

LENT TWO, YEAR B, FEBRUARY 25, 2024

Clarence Jordan was just 12 years old in 1922 when he made his profession of faith during a Baptist tent revival in Sumter County, Georgia. At the evening service, Jordan took notice of a man in the church choir who was robustly singing one of his favorite hymns, "Love Lifted Me." The following night, after he became a Christian, he was awakened by an agonizing sound coming from the prison yard located near his boyhood home. A black man was being tortured in clear view of Clarence's bedroom window. As he watched that horrific scene, Clarence soon discovered that the tormentor, who was the warden of the prison, was actually the same person who had been singing "Love Lifted Me" only one night before.

This experience changed Clarence Jordan forever. He became committed to Jesus' radical message in the Sermon on the Mount and became a biblical scholar who devoted his life to translating the Greek New Testament into the vernacular of rural South Georgia. His writings are known to many as The Cotton Patch version of the Gospel which talks to us not only in modern English but about modern problems, feelings, frustrations, hopes and assurances and what it is like to work in a cotton patch or on an assembly line. In 1942, instead of using his many gifts to become pastor of a large, well-to-do church or using his Ph.D. to secure a seminary professorship, Clarence and his wife, Florence, founded an intentional, inclusive Christian community near his home in Sumter County in Georgia called Koininia.

Koininia is the Greek word for beloved community and this community clearly defined biblical principles to order their common life. Members chose to live and work and worship together and shared in common all worldly possessions. Throughout its continued 80-year history, Koininia has been a powerful witness in New Testament living that has challenged racial and economic injustice in its myriad forms. Perhaps most notably, Koininia is credited for giving birth to the international home-building organization Habitat for Humanity.

Clarence Jordan never tired of saying that "God is not so much interested in our talk as in our walk." How we live is of far greater importance than the high sounding rhetoric of our religious piety. Clarence took Jesus at his word and he spent his life trying to prove Jesus right.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus summoned the multitudes, cleared his throat, and made his message clear. "If any would come after me," Jesus said, "let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who try to save their life will lose it. But those who are willing to lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel will save it."

I'm afraid that a great number of us hear Jesus' words and we grimace. It's not what we want to hear because the prospect of bearing crosses has never been our idea of a good time. In fact, what most of us want for ourselves and for our children is not sacrifice at all, but comfort. We want to be happy. That's why when we hear all this Jesus talk about denying ourselves, letting go of control, resisting evil, turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, giving your shirt as well as your cloak and sharing one another's burdens is not all that appealing. We hear all this stuff about taking up the cross and following Jesus, and it scares us.

It's not realistic, we say. If only the world worked that way. Because everything else in our culture warns against a life of such risk and uncertainty. We are taught to avoid controversy at all costs. We're lectured from cradle to grave to pursue the life that will lead to security, which is quite often the opposite of faithfulness, sacrifice, and the antithesis of justice.

Our self-centered culture has produced self-centered religion. The most important question being asked in our churches is a question that comes right out of consumer society concerned only about self: What can Jesus do for me? We ask: how can Jesus help me be more successful. As one person has put it. We pray for parking spaces and not for peace; we pray for teams to win a game but not for racial, economic and gender equality. We're told that Jesus can make us happier, more self-satisfied, better adjusted, and more prosperous. The problem with that message about Jesus is it's distorted.

What Jesus is really telling us is not about the "payoff" to our belief but the "payout" - what it is going to cost. In fact when you study any passage of scripture, there are possibly only two main questions to ask, "What do I hear God saying to me? What will it cost me to truly believe what I hear God saying to me?"

A number of years ago the Department of Sociology at one of our Universities embarked on a nationwide survey about the basic demands of discipleship of Jesus. Respondents were asked questions pertaining to their love of their enemies, their being willing to turn the other cheek, to walk the second mile, to their being not overcome by evil but overcoming evil by good. Church leaders were astounded and chagrined to learn that the persons who most accepted these prime precepts of Jesus were the ones who were not connected with the church, and the ones who rejected them were the ones who were faithful churchgoers.

Now there is limitations to these kind of surveys, but it is challenging to us. We can listen to these passages of scripture over and over again, celebrate the events of Christ year after year, and go largely unaffected by them.

What the church needs most urgently today is people who simply need more courage. By and large, we are afraid to risk and, moreover, we are afraid of those who ask us to risk. Most of us have yet to move beyond the sweet and sentimental aspects of our faith to begin to discover the real hard stuff that Jesus asks of us, to wrestle with the realities of people's lives, to talk about the real stuff that matters to folk, even if it makes us squirm in the pew to have to hear it and squirm in the pulpit to have to say it. Too many of us are guilty of counting the cost before we consider the worth.

Perhaps today's parallel of Jesus' word might be: "For who ever would witness to their choices for my sake and the sake of others will live. For what does it gain to hide behind idols of prosperity, health, leisure and comfort and lose one's life? For whoever is ashamed of me and my words, I will be ashamed of them when I come again."

Jesus asks us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow. To deny oneself is to give up our sense of self that says our importance and value comes from the wealth we generate, the wealth we collect. This is the self which seeks to define our value against someone else. To deny oneself opens us to live the self that God created us to live. We are to be true to the person God created us to be, willingly get involved in the life around us in a way in keeping with our identity as a child of God. This may mean that we find ourselves in uncomfortable situations and that following the will of God is to

be always watching for opportunities of service, to be open to address injustices that confront us. Jesus asks us to pick up the cross that comes with being a part of the Kingdom of God that asks us not to deny our identity as a child of God.

Today in Georgia, just up the road from Koinonia Farms you can still see the pretty white frame Southern Baptist Church that is best known for "dis-fellowshipping" Clarence Jordan and his family for their commitments to racial justice and economic sharing. It's been said that when the congregation met in 1950 to consider the motion to kick Clarence and Florence Jordan out of the church, Florence attended the meeting because Clarence was out of town at a speaking engagement. In fact, she not only attended, but she sat in the front row, and when the motion was made to "dis-fellowship" the entire Jordan family because of their work to promote racial integration and equality, Florence Jordan raised her hand and seconded the motion. If the crime was loving her neighbor and working to protect their God-given human rights, she stood guilty as charged. Sometimes that's what carrying the cross looks like. Sometimes that's the type of courage that is required of us and the kind of peace that sweeps over us whenever we seek to take up the cross and follow Jesus. Amen.