

# JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

## Is It Worth It?

Mark 4:26-34

Sunday, August 21, 2022

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Allen and I had a long-standing tradition at Florida Annual Conference. We would sit up in the balcony. Up there it is easier to swap jokes and make commentary without getting into trouble. A ministry has grown through our perch in the balcony. It was a ministry that was developed out of a reputation that we have earned – Allen and I don't take ourselves too seriously. We take our ministries seriously, but we don't take ourselves too seriously. So, when ministers were tired of the pretence, problem and pressures of ministry they would come up to the balcony and vent. Some would cry. Some would laugh. Others would find a cool, dark seat and take a nap.

Allen and I found that almost without exception each minister who took off their collar and made their way up the balcony stairs were tired, exhausted, and worn out. We encouraged them and empathized with them. We put our arms around them and said, "I've been there." We found that it is a "real" ministry.

However, every once in a while, ministers fall through the cracks. They get tired and tired of, and they quit – they leave the ministry. I recall reading about a minister who decided one day to count up all of the sermons he had preached. He counted them all up. After he counted them all up, he cleaned out his desk, wrote a resignation letter, left his robe in the sacristy and quit, left the ministry. Some time later a former colleague caught up with him and asked, "What happened? Why did you quit?" He replied, "After counting up all the sermons I had preached I realized that no one was listening to a word I said."

Ministry is tough. Ministry is difficult. But not just for clergy. Ministry can be especially difficult for laity. I remember a sweet lady coming to see me in another church I served. She was a retired teacher and wanted to start a new Sunday school class. She had read some book that really ministered to her and she felt that it would also minister to a class. So, she wrote a blurb for the newsletter. We put it on our web-site. We announced from the pulpit.

The Sunday for the class came and no one showed up – empty chairs and unopened books. The next week she called folks that might be interested.

Many of them said they would be there the following Sunday. Sunday came and no one showed up – empty chairs and unopened books. She peaked out the window of the class room and saw many of the people committed to being there getting into their cars and driving home after worship. The next day I found all of those unopened books on my desk with a note that said, "I give up."

Ministry is tough. Ministry is difficult. It's easy to get discouraged. Ministry is tedious – Sunday after Sunday, meeting after meeting, problem after problem, fickle people after fickle people. You wonder if you are ever getting through to people. And people's needs are so enormous. Sometimes I think off all the needs of a congregation. It is an overwhelming thought. How did Jesus do it? He, being divine and human, in tune with the needs of those around him – how did he do it?

Brandy and I were on vacation a few years ago. We were sitting by the pool enjoying a conversation with a couple we had just met. Soon the conversation turned to what we did for a living. Isn't it interesting how that question always comes up? Well, when I am on vacation I am always tempted to tell people I am something other than a preacher. Oh, I am proud of being a preacher but often people have so much baggage related to preachers that once they find out you are a preacher they don't converse with you like you are a normal human being. It's an occupational hazard. I did tell the couple I was a preacher. The lady responded, "Oh, your life must be so peaceful." Just as I was about to respond with a belly laugh I looked into her eyes and discovered that she was not joking.

Ministry is a lot of things – busy, chaotic, challenging – but "peaceful" is not one of them. It gets too much for some ministers. Many of them quit. Some actually leave the ministry. Others don't leave the ministry. They just quit. They check out. Somewhere along the line they gave up the good fight and now they are just going through the motions. Their heart is not in it anymore. They do their jobs with a numbness, a separation.

It happens to laity, too. If I have seen it once I have seen it a thousand times. She has been on the same committee for a hundred years. One day she realizes she is burned out. She turns in her material and never works in the church again. He gets mad at a member of the committee and quits. He goes to another church that doesn't know him. He can sit in the back and leave after the service. No one will call him or ask him to do anything. It happens.

You can't blame them, really. Ministry is tough. Ministry is difficult. After all, many people followed Jesus in the beginning. They came for the bread and the show. But soon Jesus discovered that many of them wanted to go the show but they didn't want to grow. Many of them slipped out the back when Jesus' teaching got too edgy. Ministry is tough.

One of the reasons why ministry is tough is because it is difficult to get immediate and tangible results in ministry. Networks know how many people tuned in to the show last night. Businesses look at the bottom line and know their profits. Teams know if they won or lost the game. Ministry is different. I can't put you through a soul machine every Sunday and get a print out on how your soul will grow this week because of what you experienced here. So, as a substitute, we become obsessed with numbers – worship attendance, membership, budgets. These are not bad things, but they don't tell the complete story.

Another reason why ministry is difficult is because people are difficult. I don't want to burst your bubble but sometimes church folk don't get along. So, if you are looking for the perfect church you will not find it. It does not exist. And even if you do find the perfect church, when you join it, it won't be perfect anymore.

I was talking to a minister at Conference about his church. You know what happened at his church? A fight broke out in the middle of worship? They called the police to come break it up. Squad cars surrounded the church. The chief of police worshipped there for two months so no more fights would break out.

A minister friend called me one day and said that his church was about to split. I asked why. He said, "You are not going to believe this. They are about to split over the color of the carpet going into the sanctuary." He said, "I'm tired of fighting." Ministry is tough.

So, why do it? Why don't I quit? Why do I keep fighting the good fight? Why do I keep preaching Sunday after Sunday? Why don't you quit? I'll tell you why – because it works – because it does make a

difference - because the gospel changes lives – because everything else in this world will pass away but gospel truth! This is why I don't quit. The church is worth the effort. Ministry is worth the effort.

I don't know what your Bible says, but my Bible says today that God's Kingdom seed never dies. My Bible says that God's Kingdom seed always grows a harvest. My Bible says that even the smallest of God's seeds will grow into something huge.

Oh, I have seen the harvest! And, if you are patient and hang in there, you can see the harvest, too! I've seen the harvest!

Will Willimon tells of the time he was scheduled to teach a confirmation class. A rain storm blew in and only one confirmand showed up – a 12-year-old girl. They canceled the class, but he could not get a hold of the girl's parents to come pick her up. He was called to the hospital for an emergency and he had to take the girl with him. He took her up to the hospital room. He prayed with the patient and his family. The awkward girl sat there in a chair. Fast forward several years later. Willimon is at Annual Conference at an ordination service. A lady greets him and says, "Remember me? When I was 12 you took me to the hospital with you. I am preacher now, just like you." Willimon planted a seed and that seed grew!

I am here to tell you that the seeds do grow. They grow! I saw the harvest at this year's Annual Conference. I ran into a guy I knew in another church I served. I remember his face. Oh, I remember his face. He came to church for the first time when I was preaching with the wind in my face. The church was facing all kinds of difficulty. I was tired. But I preached. He sat there. He usually played golf on Sunday but his wife dragged him there. I scattered the seed. Well, here he was a delegate at Annual Conference, carrying his Bible. I couldn't believe it. He shook my hand and said, "Thanks for making God real to me."

Oh, the seeds grow! They do grow! Oh, they grow! Jesus said so.

A man complained about the futility of listening to sermons week by week in church. "I've gone for 30 years now," he snorted "and in that time I have heard something like 3,000 sermons. But for the life of me, I can't remember a single one of them. So, I think I'm wasting my time and the pastor is wasting his by giving sermons at all."

Then a wiser brother rebuked the man with this clincher that was an irrefutable reply. He said, "I've been married for 30 years now. In that time my wife has cooked some 32,000 meals. But, for the life of me, I cannot recall the entire menu for a single one of those meals. But I do know this... They all nourished me and gave me the strength I needed to do my work. If my wife had not given me these meals, I would be physically dead today. Likewise, if I had not sat under God's Word for nourishment, I would be spiritually dead today!" So, what is my message today? Don't ever give up? Ever! Don't stop smiling at strangers. Don't stop praying for your enemies. Don't stop inviting people to church. Don't stop going to the meetings. Don't stop telling your friends about God. Don't ever stop. The seeds do grow! All of this is worth the effort. The church is God's best hope for the world.

Fred Craddock is one of the greatest preachers in the history of the church. I really mean that. He used to teach preaching at Candler. Now, in his retirement, he pastors a small church in the mountains of North Georgia and does workshops on preaching for local pastors. Craddock tells a story about seeing the harvest: "My mother took us to church and Sunday school; my father didn't go. He complained about Sunday dinner being late when she came home. Sometimes the preacher would call, and my father would say, 'I know what the church wants. Church doesn't care about me. Church wants another name, another pledge, another name, another pledge, right? Isn't that the name of it? Another name, another pledge.' That's what he always said.

Sometimes we'd have a revival. Pastor would bring the evangelist and say to the evangelist, 'There's one now, sic him, get him, get him,' and my father would say the same thing. Every time, my mother in the kitchen, always nervous, in fear of flaring tempers, of somebody being hurt. And always my father said, 'The church doesn't care about me. The church wants another name and another pledge.' I guess I heard it a thousand times.

One time he didn't say it. I was in the veteran's hospital, and he was down to seventy-three pounds. They'd taken out his throat, and said, 'It's too late.' They put in a metal tube, and X rays burned him to pieces. I flew in to see him. He couldn't speak, couldn't eat. I looked around the room, potted plants and cut flowers on all the windowsills, a stack of cards twenty inches deep beside his bed. And even that tray where they put food, if you can eat, on that was a flower. And all the flowers beside the bed, every card, every blossom, were from persons or groups from the church. He saw me read a card.

He could not speak, so he took a Kleenex box and wrote on the side of it a line from Shakespeare. If he had not written this line, I would not tell you this story. He wrote: 'in this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story.' I said, 'What is your story, Daddy?' And he wrote, 'I was wrong'" (Craddock Stories). Amen.



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