seeds into God.

Ancient Witness: Matthew 13:1-9

You’ve heard me talk about the concept of community anyhow it relates to our understanding ourselves as a church. I’ve said that community has to do with the richness and depth of our human relationships. There is nothing “virtual” about it. Community involves time spent with one another. There are no short cuts. Community requires the sharing of time, sharing of attention, sharing of feelings, sharing of experience, and sharing of support.

I’ve said that community has to do with justice. As a congregation, we exist to work for and proclaim the community of God, “on earth as in heaven.” We are focused outward as a community, advocating on behalf of all persons and things, for their dignity and respect. This justice-seeking community works for the re-ordering of human society, addressing systemic and structural violence and calling forth not just personal responsibility, but collective and political responsibility for the whole.

I’ve said that for us, the word “community” means that we are inclusive. By that, I mean that we not only welcome all people into the full life and ministry of this church, but we also are keenly aware that we are but a part of the larger community of God. We accept our relative status and point beyond ourselves. As inclusive Christians, we accept, respect and embrace other communities of faith, other faith traditions, other religions and world views, and we acknowledge that we are all part of the larger community of God.

Today I want to say something else about what a community that follows Jesus is. A Christian community is marked by commitment. It is a place where each individual in nurtured, challenged and encouraged to deepen their commitment to the God of love and justice, and to live this out in real and tangible ways. As a congregation we welcome persons to this place no matter where they are on their journey of faith. We are happy with any friendly association with us, no matter how small or infrequent. We accept, value and cherish all these friendly connections. We are accepted as we are, and yet, this is also a place to change, to grow, to evolve and to deepen one’s commitment. There are certain expectations if one wants to be a member of this community.

In the jarring words of Jesus, we are called to strive toward a total commitment and to achieve a radical and complete change to participate in the reign of God. And this is a never-ending process. So this
morning, I am going to focus on this radical call to change and commitment, and the Christian path as a means to this personal transformation.

In our parable of the sower that we read this morning, one way to read it is that we are entrusted to sow the seed in the world; we are commanded to share the message of God’s call to total commitment and to live in God’s grace. And this message, this seed, falls in different places. As a sower, we have no control over the soil.

William Barklay talked about how the farms in early Palestine were in these long strips, and a path that people traveled on often went right through these fields. And so where you are throwing out seeds, many of them would fall on its hard-packed ground where the birds would simply eat them. So it is when the message of the teacher, Jesus, is broadcasted. There are some whose exterior is so hardened, that the extremely demanding and confronting news of the gospel doesn’t even enter.

Much of the land of Palestine is also quite rocky. There might be just a thin layer of topsoil. And because it is so thin, it would heat up quickly, and the seed would sprout up very fast. But it is too good to be true for the seed, because the water soon drains away, and the roots cannot go down through the rock. And so the plant withers and falls away. So it is with those who accept the message, but only in a superficial way. For those who do not allow the seed to be planted deep within, the message will not take, and that early enthusiasm will wax and wane. The commitment must be fully made, and the demand must be deeply received.

Sometimes the soil might look soft and deep, but there might be another problem. There might be other competing seeds of thorns and thistles, seeds that will eventually crowd out and choke the message. So it is with those who wish to have it many ways, who want to hold onto so many worldly goodies. The seeds sown on behalf of God must be given a top priority, and the pursuit of wealth, word, recreation must have secondary status. Such is the undeniable demand of the gospel.

Finally, there is the soft, good soil, which allows the message to deeply take root. So it is with those who yearn to grow in faith and who desire for a stronger and stronger commitment to blossom within. And as a sower, all we can do is to sow faithfully. Some seeds will prosper, some will not.

There is another angle from which we can view this parable. And that is, we are the soil, individually and as a church. God is the seed planter, constantly trying to plant seeds within us. And when do those seeds take off and grow? When we allow them to be planted deeply within us. We can decide what kind of soil we will be. We can be receptive, loamy and soft ground. We can provide the environment that promotes depth of commitment and growth in faith. Let is not be said that this church is like rock ground, where shallow acceptance is O.K. Or that we don’t care if thorns and thistles are growing here. No, as a church we can help each other be more receptive, and this means being honest about what kind of demand and commitment God’s call requires. With discipline, dedication and practice, we can make ourselves fertile soil. Or to use Meister Eckhart’s analogy, we can be the “intelligent and hardworking farmer” that enable the God-seed to grow within us.

But this takes hard work. The 4th Century desert mother, Amma Syncletica said,

In the beginning, there is a struggle and a lot of work for those who come near to God. But after that, there is indescribable joy. It is just like building a fire: at first it’s smoky and your eyes
water, but later you get the desired result. Thus we ought to light the divine fire in ourselves with tears and effort.

If we pretend that there are not “tears and effort” or that little is demanded, then we will not grow in faith.

Years ago, Ben Johnson, who was Professor of Evangelism at Columbia Presbyterian Seminary in Atlanta, asked the question, “How do we stop the exodus out the back for in our churches today?” The answer, he said, is by doing a better job at the front door, by not withholding the commitment required by the gospel message. He said that many churches were doing the exact opposite. But making membership easier and easier and more “accessible,” they have been setting themselves up for the mass exodus out the back door. And that is exactly what’s been happening for the last 30 years.

Elizabeth O’Connor, in her classic book, Call to Commitment, wrote:

The refusal to grapple with the issue of entrance into the Christian Church is not tolerance; it is betrayal of the gospel which we preach. No one claims that seeking to ensure integrity of membership is not fraught with danger and difficulty, but the answer does not lie in skirting the problem. The profound meanings of membership need to be rethought.

Surely entrance into the Christian Church presupposes total commitment to Christ as the Lord of the church. A surrender to Christ is a surrender to Christ’s people—total involvement in the life of the church and the awareness that participation in this community of forgiveness and love means that we extend it to all humankind. (p. 25)

Now, people who know me, know that I’m about as liberal as you can get as a Christian. But we liberals should never be above self-criticism. And if there is one weakness with the mainline and liberal churches (and there are many), it is that we have neglected the gospel’s call to commitment. We have often presented the Christian life as requiring little effort or commitment.

As liberals we’re worried about offending others if we say that the Christian life requires a commitment. And so it’s like people who sign up for a gym membership and expect a magical transformation without actually showing up or much effort. Instead, we need to love them enough to say that it’s not how the Christian path works, even if that makes us uncomfortable. As G. K. Chesterton famously said, “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting, it has been found difficult and not tried.”

Without an unashamed call to commitment, the church becomes like a vaccine, which as you know is a weakened strain of a virus that becomes an inoculation from the real thing. May we not be in the business of inoculating.

Look, please hear me. I believe that God loves and holds eternally all people equally—religious and non-religious alike. Following a spiritual tradition is not for everyone, and that’s perfectly O.K. But let us not diminish the Christian path, either. Like I’ve told my own children, it you decide to do it, do it right. It can be life-changing for those who choose it.

And look, we live in a world that desperately needs a church that is robust, a church that is a powerful force for justice and compassion, a church to challenge the forces of authoritarianism that stokes the flames of fear and hatred, a church to challenge the violent rhetoric that provides a soil for heinous actions against marginalized and scapegoated people. We need a church that is strong enough and vital
enough to make a difference. We need a church that doesn’t just play around, but has grit and determination and resilience. We need a church that is serious, that grows its roots down deep and that like a mighty tree that is planted by the water, will not be moved. Now is not the time to have a weak and ineffectual church with roots so shallow that it is washed away with the first hard rain. I don’t call for commitment to the church merely for the church’s sake. I do it for the sake of the planet.

About 80 years ago, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote at a time not unlike our own. As fascism was taking hold, he addressed the Christian church in Germany. He was imploring them to find the strength to resist and the fortitude to stand together. He wrote:

*Cheap grace is grace without discipleship… Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again. It is costly because it costs one one’s life, and it is grace because it gives one the only true life.*

But unfortunately it was too little, too late for all but a tiny part of the German church. And they lost their identity, their commitment and their soul as people of faith.

May we challenge and support each other
in our blossoming commitment
to proclaim and bear witness
to the loving presence of God
within us and within this world.

May we, as a community and individuals,
be diligent and disciplined.
May we deepen our commitment
devoting effort and time
to become fertile soil
for the seeds of God’s love and justice.