

ALMOST PERSUADED

ACTS 26:27-31

GALATIANS 5:22-24

A SERMON TO INTRODUCE
COMMITTED TO CHRIST
SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 8, 2013
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
TED W. LAND, INTERIM PASTOR

I will be doing something for the next few weeks that is difficult for me. I'll be departing from the lectionary, the list of scriptures that fit the season of the church year, and I'll be using texts, and even titles, suggested by someone else. That someone else is a United Methodist pastor from Texas, who developed a stewardship program, entitled *Committed to Christ: Six Steps to a Generous Life*.

I'm sure that most if not all of you received a letter about this program from Johnny Milton, who is our stewardship chairman for this year. And I'm sure all of you received a set of commitment cards.

Did you understand that at the close of the sermon each week, there will be a time to complete that commitment card? And that you will be asked to bring it forward, and put it in a locked chest here at the front of the sanctuary during the singing of the hymn after the sermon?

Does that sound like an altar call to you? Can you imagine? Six, no, seven weeks in a row, at the close of the sermon, Presbyterians will be asked to come forward and make a commitment. Beginning with a commitment to Christ.

That is foreign, alien, strange, different, not what we are used to doing.

Now I warned you several months ago that we'd be changing, doing things differently, adding some new programs to the life of this church in order to make it more attractive to that new pastor who is surely coming someday.

This is not one of the programs I anticipated, nor is this a change that I suggested. This came from your stewardship chair, through the Administration Committee and was approved by your Session, your elected Ruling Elders.

And it is important that we heed their wisdom, even if it means doing things that are not the normal, the usual; even if it means doing things that make us uncomfortable.

I promise that none of you will be any more uncomfortable bringing your commitment cards forward than I will be preaching on texts and titles that someone else suggested. I haven't had to do that since I was in seminary! It is like I'm writing sermons for a course in preaching on stewardship and commitment.

Now if I'd chosen to preach on the Acts passage, I'd have read more verses. Instead, I'll have to tell you the story of what is going on in Acts 26.

Paul has been arrested, and he is being shuffled back and forth from one venue to another. He has appealed to the emperor, and before that Roman trial can happen, he appears in Jerusalem before the Roman governor, Porcius Festus, hereafter referred to just as "Festus". Paul wants to avoid being tried by a Jewish court, but instead of sending him on to Rome, Festus arranges for a trial before Herod Agrippa. Now if this sounds like a familiar pattern, it should.

Pontus Pilate was a predecessor of Festus, and Agrippa was a successor of the Herod who was on the throne when they shuffled Jesus back and forth. Agrippa was well acquainted with Judaism, but was not a practicing Jew, as was the case with most of the Herods.

Before Agrippa, Paul gives his testimony, including a recounting of his experience on the Damascus road.

For those of you who may not recall that lesson from Sunday School in years gone by, Paul was headed to Damascus, in Syria, to persecute the early church there. He was struck down and blinded on the road, and at that moment the voice of Jesus spoke to him, saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Paul asked, "Who are you?" Jesus replied, "I am Jesus whom you have been persecuting." Then Jesus gave him instructions about where to go, and what to do, in order to regain his sight.

The encounter on the road led to the change in the man, from Saul to Paul, from a Pharisee to an Apostle, from a persecutor of the church to a founder of churches. It led to a commitment to Christ.

The portion of Acts 26 that I read is the dramatic conclusion of Paul's testimony, when he asks the King if he believes. Agrippa's response is translated in the King James Version as "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.

And ironically, had Paul not appealed to the Emperor, he would have been set free. But God's plan for Paul's life included a trip to Rome, and imprisonment and work to be done there.

Almost persuaded...not quite ready to make a commitment, but almost persuaded.

Don't we know folks like that? Washy washy, lukewarm, straddling the fence, unable to decide. There is really only one decision in life that counts. And that is the decision to follow Jesus.

The French philosopher/mathematician Blaise Pascal called it a fool's choice. We were talking about this Wednesday evening after the Pot Luck supper. Either Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Savior of the World, and those who believe in Him have Everlasting Life, or He is not. If He is not, then believing in Him is a vain act, for there is nothing to be gained. But if He is, then to believe in Him means everything: it means eternity in heaven. As Pascal said, a fool's choice.

You know, at Billy Graham Evangelistic Association events, thousands, probably millions by now, have come forward in response to altar calls. But Dr. Graham, and his son, Franklin, and the associate evangelists, don't call this being saved. They don't call it becoming a Christian. They call it making a decision for Christ.

It has been my privilege once in my life to offer the invitation, to lead the altar call, to encourage people to come forward and make that decision, at a Billy Graham-sponsored event.

I've done it other times. I preached revivals and gave altar calls one whole summer when I was in seminary as the Marion County Evangelist in Kentucky.

And, just a few days before my ninth birthday, I came forward (and it wasn't very far, just from the second pew) to make my profession of faith in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior in the

Little Brick Presbyterian Church in Knoxville, Tennessee, while the choir and congregation sang "Just as I Am, Without One Plea".

This morning, I am asking each one of you to take out the first card, the gray card, which should be in all of your bulletins. I'm not asking you to come one at a time in response to an altar call. I'm asking you to all, if you are able, and if you are not able, hand your card to someone who is passing by, they won't read it. Mark your card, and make your commitment.

Don't be almost persuaded. Be convinced. Be committed. Committed to Christ.

And if are not ready to be committed to Christ, there is a box or two to check for that.

And please, don't feel like you have to sign your name. No one is going to be checking up on you. No one is going to be following up on these cards. This is between you and your Lord and Savior: As for me, I am checking two of the boxes. I'm checking that I have already accepted Jesus Christ; the year was 1955, and I've still got the Bible that I was given when I joined the church.

And I'm checking the bottom box, because today I am indeed ready for a closer walk with the Lord, to growing closer to Jesus, and I affirm that Jesus is my guiding light, my compass, my lighthouse. And I do ask the Lord for that peace that passes all understanding, and I will strive for my speech and behavior to please the Lord. I will also strive for my attitudes values and thoughts to please Him. I will be passionate about the Lord as a priority of my life, more passionate than I have been. I will strive to continue to be able to explain clearly what I believe and why. I do indeed look forward to a constant awareness of the Lord's presence. I will strive for others to see Christ in my life, words, and actions, and I will ask, "What would Jesus have me to do?" And I will keep the Lord in my marriage, my family, all my relationships. I will allow Christ to love others through me, even those who are different from me."

I don't ask you all to make that commitment, but I do ask you to bring your cards forward, as we sing our hymn.