

First Presbyterian Church
Marianna, Florida
Sunday, August 12, 2007
Sermon by Huw Christopher, Pastor

Scripture Readings: Luke 12:32-40

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-12

Sermon Title: “The Adventure of Being the Children of God”

Sermon Text: Hebrews 11:8: By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going.

This morning I have a confession to make. I hope that none of you will feel that my offense is so serious that an emergency Session meeting needs to be called following this service, and by the end of the day I need to be asked to leave town, or that you need to call Lou Roberts, the chief of the Marianna Police Department, back to the church office this service, and have me thrown in jail. My confession is that I stole this card from of all places, a monastery. The card was lying on the bedside table in the room that I used at the Retreat House of the Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Conyers, Georgia when I was taking a course there a few years ago as part of the Certificate in Spiritual Formation through Columbia Theological Seminary. The words on this card impressed me so much that I decided I had to have them. I suppose I could justify my action by saying that the card was placed there just like motels put notepads next to telephones on bedside tables for people

to take. Since there was no telephone in the room and therefore no need for a notepad I could say well they must have put these cards there for people to take instead. I feel sure that I probably was not the first person to take such a card from that room.

I do not know whether if you had been in my position you would have done the same. In retrospect I realize that I could have found the words later with a Google search on the internet, but back seven years ago when I first saw this card I was not that computer literate to be aware of such possibilities through the internet.

This morning I have shared with each of you the words that so impressed me as a prayer that later in the service I will invite all of us to pray these words together. The words come from the writings of Thomas Merton. The course I was taking at the monastery was the first of several courses that I took during a two month sabbatical from my former congregation. Since this was a time of reflection on my own personal ministry, as well as that of the congregation I was serving at the time, I think that the words may have spoken to me even more significantly as they said, "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end." The words probably struck me even more because if someone a few years earlier had suggested that I would be taking a course on spirituality in a monastery I probably would have laughed them off as not knowing what really interests me in ministry. If someone at that time had told me that part of the road ahead would end in Marianna, Florida, I probably would have reacted by saying, "Where in the world is that!" As I have shared with many of you before there is no way in which I can look back over my life or my ministry and say that things have happened exactly as I planned out. If that was the case I probably would not be standing in this pulpit this morning, but would be somewhere back in my native Wales. As Rachel and I were counting bagels and English muffins at the Second Harvest of the Big Bend Warehouse in

Tallahassee last Tuesday morning I thought again about the way in which even here in Marianna my ministry has led me in many different directions than even the Pulpit Nominating Committee had told me, or maybe even of which they were aware when they met with Rachel and myself just over three years ago. Rachel has often said that she never anticipated when we moved here that she would be using her Christian Education training of over thirty years ago much more in this congregation than in any other church we have served.

Those of you who have been in my back study in the church office may have seen that I have this card on the wall there together with a copy of the words that I printed this morning on the front of the bulletin. I am not sure where I obtained those words but they also have spoken to me very significantly for many years. I have these words before me to remind me of the way in which God has led me in the past and through that reminder to find confidence and assurance of God's continued guidance to me personally, and in our ministry together in this place at this time, even though we may not always see the road ahead of us, nor are conscious of where the things we are doing might end.

As we have been reminded of the experience of Abraham that he went out not knowing where he was going we can imagine that he too may well have wanted to steal these words of Thomas Merton. The experience of Abraham and of many others to whom the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews makes reference in this same chapter reminds us that the words of Thomas Merton do not just reflect his own experience. They rather reflect the experience of so many, if not all, of the children of God.

In our Gospel lesson we heard Jesus say, "Do not be afraid, little flock, it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." His words remind us that God's desire is that all people might come to know that fullness and abundance of

life that is the hallmark of the Kingdom of God for which we pray as we say, “Thy kingdom come.” In the words that follow, though, Jesus makes clear that gifts, even the gift of the kingdom of God, do not come without some responsibility. His words reminded me of a story I read recently of the way in which a record breaking crowd attended a special session of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. The audience was literally captivated by the piano playing of one gentleman. It was later written that after the performance a lady went up to him and greeted him with the words, “Oh, how I wish I could play the piano like you.” She was rather taken back with his response. He said in a firm but gentle voice, “Oh, no you don’t.” (quoted in www.eSermons.com, for July 29, 2007) Here was a man who recognized that the gift of being able to play the piano had come with all of the responsibility to practice and practice and practice hour after hour to be able to use that gift well. Jesus reminds us that gifts even the gift of God’s kingdom do not come without responsibilities.

She probably would have reacted by saying, “Do you think that is really appropriate for a worship service,” if I had asked Rachel to lead us this morning in a rousing chorus of “Father Abraham had many children.” After all we did sing it very well at Summerfest. Yet certainly we can see how the words would be very appropriate after we heard of Abraham’s descendents as being “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.” Yet even as we claim this day not only to be the children of God, but also the children of Father Abraham, we have to wonder whether any of this would have happened if Abraham had not been willing to obey God’s call and to set out, not knowing where he was going. The adventure that came to his life, and the blessings that have come to so many through his life came because he was willing to be a responsive and responsible child of God.

His experience reminds us of that of so many. If people had waited to see exactly the results of their actions and to know the full details of what might happen we have to wonder how many good things in this world would never have happened, and how many people's lives would not have been blessed. Is it possible that Rosa Parks on December 1, 1955 saw all of the implications and changes in the life of this nation that would take place as a result of her actions on that day when she refused to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama?

When Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu picked up her first dying person on the streets of Calcutta, India is it possible that she saw what influence her work would have there and in other places? Yet even almost ten years after her death the work of this person who has become better known to the world as Mother Teresa continues for good not only in that city but in so many other parts of the world.

I recently had the privilege of participating in the dedication of House No. 40 built here in this community by Jackson County Habitat for Humanity. I wonder how many of those who first started that work in 1989, from what I have heard in our own fellowship hall, saw the impact that this organization would have on this community, and the number of people over the years who would come to enjoy better housing conditions because of it.

Some of you know far better than I do how the Food Pantry ministry of this church got started. But as we look in our bulletin this morning at the figures of those served in the month of July of this year, and remember that all of the support for this program comes entirely from this congregation both in terms of money and volunteers we have to wonder whether those who started this program had any idea of where this program might go, and the good it might do for so many hungry and needy people here in Jackson County.

If Abraham had waited until he had a clear insight into where he was to go, and understood entirely what it would mean to respond to God's call it is very doubtful that anyone of us would ever have sung about Father Abraham having many children. Indeed when we think about his pivotal role in the whole history of Judaism, Islam and Christianity, we have to wonder what would have happened in the history of the world if Abraham had said, "Thanks, God, for the invitation to be a blessing to the whole world. But Sarah and I are very happy and contented here in Haran. I think we will just stay put." His life became an adventure as a child of God because he was willing to go forth not knowing where he was going but trusting that the God who had called him would lead him and would be with him. His experience has been true of all the children of God who have been ready to respond to the particular call of God on their lives. The adventure of being the children of God comes only to those who like Abraham are ready to open their lives to where God might lead them not because they see clearly everything that might happen to them, or that they might be expected to do, but because they believe like Abraham that God will be with them and that God will guide them, and that God will use their lives to be a blessing to other people. God is still inviting us to share in the adventure of being the children of God as we allow God to use our lives to be a blessing to the lives of others in ways that at this time we may not be able to visualize, or even to imagine.

If you had been staying in that monastery in Conyers, Georgia I do not know whether you would have been as guilty as I am of stealing this card because the words on it spoke so clearly and significantly to your life. I would like to invite you this morning, though, quietly to read and to reflect on these words of Thomas Merton on this card as they are printed in the bulletin before we stand and pray them together...

UNISON PRAYER OF FAITH AND TRUST

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost, and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. Thanks be to you, O God, Amen.

(Based on the words of Thomas Merton in Thoughts in Solitude)

The following prayer was printed on the front of the bulletin:

O Lord God, who has called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, and through perils unknown: Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

