

The Commitment Question: Will You Lay Down Your Life For Me

John 13: 31-38

There is a little church on the Appian Way not far from the city of Rome that bears the interesting name "The Church of the Quo Vadis". Those Latin words, Quo Vadis means, Where are you going? A beautiful legend has it that a few years after the crucifixion of Jesus, Peter had been in Rome and was under the threat of persecution again. He was fleeing for his life -- leaving the city in fear, when he met Christ who was headed into the city, so Peter asked the question "Where are you going?" And Christ answers: "I go to Rome, to be crucified again."

That the answer so pierced the heart of Peter that it turned this cowardly fugitive into a hero, and he followed Christ back into Rome, where he gladly died. And you probably know that tradition has it that he was crucified upside down on a cross at his own request because he felt that he was not worthy to die as Christ did.

So, a little church has been built on the Appian Way, on that spot where Peter fleeing Rome met Christ going into the city.

It is a legend -- but the church is there...the "Church of the Quo Vadis" -- to tell a moving story.

I share it because the question that Peter asked Christ in that story is the same question he asked Christ in our Scripture lesson for Jesus was talking to them about His coming death, and His "going away." Peter didn't understand, though he wanted to, and he asked Jesus, "Where are you going?" Jesus told him he couldn't go with Him.

Jesus knew Peter and why he was asking. So He laid that hard word on Peter -- a tough question: "Will you lay down your life for me?" It is the commitment question, and we consider it as we continue our series on Questions Jesus Asks.

Could there be a tougher question -- will you lay down your life for me? The question not only pierces the shallow thinking of Peter, it is the commitment question for all of us. It is relevant for us today, especially relevant as we begin Holy Week and the vivid memory of Jesus' passion and death: "Will you lay down your life for me?"

I'd like for us to come at the question a step at a time so we can capture the full meaning of it and struggle with integrity for an answer. In my struggle with it, I've shaped four other questions. As we answer these questions, we will be responding to the commitment question with which Jesus confronts each of us.

The first is, will you make my will your will?

Charter Piggot has reminded us: "If Christ is to have the whole of your being, Christ will get it only one way. Christ won't take it because you happen to have left it vacant. Christ won't take it by storm. Christ will get it because you give it to Christ by deliberate, conscious, willing choice."

"We often hear that Jesus' teaching turned the world upside down". Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Jesus showed us that we live in an upside-down world. Jesus slashed at the Pharisees, the very best of the Jewish community. He said, "Blessed are the meek, the hungry, the poor." In Jericho, Jesus turned His back on the leading citizens and stayed with the social outcast, a tax collector. Jesus held as valued by God those whom the world despises. Jesus showed us, that alongside the truth of God, the values of the world are inverted.

This is what Jesus was telling us as He knelt to wash the disciples' feet. He was saying, "This is obedience to God, not that you become great in the eyes of the world, but that you serve your neighbor." We sacrifice nothing when we serve others because God put us here to serve. When we reach out to our neighbor, we reach out to the highest value of human existence.

The commitment question is the one that Jesus would ask: "Will you make My will your will? Will you give me your whole being?"

The second question is this: "Will you make my style your style?"

This is the servant question. You know the setting. Jesus and His disciples came together in the Upper Room to celebrate the Passover. Though they did not know it, my hunch is that some of them must have suspected it -- that this would be their last Passover meal with Jesus. If they didn't know that, or suspect it, they knew that something ominous was in the air -- something heavy was going on in Jesus' mind and heart. And yet even amid the foreshadowing of the cross, Jesus got up from the table, and took upon Himself the role of a servant -- girded Himself with a towel, got a basin of water, and washed the disciples' feet.

Jesus explains, "You call Me Teacher and Lord - and you are right, for that is what I am. So, if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. The style is clear -- not only here, but throughout the Gospel -- the style of a servant.

Two great incidents took place in the Last Supper in Jerusalem on the night before Jesus was crucified. Jesus took bread and wine, symbols of His coming death, and handed them to His disciples. And by this act He instituted the most solemn and unique ceremony in the Christian Church, "Do this in remembrance of Me," He said.

That night Christ gave the world these two sacred acts of life -- bread and wine, Holy Communion, and the act of service the towel and basin. In the amazing act of balance and wholeness Jesus, tied together, worship and work, receiving and giving, communion and service. So, Jesus put the style of servant at the very heart of what the Christian life is all about.

The surest way to find Christ is to turn our attention from our own concerns, even our own suffering, to the concerns and sufferings of others. Martin Luther used to say: "Our neighbor is the next person we meet and for that person we are to be Christ." That is what Jesus was trying to tell us in His action there in the Upper Room, and in telling us that He had given us an example. He was showing us how we should live as servants.

So that's the second question that will help us answer the big question. "Will you make My style your style?"

The third question is "Will you make My love your love? This is not much different than the style question, but we ask it to underscore the very heart of commitment -- laying down our lives for the sake of Christ.

In the ancient Apostles Creed is the statement: "He descended into Hell." Most Protestant churches have removed this statement. The reason it was removed was that there is scant Biblical evidence for it, but I want to say to you that it is real. Jim Harnish tells the story of a chaplain in a mental hospital, working with patients to prepare a worship service. When they came to the Creed, they discussed whether or not to leave it in or take it out, and one of the patients said, "It has to be there! I must know that Christ descended into hell with me!" Christ has been there with us and knows what it means to be human. In the same fashion we need to be there for some others in the hell of their lives, loving them for Christ. Christ continually asks the question: Will you love as I love?

The final question that will help us get to the ultimate commitment question, will you make my power your power?

I heard a story recently that speaks to us here. A story about a slow-moving panel truck and a narrow winding road. A woman traveling out west got behind this slow-moving truck, and because of the nature of the road, never had a chance to pass the truck.

To make matters worse, the truck would stop, and the driver of the truck would get out of the cab carrying a broom and would proceed to beat on the side of the of this truck. After a few moments of this, he would return to the truck and drive on for a few more miles, very slowly, until he would stop and proceed to do the same thing with the broom again.

After thirty minutes of this, the woman finally got out of her car and went up to this man hitting the sides of the truck with his broom. As calmly as she could she asked him why he continued to do this every few miles. He replied, "Mam, this is a one-ton panel truck, and in the back here I've got two tons of canaries...If I can't keep half of them up in the air, I can't drive my truck."

Well, that makes the point, doesn't it? The question of power. And that's a part of the commitment question: Jesus asks us, "Will you make my power your power?"

Isn't it true that we try to separate them, and we never can. We can't be strong in our serving without receiving strength which is beyond ourselves. We can't forever be out on the street giving away what we don't have. So, Jesus would ask, "Will you make My power your power?"

So how will you answer the question: "Will you lay down your life for me?" Are you ready to make that total commitment of life to be a servant to all? Are you ready to love as Christ loved? Are you ready to make Christ the power in your Life? Are you ready to lay down your life for Christ?