



What God Really Wants of Us

Romans 12:1

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Pastors as a rule often get invitations to events, and often those invitations come with a small request – “Répondez s'il vous plaît”. This is the way to get an accurate headcount for the event. It's a great practice, and important. But I have to admit, I am horrible about RSVPs. It's way too easy for me to get a wedding invitation, look at it, put it down, and say to myself “I'll respond later.”

There are many excuses that go through my head when I get them. Like, I need to check my calendar, which I could do right then but don't. Or I think, I need to ask my wife, but that gets into questions about her relationship with the invitee and our own family time. And though I hate to say it I can find myself assessing the relationship with the invitee and/or who else might be there. But the worst is that, there seems to be a little check in my head and heart that says subliminally, “maybe a better offer will come along. Why commit now?”

Now I won't ask for a show of hands, but I'm pretty sure I am not the only reluctant RSVPer in this room. In a world where we are given more and more options, it's harder and harder for us to make commitments. Despite a need and yearning for relationship, and hundreds of connections virtually, when our options are many, it's easy to wonder if a better option might come along.

This resistance to commitment can play out in other areas as well. Some tend to “Keep their options open” in relationships or fully investing in their jobs. Some resist the invitation toward philanthropic activity, and some even fill their lives with things to do, in order to **always** have options. It seems as if we live in a society that produces choices in just about every area, which acts as a lure toward non-commitment.

And yet, we know that commitment is vital to life, and when we have committed to something or someone, we discover that our lives take on deeper meaning and purpose. When we open up and let someone in, or let ourselves open up to the other, we no longer focus on ourselves, but on those whom God has placed on our path. The rub, however, is that, the word “commitment” carries with it a lot of baggage. It can imply losing something, rather than gaining a new perspective.

In our scripture today, St Paul says, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” That's some demanding language. Presenting our bodies? Sacrificing? That can sound so threatening! Paul is talking about submitting to something. Surrendering. That's hard.

This idea of surrendering or committing to another person or entity conjures up thoughts of submission, which in turn raise questions, doubts, and even fear. And yet, this is a call to give ourselves over to God, this is what God truly desires of us.

One of the most poignant lessons learned came in a meeting with a confirmation class. We opened up the floor for the youth to ask any question. After a few easy ones, one youth asked, "How would you describe faith in one word?"

I responded with the word, "surrender." I might as well have dropped the "F-bomb." To a group of youth from affluent NOVA families, this was anathema, for it implied weakness! Of course, for those who understand surrender, they know that it takes much more strength to do so. However, commitment, surrender, submission, are resistible words and concepts, even if that's what God wants from us, and what we pray for.

Such commitment, however, is not foreign to the Bible. In the 11th chapter of Deuteronomy, we read these words, "You shall love the Lord Your God, with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength." The Shema, as it is called, was an invitation to place God first in everything, and in fact it was encouraged that they internalize it by writing on their hearts and carry it with them all the time.

Later on in the Gospels, we hear Jesus repeating it and then simplifying the faith into just 2 things – Love God and love your neighbor. The faith really is that simple...and that unnervingly hard, because to do so calls for commitment.

Last week you kicked into this series based on the phrase, "Spiritual but not religious." In thinking about the concept, it does make sense. After all, we are spiritual creatures, and the foundation of United Methodist theology is that we believe God's unconditional love is coming at us all the time, wooing us to connect. So when we hear that someone is spiritual, we get it.

We can also understand the "not religious" aspect of the phrase. Look at the hypocrisy that arises in churches, not to mention a history of disappointments and abuse by fallen humans in position of power representing God, and it's no wonder folks resist religion.

Add to that the disconnect with many to ancient liturgy, or the invitation to sit in silence, or the lack of education or information on what liturgy or prayers mean, and I can see how folks can say, "I can connect with God just as well on the lake, as I can in church." But there is more to faith, more to God, than just the spiritual connection. Faith includes the body.

On a personal level, we are bodily creatures. In fact, the body has it's own language, and if you're good at hearing what that language is, you'll be more successful in relationships than if not. In addition, our bodies are constantly changing with age, with different urges, and with different needs. The truth is, we can't run away from our bodies. And we Christians, as odd it might sound, even believe in a bodily resurrection.

We also believe that we are each members of a greater body, called the Body of Christ, the Church. That Body, when drawn together makes up the Kingdom of God, and when we commit to the Body, submit to each other and God, then God does amazing things with, to, and through us. And this call, this way of living, it DOES change the world, when the Body is joined together for the common call of love and serving others in the name of the One who gave all to save us.

St. Paul pens the letter to the Romans as a way of testifying to how he had experienced God at work in his life. He suffered trials and struggles, suffered for the sake of Christ, and the only way he was able to make it was to put all his chips on the table. He was all in, and when he did, God made way for miraculous things to happen to and through him.

So when he appeals to them to give their bodies over to God's work as a living sacrifice, he is speaking out of experience. He understood that surrender and commitment has to do less with what one gives up, and everything about what comes to us in return. That when we commit to God's ways, God makes a way for God to work and bless and share Himself, and the incredible thing is, that WE get to be a part of that!

In preparation for today, Thomas left me this definition from Webster's dictionary – "Total commitment means the alignment of one's motives, resource, priorities, and goals to fulfill a specific mission, accomplish a specific task or follow a specific person." As I thought about that definition I thought about what that looks like in our own lives. Then I thought of how pale a commitment we make, when compared to the commitment of God's Son who died, so we could be a part of God's story. What God really wants of us? Is to be all in... total commitment of heart, soul, mind, strength; actions; in work, play, behind closed doors... all the time, because then, God can do God's best work to change the world.

Anyone here heard of Dr. Alan Eustace? What about Felix Baumgartner? Both of these men have something in common. They both accomplished the same feat, both set records, and both committed to something that, once they took the step, it was all or nothing.

On October 14, 2012, over 8 million people signed into a delayed YouTube feed, showing Felix Baumgartner stepping out of a space capsule into the stratosphere and free falling 843 miles an hour, faster than the speed of sound, for 127,853 feet.ⁱ Four minutes later, following a violent spin and miraculous recovery, Baumgartner deployed a parachute, landing safely in New Mexico.

Though much less well-known, 2 years later, on October 24, 2014, Alan Eustace, a Vice-president at Google, broke that record. He traveled 135,908 feet at 822 miles an hour in a 14-minute freefall.ⁱⁱ

In order to accomplish these feats, both of these men were totally committed. In order to carry them out, they practiced and trained through hundreds of jumps. They studied physics, aerospace engineering, parachutes, then practiced time and time again, and committed themselves to the cause. Then those 2 fateful days, all that work and commitment would either

pay off or they would die for the cause, for when they released the balloons carrying them heavenward, they were all in. The result was incredible.

These were truly amazing feats, but their success was based in the work of human hands. Engineers, designers, physicists, and so many more, ran the calculations and built space suits and produced success. Imagine however, how much more success and blessing we can have when the Creator of the Universe's plans are lived out. When we commit to the One who created everything, then listen, follow, and share God's love?

As a pastor I've been blessed to walk with many through the end stages of life, and there have been a few great saints who have amazed me. I'm thinking specifically of 2 women, both of whom had cancer. Both of whom stopped treatments early because they chose quality of life over quantity. Both of whom could literally feel the tumors growing in their bodies. Both of whom lived multiple years longer than expected. And both of whom taught everyone who met them, what it meant to surrender to God's will.

No matter who we were, if we came to minister to them, they ministered to us. If we sought to console them, they consoled us and shared their joy. If I wanted to recognize Christ in this world, I'd head out for a visit, and there Christ was in women who didn't worry about their disease or pain or death, but who simply committed themselves and those whom they loved, to God's care. It was a beautiful thing, and it was a revelation to so many. They loved the Lord, and it showed. That love showed me that when we commit ourselves to Christ, He can do miraculous things, and He blesses through the committed.

As I close, maybe you wonder, what does surrender look like? How do we do that? Well it begins with the commitment of ourselves, our souls, our bodies. That sounds overwhelming, but what if we tried it for 5 weeks. That from here during this series, you commit to pray to hear God's will, to seek God's way, and ask for the desire to be what God really wants you to be? Then we live into those prayers. At the end, you can evaluate, but it starts with one step—a commitment to the One to whom we owe everything, who loves us beyond measure, and before whom we will one day stand.

Because you see, what God really wants? Is us.

Please pray with me. I'll pray a phrase then invite you to in silence, pray that prayer to yourself: *Jesus, You love me. Sometimes I don't understand how or why, but I thank you that You do. Show me how to surrender myself to Your will, then give me the courage to do give myself to You. In Your name I pray. Amen.*

ⁱ <http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/news/60at60/2015/8/2012-highest-freefall-parachute-jump-392848>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-rWtqConY8>