

Series: Lessons from the Lectionary
Today: Wearing Out, Not Rusting Out
Text: Luke 21:5-19

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
Sunday, November 14, 2010
First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

It has been nearly 40 years since Cherie and I had dinner at the home of Grace and Roger Cross. I was newly ordained and not yet installed as the Assistant Pastor of the United Church of Fayetteville, NY. My responsibilities were for the youth of the church and their families and for reaching out to the youth in the community.

Grace and Roger didn't fit the profile of those I was called to serve. They were 85 years old, but once you got to know them, you quickly learned that age meant nothing to them. Roger had been a ranger in the state park system all his life. Grace had been a "stay at home" mom who raised their children and did just about everything that no one else wanted to do in the church.

Grace and Roger were interested in everything. This was long before the days of computers, but they were the champions of social networking the old fashioned way. They stayed in touch by phone, letters, attending meetings; any way they could. My very first Sunday in the church, Roger said they would like to help in the youth program in whatever way I could use them, and they did. They loved young people, and they were willing to share their wisdom and experience with young people who were 70 years their juniors.

At dinner that evening, I was marveling at their energy at age 85. So I asked them what kept them going. Roger said, *"Twenty years ago when I retired, my boss said to me, 'Roger, you need to decide right now whether you are going to wear out or rust out. If you decide to rust out, I predict you will be miserable, but if you decide to wear out, I believe your best years are still ahead of you.' Right then and there I made my decision that I was going to wear out, and I have never regretted it."*

Our text this morning is about making a decision about how we will live our lives as followers of Jesus Christ. Will we wear out using all of our energy to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, or will we rust out sitting on the sidelines of life and waiting for death to come?

The text is what we call apocalyptic literature. Jesus is speaking of the end of the world as we know it. It has everything that makes for a good action movie, but little which makes us feel comfortable and secure. There are wars and revolutions; earthquakes, famines, pestilence and persecution. Luke tells us that this is what must happen before the second coming of Christ and before the Kingdom of God can be established on the earth.

When Luke wrote his Gospel**, he was writing to members of a church under siege. That which is predicted sometime in the future has already occurred. Jerusalem had been destroyed in 70 A.D., and the historian, Josephus, tell us that in the midst of the battle over a million people were killed, and another 100,000 were carried into captivity. (**Note: This assumes the argument that the Gospel was written between 80-90 A.D. There are those who argue for a date between 60-65 A.D.)

The Jewish nation was obliterated, and the Temple, this glorious tribute to Solomon that was five football fields long and four football fields wide; the Temple, with its solid gold and marble walls that shone in the sun so it looked like a mountain; the Temple which was a symbol of the favor and the presence of God to the Jewish world was destroyed.

From there it was all downhill for the faithful. Persecution, violence and death was what could be anticipated if you refused to give your allegiance to Caesar. Followers of Jesus could anticipate becoming sport for Roman gladiators, a mid-day meal for lions, or a long and tortuous death by crucifixion as an example to others. Being a Christian was not a spectator sport when Luke wrote his gospel. It was a matter of life and death.

And what did Jesus say to all this? DON'T DESPAIR! Whatever circumstance may come, DON'T DESPAIR! Instead, use it as an opportunity to: 1) Give your Testimony; 2) Let Endurance Deepen Your Faith.

Give your Testimony

Jesus lists all the calamities that are bound to befall his followers, and then he turns around and in effect says, DON'T DESPAIR! *"This will give you an opportunity to testify."* The New International Version translates it this way: *"This will result in your being witnesses [to those who are persecuting you]."*

It has not been easy to be a Christian at any period in the history of the church, and our era is no different. Ours is an era when individualism has reigned supreme. The mantra we hear these days is: *"What's in it for me?"* or *"It's not my problem!"* As Christians we are called to testify that it is our problem, and together we can do something about it.

There is a legend which circulates about the early days of the Ford Motor Company. It concerns a machinist who had conveniently "borrowed" tools and automobile parts over a period of years. Although it was against company policy, the attitude of management was *everybody does it,* so they did nothing about it.

One day, however, the machinist had a conversion experience. He was baptized, and he became a believer who took his baptism seriously. The day after his baptism, he gathered up all the tools he had collected over the years, loaded them into his truck, and took them to the plant. He presented them to the foreman with his confession and a request for forgiveness. The foreman was so overcome by his honesty that he cabled Henry Ford himself. After Ford read the entire event in detail, he wired back his response: *"Dam up the Detroit river and baptize the entire plant."*

The fact that you and I are in this building this morning doesn't matter to anybody but ourselves. What we do as a response to the grace we receive as a result of being here can make a profound impact on others. If going along with the crowd by accepting dishonest behavior or fostering an atmosphere of gossip is the norm, then we speak volumes when we behave honestly and put an end to rumors and gossip. If bitterness and despair is the prevailing attitude of our culture, then we speak volumes when we bring a word of hope and encouragement. Whatever our circumstances may be, Jesus says use it as an opportunity to testify to the truth of God's power and God's love we experience in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Let Endurance Deepen Your Faith

Jesus goes on to remind his followers that the natural response to change is insecurity, and that when we feel insecure we are vulnerable to all kinds of manipulation by those who seek either personal gain or political power. He warns his listeners not to be deceived for many will come in His name claiming that the end is near. How many times in my lifetime have you and I been shocked by the manipulation of those who speak in the name of Jesus and then lead people astray.

We have seen examples of this throughout history. Some of you are not old enough to remember James Jones and how he led nearly 1,000 people to Guyana and coerced them into a mass suicide in 1978. They followed him because they believed he was a prophet of Jesus. In Waco, Texas in 1991 David Koresh led his Branch Davidian cult to a fiery death because they believed the end was near. People are vulnerable during times of change and open to the manipulation of those who have a misguided sense of their own importance.

Jesus knew that. He also knew that those who followed him would face persecution for their beliefs. He knew that life would not be easy for them. However, he promises them that if they will

endure, if they stand firm to the end, they will gain the thing that is most important in life. They will gain their souls.

The word he uses is the image of a runner who is running a marathon like the one that was run in NYC last Sunday. Any of us who have run a marathon knows what it takes to finish: hours and hours of training. That is why most people never bother to try. The price is too high. In fact, most marathoners never enter the race to win; only to finish. Winning for an amateur runner is just showing up prepared to run, and finishing what you start.

I have run four marathons in my life, and I never started one of them believing I could win. I started only with the hope of finishing, and if possible, finishing under four hours. The most important part of any marathon is not the day of the event, but the hours upon hours of training. One knows that unless there is a regimen 50-60 miles a week on the road, you may start the race, but you will not likely finish it. Anyone who wants to finish has to endure hours and hours of running to be physically able to finish.

The other thing that marathon runners know is this: the final six miles are different every time. In training, one runs once a week for 20+ miles, but one never runs the entire distance until the day of the race. The last six miles of every race is always a new experience, and those six miles are when you need the most support from other participants and from those who line the route of the race just to cheer you on.

This is what Jesus is talking about when he speaks of endurance. It is not about winning. It is about finishing. Endurance is not just about the race. It is about the training that gets you ready for the race. Endurance is about the discipline it takes to get to the finish line. It is the satisfaction one feels when a goal is achieved that seems beyond the reach of others.

This is the imagery Jesus uses when he talks about the endurance that will give us back our souls again. It is about training; understanding the faith we profess through study, prayer, devotional reading, and adult education classes that inform us. It is about accepting the support of the community of faith at times when you need it most. It is about taking one step of faith, and then another, never sure if you if you will be able to finish, but trusting God with the outcome.

Over 70,000 Christians learned this lesson on October 8, 1989 at a prayer vigil in Leipzig, Germany. They were marching for their freedom, and before the march the pastor of St. Nicolas Church admonished them to be non violent. All they were to do was pray and to light candles to bring light to the dark corners of the world. Security officers in Leipzig waited for instructions from Moscow and Berlin about using force to subdue the demonstrators. The orders never came, and the police eventually gave up. One month after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Security Officer who wanted to subdue the crowd, was captured on film one of on the night of the vigil. He was staring at a sea of 70,000 candles, and he says to the camera: *We were prepared for everything; everything except candles and prayers.*”

Conclusion

Wear out, or rust out? The choice is always ours in these challenging times in which we live. Jesus tells us to wear out; to use the challenges as an opportunity to testify to the goodness of God, and allow endurance to deepen our faith. This is why we come to the Table today and every month. To be fed by the hand of Jesus so that we might have strength for the journey of faith.