

“Together We Do More: Wrestling with Priorities”



Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
10:45 a.m. Sunday, September 18, 2016
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Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Thank you for having me with you. I'm very honored to be here. This congregation has had a long tradition of supporting not just local efforts, but also church-wide and synodical efforts all over the place. And those are both entities that I represent. And so I'm honored to be here today and to share the Gospel with you.

Just a few notes about today. First, I have permission to share the following stories. So, in case you think I'm violating some sort of confidence, I want you to know I was given permission to share. And the other is, if you're really offended, I'm going to be preaching at the second service and it might be better there. So, go to the second service later and maybe it will be better.

One of the things that occurred to me as I was reading this text for day was the idea of kenosis. Of pouring ourselves out, our own personhood, so that nothing else is more important to us than serving God and making that our priority. And that all things fall out from that. That if I truly follow God, and love God and my neighbor above all things, then everything I do in my life will be geared that way. I will listen to God's law and try to follow it, including the way that I prioritize my spending, my time, my talents – however I do my life and my world, will all fall out of keeping God first. That that's the way my life should be ordered.

I was at a conference once and a woman said, “Keep saying “should” to yourself and the next thing you know you'll should all over yourself.” And that's a really good expression to remind me that “should” is a dangerous word because we often say, well I should have done this. And really, truly, it's either you do it or you don't.

So we put up in front of us this idea of how God wants us to live. And I think about kenosis because what it means is that when I'm pouring myself out of my own stuff, my own agenda, my own interests, and I'm putting God's stuff and God's interests and God's agenda first, then I really am surrendering my sense of priorities to God's of sense of priorities. Because my sense of priorities are, quite frankly, very different some days.

I'll give you an example. A few years ago – I've been a parish pastor for almost 20 years – and in one of my parishes a few years ago one of my parishioners who had cancers of varying kinds but had survived all manner of cancer, and her husband had a mass and she had survived taking care of him for many, many decades. Here she was in her 80s and she had gone in for one more surgery – and you can almost see it coming – she didn't come out of a coma. She was on life support. And the doctors said to her family,

"listen, it's been a day. Let's give it another couple and we'll see how it goes." Well, three days later she was still in a coma. Well, for those of you who have been through this experience, you know that the longer you are on life support, the more your body diminishes and the less capable your body is to recover. And so, we walked with her through that journey, and after five days it was time for the family to make a decision as to whether or not to keep her on life support. Her son called me the night that the doctors told them that it was time to make a decision. And on the phone the two of us spoke and he said to me, "I cannot make this decision. I can't do it. I don't know what to do. I cannot make this decision." And so I said to him, "we'll meet at the hospital tomorrow, and you and I will prayerfully make this decision together."

When we spoke on the phone that night, the thing that really hit me was that what I was hearing in his voice was kenosis. He was giving up everything within his being because the only thing that mattered to him was the love of his mother. And he was giving everything that he had for that. Everything; all of his hopes and his dreams and his own decision-making; all of his heart, all of his time. He had poured everything that he was, everything that he thought he knew, into this moment of prayer, saying to God, "I don't know what to do anymore."

And so we met at the hospital the next day. The curtain was pulled when we arrived. If you're a pastor and you arrive at ICU and you see a curtain pulled that's not always the best sign. And so when I arrived I stood outside the room because I could hear the nurse on the other side. And then I heard something I thought I'd never hear again – the voice of my parishioner. The nurse came out of the room and she said to me, "she just woke up this morning. She pulled out her own intubation tube, she's talking, she's completely normal, she's had breakfast, she's gone to the bathroom. It's like it never happened." Her son arrived and the curtain was still pulled. I looked at him and I said, "Greg, are you ready for a miracle?" And he said, "Why?" And then he heard her voice. Three days later she died.

God took that decision from us; the decision whether or not to pull life support. God took that decision from us, because we poured out our own selves and allowed God to do it. Somehow those things came together. I can't explain to you the way God works, and why things happen the way they do. I'm not going to stand up here and try to say that somehow we did everything right, or we prayed rightly and that made it work. Life doesn't work that way and I know better than that as a theologian and a pastor and someone who's been down that road a million times. But I will say this. I do know that kenosis is real. But it's not something you and I can manufacture. I can't somehow pour myself out by my own volition, because that defeats the whole point of kenosis. Kenosis is the complete pouring out of one's own self. And that's what Christ does for us. Christ is the one who shows us pure kenosis. The pouring out of his power and his strength and everything that he is as God so that he can surrender unto death. That he pours out all of his almighty power and wisdom and kneels in a garden and sweats blood praying that what's about to happen won't happen, and yet, still walks to the cross.

This is what Christ shows us, that kenosis is a product of good, correct priorities and not a priority you or I set. Again, that would defeat the purpose. We don't set the priorities. We often let other people do it for us. The bank. Why do you have a job? If you didn't have to work for the bank, would you work? Would you? I wouldn't. Seriously, are you kidding? Think it through. Sports teams. How many times has somebody set a schedule that you

have to live by? Who's setting your priorities? Your activities? Your time? Your devotion? Who is setting those things for you? And that's the thing about priorities is that it's not something that we usually set. It's set for us and we surrender to those issues or concerns or things that are placed before us. Somehow in our heads we relinquish who we are and what God has called us to be, because someone tells us what we have to be, or we have to do that, or we have to think this because those are the things that you do.

But brothers and sisters, we're not those people. We are God's people. We're the children of the light. And our priority has been set for us and that is to follow God, to love God. We just sang it like two seconds ago. To love God with our heart, body, soul, and mind, and to love our neighbor as our self. That's the priority. That's it baby. And guess what bonus we get – it doesn't take any money to do it. So when Jesus says you cannot serve God and wealth – bonus, it's not that hard to follow God and to serve God. How hard is it to serve wealth? Holy moly, right? It's exhausting! It's exhausting! Which one of those two things, God or wealth, is going to feed you? Really feed you. Which one of those two things is going to save you? God or wealth? Which one of those two things is going to forgive your sins? Give you peace that surpasses all understanding? Show you joy that's eternal, that transcends the moment? Which one of those is capable of raising you from the dead? It ain't wealth, not matter how much they are putting into cryogenics, trust me.

You and I have been given a wonderful gift from God and it's called free will. The problem I think I have with free will personally is that my will likes things. Likes family and this life, and going to Hershey Park, and I like going to museums and buying art. Don't even get me started on my art collection. This is kind of how we are. But we're easily distracted from the only priority of our lives. Literally, the only priority of your life, the one that gives you life and breath, and helps you have meaning, and makes sense out of this crazy world around us.

Take a moment and think for yourself. What is it that wealth can buy that God cannot provide? Really. And whatever that thing is, do you need it, or do you just want it? We tend to set our priorities by what we want and not by what we need. God wants and needs us. So he pours himself out, dies on a cross, and redeems us from the grave. God wants every solitary bit of you, every cell in your body, every tear that you cry, every breath that you breathe. It is all of God, from God, and for God. And there is no other priority for you and me. Everything in our lives revolves around that. Do we get distracted? Absolutely! One of my favorite t-shirts is the one that says about ADD – Squirrel. That's us. I mean we're all like that. That's not just unique to people with ADD. We all live with that. Shiny objects. Remember the tick? Anyone see the cartoon about the tick? In the cartoon, the tick was the superhero who was ridiculous and tended to save people by accident. What happened was that every time he saw some shiny object he'd get distracted so easily, and that's how we are.

We talk about what feels good and what is fun and what is interesting and what is ... My question, "What's from God?" It's a difficult thing that we have in front of us in a world where everything is available to us to think that none of it is necessary. But ladies and gentlemen, I defy you to go to Target and tell me what exactly there is necessary. Really, truly necessary. And yet, we have closets full, and attics full, and basements full, and rooms full. But all of it is about God and how we live our priority in God's world as God's children of the light.

The world expects that the gift that you're going to give me is worth it. I want you to go and buy me something and make it awesome. My mother is the worst gift giver, by the way. She always goes out and gets me the thing that is close to what I want but it isn't exactly what I want. So I have this thing that I don't really want. And so our expectation of the gifts that we are given is that they should be tangible, they should be awesome, and they should be amazing. Well, I'm sorry to tell you but the greatest gift you can give to anyone is mercy, peace, love, hope, and joy, and that, my brothers and sisters is what you have been given from Christ. Don't we often say that Christ has given us the greatest gift of all? How quick are we to throw that away when we get our shiny objects?

We're challenged today about priorities. We know what they should be. You don't need me up here preaching to you and telling you what they are. You know. The challenge is to live the life that reflects it. You can live any which way you want. God gave you free will. But will you make the choices that truly follow what God has called you to be and do in this world? Or will you make choices because, hey, I really needed that suit, and I didn't need to buy a malaria net. I really needed that new car. I really didn't want to put my money into global sponsorship or the food pantry. These are the choices that we get to make. God has given us this gift. It's our priorities that help us make the decisions. Amen.

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