

May 16, 2010

THANKLESS JOBS

“The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.” John 10:3

A family of five was enjoying their day at the beach. The children were bathing in the ocean and making castles in the sand when in the distance a little old lady appeared. Her gray hair was blowing in the wind and her clothes were dirty and ragged. She was muttering something to herself as she picked up things from the beach and put them into a bag. The parents called the children to their side and told them to stay away from the old lady. As she passed by, bending down every now and then to pick things up, she smiled at the family. But her greeting wasn't returned. Many weeks later they learned that the little old lady had made it her lifelong crusade to pick up bits of glass from the beach so children wouldn't cut their feet.

A rather thankless task, wouldn't you say? Picking up bits of glass so children won't cut their feet. There are lots of people in thankless jobs, aren't there? Being a caregiver to someone who is helpless, working in nursing homes. In a sense, teaching is a thankless task. So is being an officer of the law. Any type of service work is thankless at times. And that includes many jobs in the church.

Teaching Sunday School, singing in the choir, counting Sunday offerings, working in the kitchen, folding Sunday bulletins – all can be thankless jobs. And any job where there is not much recognition or you are taken for granted can seem like a thankless job.

Ruth Harms Calkin stated it well:

“You know, Lord, how I serve You – With great emotional fervor – In the limelight. You know how eagerly I speak for You – At a women's club; You know how I effervesce when I promote – A fellowship group. You know my genuine enthusiasm – At a Bible study. But how would I react, I wonder – If You pointed to a basin of water and asked me to wash the callused feet – Of a bent and wrinkled old woman – Day after day – Month after month, In a room where nobody saw – And nobody knew?”

We know what she's talking about, don't we? Thankless jobs. Jobs without much of a payoff in money or recognition. Repetitive jobs, boring jobs, repulsive jobs.

Being a shepherd is a thankless job. It really is. Imagine dealing with dumb, smelly sheep all day. In Palestine, flocks of sheep are plentiful. They dot the countryside, clutter up highways, crowd the streets of towns and villages. The shepherd with his long staff walks in front of his flock and his sheep follow him. In fact, they crowd around so closely they hamper the shepherd's movement. Dumb, helpless sheep.

According to William Barclay the life of a shepherd was very hard. The shepherd was never off duty. There being little grass, the sheep were bound to wander, and since there were no protecting walls, the sheep had constantly to be watched. On either side of the narrow plateau, the ground dipped sharply down to the craggy deserts and the sheep were always liable to stray away and get lost. The shepherd's task was not only constant but dangerous, for, in addition, he had to guard the flock against wild animals, especially against wolves, and there were always thieves and robbers ready to steal the sheep. With little pay and little human contact, being a shepherd had little to recommend it. A thankless job, indeed.

Yet this is exactly how Christ portrayed himself – as a shepherd. And that is the most familiar image we have of Christ – a shepherd holding a lamb in his arms. How sweet – how tender. But a lamb is not a full-grown sheep. Its wool is not wet and matted. It isn't caught in a crevasse. It is not bleating for the shepherd to come to its rescue.

OF COURSE THERE IS A CERTAIN BONDING THAT TAKES PLACE BETWEEN THE SHEPHERD AND HIS SHEEP. Jesus put it this way: "The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." Sheep-calling contests are common in Palestine. Several flocks are placed in an enclosure and mixed together. Then shepherds whistle a distinctive tune; some call or shout in a peculiar manner. Some shepherds use a pipe with a particular pitch. Each shepherd's signal is understood by his own sheep and they respond immediately. They make their way through the crowded enclosure to where their shepherd is waiting. The shepherd who collects a given number of sheep in the shortest time is the winner of the contest. Sheep know their shepherd's voice and follow him.

And the good shepherd knows his sheep. The individual sheep in a flock all look alike to the untrained eye. A good shepherd, however, can tell them apart – often because of their defects and peculiar traits. A man who was tending a large flock explained this to a Christian friend who expressed surprise at his familiarity

with each animal. “See that sheep over there?” he asked. “Notice how it toes in a little. The one behind it has a squint; the next one has a patch of wool off its back; ahead is one with a distinguishing black mark, while the one closest to us has a small piece torn out of its ear.” Observing all of them, the believer thought about Christ, the Chief Shepherd, who also knows the individual weaknesses and failings of his flock and watches over the members with discerning love and sympathetic understanding.

Christ the Good Shepherd. Taking over the thankless job of watching over his sheep, taking the trouble to know them by name. Can you imagine that? There have always been people with a good memory for names: Napoleon – who knew thousands of his soldiers by name.....or Charles Schwab – who knew the names of all 8,000 of his employees.....or Charles W. Eliot – who, during his forty years as president of Harvard, earned the reputation of knowing all the students by name each year. But can you imagine Christ knowing all his sheep by name? That’s millions and millions of people for over 2,000 years! No wonder we call him Master, Lord, Savior. Watching over his flock, calling them by name. **AND SETTING AN EXAMPLE FOR US.** Here’s what we need to remember: Christ calls us to follow his example.

In his book *Finding God at Home*, Ernest Boyer, Jr. tells of a woman named Sarah who lived a humble life, yet she lived it with such purpose that she influenced all those around her. Sarah was born in 1906, the last of eight children. Her father was a miner and her mother ran a boardinghouse for miners. Sarah spent much of her growing-up years working at the boardinghouse and playing with her brothers and sisters. At eighteen, she married a man from Italy. She had only met him three times before, but his family knew her family back in the old country, so it was considered the proper thing to do. Sarah and her husband moved to the city, where he opened up a barbershop, and they started a family. First was born a son, then a daughter. But something was different with their third child, also a son. He was soon diagnosed as having muscular dystrophy, a horrible disease that would destroy his muscles and render him unable to care for himself in the smallest way. Doctors predicted he would die before his fifth birthday.

This was in the midst of the Depression, when there was barely enough money for the necessities of life. Their third child would need extensive medical care for his condition. So Sarah went to work. She took on many odd jobs, such as cleaning houses, baking bread, taking in laundry. And every morning Sarah went to Mass and prayed for her children, especially for her son. Years passed,

and the boy outlived his fifth birthday, and his sixth, and his seventh. Sarah did whatever she possibly could do to care for her afflicted child. She even wrote to President Roosevelt, hoping that his own infirmities would give him compassion for others who were suffering. The President arranged for the boy to be sent to a prestigious clinic in Maryland. Sarah took her son to this clinic, where the astonished doctors told her that the boy's continued survival and slow disease progression were nothing short of a miracle. Evidently, Sarah's loving care was keeping her son alive and in fair condition. The doctors suggested that Sarah take him home and continue to care for him in the manner in which she already had, for that seemed to work some kind of magic that the doctors couldn't match.

At the age of fourteen, Sarah's son died. Sarah's husband took to his bed with grief, and he died six months later. In addition to her regular jobs, Sarah began taking classes at beauty school, and eventually turned her husband's barbershop into a beauty shop. In this way, she supported her children. But something kept nagging at Sarah. Throughout the years of her son's illness, Sarah had spent much time in hospital wards, and she was aware that there were many suffering children in these wards who had no one to visit them. So Sarah began visiting the children's wards of the local hospitals to talk to the children and let them know she cared. But the hospital had a strict policy of only allowing family members to visit, so they barred Sarah from the wards. When Sarah protested that many of these children didn't have a family, the hospital staff told her that many of these children weren't used to that kind of caring, and if they got out of the hospital they wouldn't know what to do when they no longer received it. Sarah left the hospital and sat down on a park bench. And there she cried and cried. And then Sarah resolved to do something to show love and care to children who had no one else to love them. So Sarah became a foster mother, and her house became a home to many young girls who needed her.

Sarah's life followed a simple routine. Every morning she went to early Mass, then came home and cooked breakfast for her foster children. Next she worked at her beauty parlor, then she went home and baked bread. Her bread was Sarah's gift to the world around her. She never baked it for herself. Instead she gave away her loaves to churches, soup kitchens, family, friends, and neighbors in need.

One day, Sarah got a call from one of her granddaughters asking her to go to afternoon Mass with her. When Sarah showed up at the church that afternoon, she saw her whole family waiting for her. They led her into the church. It was filled

with Sarah's family, friends, neighbors, and former and current foster children. Some people had traveled hours to get there, and some were friends that Sarah had not seen in years. And when Sarah entered the church, they all stood and clapped. As Sarah stood there crying tears of humble joy, her youngest great-grandchild walked up and presented her with a bouquet of flowers. "Here Great-grandma. These are yours."

Sarah walked to the front of the church and gently placed the flowers in front of a statue of Mary with the baby Jesus. And she said softly, "Here. These are yours."

Christ set the example. He is the Good Shepherd. He watches over his sheep. He knows each of us by name. He even lay down his life in our behalf. Now he calls us to take up the often thankless job of laying down our lives for others – with no other reward than this: someday to hear his voice say, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

Are you up to it? Do you have what it takes to give your life in service to this church? To this community? To those around you? Friends, let us serve others, even as he continues to serve us.

The Rev. Craig S. Davies, First Presbyterian Church, Inverness, Florida