

Preached by Dr. Carl Rush  
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church  
Alexandria, VA  
April 27, 2008

Acts 17:22-31  
John 14:15-21

## AVOIDING IDLE WORSHIP

I wonder how Paul felt after he left Athens. If you read on in the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts, you'll find that no one was moved to make a commitment by his sermon that day. His logic failed him. Indeed, only two people even showed any interest after the sermon was over. Paul learned an important lesson that we all are learning over and over again, that it really is not about what we accomplish in the faith, it's not even about how moral or ethical we are or how educated we become, that following Jesus is about something very different from all of those things. Those things are a result of following Jesus.

But what does Christ say has to come first? The text is very clear: if you love me, you will keep my commandments. Discipleship only works when we are clear that keeping the commandments will not produce an appreciation or an affection for Christ. Only by keeping our focus on the order in which Jesus instructs us into the faith-love me first—can we ever be clear about what the commandments are teaching us to do and to become. Love me, then and only then after you have that down, should you concern yourself with keeping my commandments. So we cannot fulfill the commandment to love one another or to love one another the way Christ has loved us until we get the horse in front of the proverbial cart.

There is a famous sermon that was written more than 30 years ago at Glasgow Presbyterian in Scotland and the title of the sermon was *Getting Little Nelly Done*. It was a sermon about the habit of ministers speaking to mothers with newborn children and saying to them, so when are you going to get little Nelly done, meaning when are you going to bring her for baptism. The author of the sermon talked about how we go through the motions and especially how we are so concerned with process in our faith and our practice of faith as Presbyterian Christians that we get all these steps in line. Getting little Nelly done—the baptism—later, hopefully, some connection through membership, then the all-important joining of committees or possibly serving as a leader in some other fashion.

The process can easily make our worship, our service rote and predictable and hollow. I would not presume to advise the apostle Paul, but I wonder if his sermon would have been different if he had talked to them not so much about this unknown God, but had talked to them about the empty feeling they had when they worshiped their deities. I wonder if God would speak to us today about how easy it is to come to this worship service and go through all the wonderful music, liturgy, and prayers and walk out empty. Nothing has changed. We should not be surprised that Jesus insists that devotion has to proceed apprenticeship or that obedience can only come after that personal and passionate connection. For Jesus, discipleship is always more about relationships than it is about achievements. Listen to his words: "I will ask my father and he will give you another advocate, comforter, counselor. And this counselor, this friend, this spirit of truth, will be with you forever, for I am coming to you."

It's only been a little over two weeks since our team returned from Liberia, three Sundays, but just a short time to try to process all that we experienced while we were there. You know that we sent an educational specialist to look at the need for the community and the school. We sent a grant-writer, your own beloved Anne Troy. We sent the chair of the international mission committee for our church, wonderful Dick. Then we sent the minister along to do some meeting, greeting, and to connect the Goba Town Presbyterian Church. We also sent a construction expert, a friend of mine from my past. Someone who had, on his own, built and operated a saw mill, then became a Presbyterian minister. His name is Paul, and he went along to really take a critical look at all the construction that was taking place and tried to inform us how we could better assist Carney and Ophelia Johnson at Todee Mission in Liberia.

But Paul, being a good friend and having a wonderful sense of humor, when we would be introduced and tell the people we were meeting what we were doing there, Paul would always say that he came along to love Carl no matter what he does. He said, I'm his friend from the past and I know that when he doesn't say the right thing, he's not really trying to say the wrong thing. I know his intentions and I have come along to be his friend no matter what." My advocate, if you will. Jesus is promising us that we will have that kind of connection with him when we surrender all of our pride and arrogance, all our abilities, when we surrender those to a loving God whose spirit literally comes into us. This passage reminds us that to be a follower of Jesus is more important to do the Jesus things than the things we think are more important.

Being one of Christ's disciples requires some intense honesty and some genuine integrity on our part about who we are and where we have come from and what God has in fact done for us that we could never have done for ourselves. Think about it this way, when we talk about falling in love, don't we say, what it means to be in love? We never say what I'm going to do in love. We say I want to be in love or I am in love. The same is true if we are ever going to have a faith that is truly meaningful, that changes us from the inside out, that personal devotion and that devotion which leads eventually to a corporate confession. We may think we're in love, but until we admit it to ourselves and until we confess it to the one who we are in love with, it becomes then and only then tangible. If we never tell, if we never admit it to ourselves; quite simply, we can't be in love. The one who is the focus of our devotion becomes genuine and real when we take that risk of saying those words that we hope by some miracle will be returned to us in kind.

Yesterday was a great day for our congregation. I know that every year *Rebuilding Together* is a high point in the year for many in this church. It seemed that yesterday there were so many people at the house where we were working that we almost had to take turns working. There were just so many folks around. It was a great success. At one point, I volunteered to go up on the roof; not because I have some great skill, but just because I have two hands and I could hold something while somebody else who was skilled did what needed to be done. While I was up on the roof, someone noticed that I had brought my dog along with me and my dog was sitting under a tree. For that half an hour or so that I was up there, the dog never flinched. It never stopped looking up on that roof to make sure I wasn't going to fall or something like that. But there were children playing, there were saws going, there was conversation and people painting,

people were stepping over the dog, but that wonderful little animal never lost focus, always watching the roof line.

That's what Christ is asking us to do, to look up in response to God's love for us. To look and focus not on ourselves as we're so prone to do, not on someone else, which we often use to measure our faith by, but in response to a loving God who has promised to help us, to be our advocate. Now this isn't a really brand-new idea, not even for Jesus. It's a pre-Christian concept that exists throughout Jewish literature. It exists in the Old Testament. Moses was given a helper to complete what he did not complete on his own. Joseph has Joshua as his advocate and friend. Elijah passes the mantle to Elisha. Even John the Baptist in the New Testament recognizes that what God is doing in his life can only be finished by the person of Jesus.

Jesus offers us a spirit of truth, a truth that will indeed liberate us, a spirit that will complete in us our surrender to be disciples. Our response to Christ's coming to us, being does not always lead to doing for sure, but let us be careful. Let us not allow worship or service become empty idle enterprises, for doing will not necessarily lead you to being. If you want to remember the exhilaration of recognizing Christ as your savior, decide now to be his love and to focus on his actions for you. So may it always be for God's people in this place and everywhere.

Amen.