

Luke 10:38-42 The Hardest Thing
Colossians 1:15-28
July 21, 2019

Yesterday was the 50th anniversary of the first moon landing in 1969. Inspiration for the effort to go to the moon came from President Kennedy's 1961 speech before congress in which he said,

“We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept . . .”

The 800

I may have told this story before, but I will again because it illustrates the point well. My oldest son, Evan, was a member of his high school track team. He ran the 800m, mainly, 2 laps around the track. It is a long sprint, very challenging, very painful.

I once overheard one of his teammates, who was very good at it, say, “I run the 800 because it is the hardest thing I do.” I could make a challenging point about how in the course of character building accepting difficult challenges is important, which seems also to have been President Kennedy's point. Maybe another time. It got me to thinking.

I too was an 800m runner in high school. It took up a great deal of my time and energy, all year round, but it was not my only activity. Was it the hardest? There were three major time-consuming activities in my high school life; I went to school, and was in some tough classes along the way, I ran, and mostly at church, school, and with my running friends, I had a social life. Was the running the hardest thing?

After long consideration I have decided that exaggeration is appropriate in this case. If there is a scale of difficulty from 1 to 10, 1 being easy and 10 being the most difficult, and if I applied this scale to the difficulty of these three activities, I would say that the easiest thing I did was the school work, and I would give it a 3 or 4 on the scale of difficulty.

The next would be the running itself, and I would say that it was much harder than the schoolwork. I would say it is about a 10. It was hard everyday, and I never figured it out well. Though it was rewarding in some ways, it left me frustrated, discouraged, and exhausted.

Very easily the hardest thing about that time in my life was the relationships, and it is not close. It rates about a 60 trillion. That is the exaggerated part. The words frustrated, discouraged, and exhausted don't begin to tell the story. It is sad to say that when I graduated I did not really care if I ever saw most of those people again. For the most part, I haven't seen many of them, just a few, although I no longer feel that way.

The Good Samaritan

Last week in the message about the Good Samaritan, there are two questions that have been linked together; “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” and, “who is my neighbor?” In the answer to these two questions, one finds the conviction that the rule of love is the highest rule. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul, strength and mind,” and “love your neighbor as yourself.”

These greatest commands, relevant to us not because they help us attain heaven, but because Christ has attained heaven for us, concern all the major issues of the Christian life; issues regarding personal spirituality, daily life concerns, as well as the evangelistic message of the church; and the concern for social justice and the transformation of the world.

I mentioned the story which has been read for us today about the time Jesus spent in the home of Martha and Mary. In that encounter, Jesus commended Mary for her attention to the one, “needful thing,” the most important question in life. The question of salvation is not only the most important question, it becomes the hardest thing.

Colossians

Paul elaborates further in the Letter to the Colossians. There are a number of words that could be used to describe the “one needful thing.” Paul’s word in this text is “reconciliation.” He speaks of a standard

feature of the human experience as “alienation,” as the result of evil deeds. This alienation is one way of talking about sin and its results.

On the community side of things the results of sin turn into injustice; poverty and war and the disharmonies found all around between the nations and with nature. On the individual side of the things, the results of sin involve excessive selfishness and greed, fear, anger and associated things, the disharmonies found all around between people. These are central features of life. Alienation from God is the great problem, reconciliation with God is the solution.

Gazette

If you had the chance to read what I wrote in the Gazette this past week, you will know that I took as a starting point the 15th verse of Colossians 1, about Jesus as the “firstborn” among all creation. I then chased the primogeniture rabbit, probably to the point of distraction.

The rights of the firstborn have always been seen as the right to inherit the preponderance of the family’s wealth and power, if there is any. It is seen from the point of view of what benefits and privileges accrue to the oldest son.

Part of what I was hoping to point out is that primogeniture is a human construct, it was never really followed much by the Israelites. We in the modern

world, mainly in America, have largely given it up, rightly.

But part of what I was trying to say is that for Jesus, as God's firstborn, the right of the firstborn is seen not from the benefits that come along with it, but instead the duties and responsibilities. In the case of Jesus, being the firstborn of all creation meant that this reconciliation we have spoken about, was his responsibility.

The separation and vulnerability that are universal features of the human experience are the responsibility of the firstborn to resolve. It is not a life of privilege and wealth, but of sacrifice and service.

The first paragraph in today's reading is really quite remarkable. It tells of creation, that the Son is responsible for what the world is and has become. It speaks of this reconciliation itself, that through the death/sacrifice, the alienation is overcome and it is proclaimed to every creature under heaven.

Naturally, Paul turns to the logical conclusion, the gospel proclamation is for everyone, implying that the Gentiles themselves, that is, us, are also reconciled by the sacrifice of the firstborn. *The gospel is for everyone.* Clearly one aspect of life is the trouble in relationships that people have with each other.

The Gospel

Relationships are *hard*. They are the hardest things we do in life. They are much more difficult than going to the moon, and my guess is that the hardest part of getting to the moon was not the math and the science of it all, or the physical work, but somehow getting all the thousands of people to get along well enough to work for the same goal.

It is no wonder that the word "alienation" has crept into our religious vocabulary. If human relationships are hard, how much more the relationship with the divine, from whom the separation is complete. It is the one needful thing.

But it is not too hard for God, who has overcome the breach for us, reached across the chasm for us. As one might expect, there is neither anything more important nor difficult than tending to one's relation to God, and then to people, all kinds of people, everywhere.

And the gospel is that God has done the heavy lifting; what is impossible for us, frustrating, discouraging, exhausting, is possible for God.

"If you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel, then you are reconciled, without blemish and free from accusation;" strengthened, empowered, encouraged, full of joy and hope.

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