

“I Would Prefer Not To”

July 18, 2010

Elder Melissa Hohler

I know you are surprised to see me up here. Believe me, no one is more surprised than I! So how did I get up here? Well, let me explain...

You have heard of the writer Herman Melville? He wrote the classic novel *Moby Dick*. But he also wrote many short stories, one of which is called *Bartleby the Scrivener*. I read this in college, and the character Bartleby always stuck with me.

A scrivener was a copyist or transcriber, usually for a lawyer. This was back in the late 1800's. Of course they did not have copy machines, and trying to typeset legal and financial documents would have been too cumbersome and time-consuming, especially if there were changes to be made. So, there was a whole legion of scriveners. And that is what Bartleby did.

One day he answered a help wanted ad and was hired into a firm on Wall Street. He was a hard worker, worked long hours, was seemingly dedicated, doing all the right things, was going through the motions. But he had one peculiar mannerism. When the boss asked him to do something he did not want to do, Bartleby would respond, "*I would prefer not to*". At first the boss, who was the narrator of the story, was perplexed and could not understand why Bartleby was refusing to do a simple task. The next day the boss asked Bartleby to run some documents round the corner to another firm. But Bartleby again said, "*I would prefer not to*". The boss was thunderstruck! Bartleby was not being sarcastic, was not being mean, he did other parts of his job very well. But he flat out refused to do certain things his boss asked him. Every day there was something Bartleby said he would "prefer not" to do.

So I got to thinking. Is that not similar to how we Christians behave sometimes? I mean, we do most of the things God asks us to do—we go to church, give to the needy, give of our time. But, when it gets down to it there are *some* things we would “prefer not” to do. Why? Because it is hard following the Gospel! The temptation is to pick and choose what we feel most comfortable doing, and “prefer not” to do the rest.

One of my favorite bible passages is Matthew 25: 35-40. Let’s look it up.

For I was hungry.....

“When you did it to the least of my brothers, you did it to me also”.

I do not think you can get anymore clear than that. Jesus is telling us, with no ambiguity, what he expects of us. This one passage, to me, is a summation of the life we are expected to lead as Christians. It is so clear and easy to understand, a child can get it!

But yet, we all must admit, there are times when we turn away from what the Gospels have taught us to do because, well—we would prefer not to. Suddenly we find ourselves becoming judgmental and uncomfortable. Or in order to not feel vulnerable we maintain a tough hard exterior. Our impatience causes us to ask, “*why don’t you get a job?!*” “*It was months ago that you lost your loved one—you need to get on with your life!*” “*Why does that homeless person not want to better themselves?*” More often than not, instead of judgment people just need a simple act of kindness, generosity, and compassion, or to be taught how to fish, to lift them up and get them on their way.

Now here comes what appears to be a contradiction. In today’s scripture lesson, Jesus says to Martha,

“...My dear Martha, you are so upset over all these details! There is actually only one thing worth being concerned about. Mary has discovered it—and I won’t take it away from her.”

Here is a further explanation of this passage from my bible, the New Living Translation. *Martha didn't realize that in her desire to serve, she was actually neglecting her guest. Are you so busy doing things **for** Jesus that you are not spending any time **with** him? Do not let your service become self-serving. Jesus did not blame Martha for being concerned about household chores. He was only asking her to set priorities. Spend time with him. Set priorities. In my family, it is called "stepping out on faith".*

Some of you may remember a few years ago Bob asked me to tell the congregation why I had such a fondness for being on Mission Team. I said it all came from the examples my family had set all throughout my life. One story I did not tell then was about my oldest cousin Shirley.

My family are all from Kentucky and like most girls in that area back in that time, she married very young. Shirley was very devout but her new young husband, Robert, was not Christian. Shirley prayed and prayed that Robert would find Jesus and eventually of course he did. Marrying young, however, and then starting a family—they were very poor. But they never forgot to tithe. There is a story in our family about how many times they put the last of their money into the offering plate—they literally did not know where their next meal was coming from—but they stepped out on faith, fulfilling their tithe obligation, totally relying on God to see them through.

They stepped out on faith back then—and continue to do so every single day of their lives. For their faithfulness they have been blessed beyond measure. Certainly, they have had their share of suffering and hardship but it has been amazing to witness their absolute, unwavering, devout, whole-hearted belief that faith will

see them through. They are remarkable examples of humble servants of Jesus. No matter what they have endured, no one has ever heard them utter “I would prefer not to”.

So. Why am I up here? In a Session meeting a few months ago we were planning Bob’s sabbatical, and the statement was made that there was hope some Session members would step up, “step out on faith” and perhaps deliver a sermon to relieve some of the pastoral burden on Denise. I will never forget—I was at the far end of the table—and as clear as I am standing here, someone whispered in my ear, “you will do this”. I was so startled I actually jumped! But the voice was so clear, it was as if they were sitting beside me. In my mind I resisted, but they said it again—“no, you can do this”. I knew who was talking to me! Me, who definitely needs to spit-shine *my* following of the Gospels. Me, who says a naughty word or two sometimes. But, in spite of all that, He. Was asking. Me. So *I had* to step out on faith, trust Him completely, to do what he was clearly asking me to do.

Jesus challenged Martha's priorities to strike a balance between *service to* and time *spent with* God. Have you been able to find that balance? Or do you "prefer not to?" When has God asked you to step out on faith? Do the uncomfortable things we know we should do? Did you do what God asked of you or did you say, "I would prefer not to, God"?

Throughout scripture we see where God calls someone to a task and their initial response is *I would prefer not to*.

- Luke Ch. 5 Jesus calls Peter to become a fisher of men but Peter replies, "*I am a sinful man*"
- Exodus Ch. 4 God calls Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt but Moses responds, "*I don't speak that well. My brother Aaron is better suited—ask him*"
- "*I am a man of unclean lips!*" Isaiah said when God called him to become a prophet in Isaiah Ch. 6.

God calls us to a task but we reject it, feeling we are unworthy, inadequate or too sinful. Boy, that is *exactly* how I felt when I heard that voice in my ear! But over these months contemplating my sermon I have learned that God Is Faithful!

- God has been faithful in giving me the words to say.
- God has been faithful in showing me that I am *worthy to speak*.
- And God has been faithful in helping me accomplish this task that He called me to do. It has been said, God doesn't call the equipped, he equips the called. Clearly, this has been my experience.

I challenge you to continue to follow God, to follow as God calls you to the difficult, uncomfortable opportunities put before you. Step out on faith and follow what He is asking you to do.

God called me to preach a sermon. Me preach a sermon? You have *got* to be kidding! I did not have the heart to say to God, “I would prefer not to”. Amen