



## Sermon of September 26, 1999



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### “GET A CHARGE”

Jonah 1:1-6, 15-17; 3:1-5

Matthew 21:28-32

The news media is turning its attention now to the 2000 elections, which means that for the next year we are going to be preoccupied with politics. I think if you asked someone in our society what they expect of a politician, they would say leadership. If you asked them to define that, I think they would say it means selflessness, giving oneself to the common good of the nation, standing for what is right, and not only for what is expedient, representing everyone, the common folk as well as those in power and influence who have contributed to their campaigns. And yet that kind of leadership is getting harder and harder to come by.

It reminded me that Henry Steele Commager, the great American historian, asked why it is that today we have so few great leaders when, at the beginning of this nation's history, over two hundred years ago, there were so many. We had a population in those days of just a few million

people, maybe equal to the population of San Diego County, spread along the Atlantic seaboard in little towns and villages. Yet that generation, the 18th century, produced Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, the Adams family, Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and the list goes on and on. A galaxy of leadership that we in our time, with over two hundred million people, cannot possibly match. Not with all our wealth. Not with all our technological sophistication. Not with all the higher education that is available to everybody in this country. Not with all the computers. We haven't been able to produce leaders the quality of which we saw in the 18th century. Why is that?

And Commager listed a number of reasons. But he said that the one common denominator of all the 18th century leaders was that they had a sense of obligation to posterity. He cited Benjamin Rush, the founder of American medicine, who was also a signer of the Declaration of Independence, who said after signing that document, "I was animated by a belief that I was acting for the benefit of the whole world and for future ages."

Great leaders in any age have that. They have a sense of duty. They are motivated by a moral obligation to serve the highest that we know, offer their leadership in that cause. They expect to act on behalf of others, even on the behalf of those who will come after us, future generations, to make the decisions in this age that will make it possible for those who come after to know the good life.

It is said that a people get the kind of leaders they deserve. That may be true. People who want only to have their desires satisfied, are going to elect leaders who will promise to satisfy their desires. People who want only to be concerned with life in the present, with no concern for what comes after, are going to elect leaders with no vision. People who don't want to know the truth and the obligations the truth would place upon us as a people, will elect leaders who are liars.

It is very difficult in this society, turned in upon itself, where seeking pleasure is lifted up to us daily as the highest purpose of our life. It is difficult in that culture to hear anybody talk about duties or responsibilities or obligation to posterity. It's just difficult.

Except in church, where we read these lessons. They keep popping up all the time. No matter how you tip toe around the scripture in order to avoid the hard lessons and the difficult challenges, no matter how carefully you do that, you can't succeed because they are all over the place. You keep bumping into them.

Such as the Old Testament lesson for this morning, that wonderful story of Jonah and the Whale. The impact of which we tried to escape in our time by interpreting this story simply as a miracle. It's about a man who was in the belly of a whale for three days. I have read commentaries where they actually explain how this could happen. But if you read the story you will see that the miracle is just a minor detail in the story. The story is about a man who tries to avoid his duty. He tries to run away from the responsibility that God has placed upon him.

Jonah is a prophet. He is ordered by God to go to the Assyrians to get them to repent. He hates the Assyrians, and he fears that the Assyrians have the same feelings toward him. So he doesn't want to go there. He knows the price that may be paid if he goes there. He knows

what's going to happen to him. So he tries to fool God. He goes down to the harbor and gets on a boat that is going west to Tarshish, hoping that God will think he's going east to Nineveh. He believes that if he can only travel so far, he can get away from God, and away from his conscience.

But it didn't work. That's the point of the story. It doesn't work. The storm at sea, the sailors panic, throw Jonah overboard, the fish gulps him up, and then spews him back on the dock from which he embarked, where God now confronts him, and says, "Now let's try this again. This time you go to Nineveh, as I command you. No more horsing around." It's a comic story telling us that it is not easy to escape the responsibilities that God places upon us.

That message was addressed first to Israel, based on the assumption that Israel had been blessed by God. Israel had received God's grace. Now God says to Israel, "Your responsibility is to share what I have given you with the rest of the world."

You've heard that before. "To whom much is given, much is required." That was written as a challenge to a nation that had turned in upon itself, was concerned only with its own life, nothing else. They ignored the warning in Deuteronomy, "Take heed lest you say, 'My hand and the strength of my arm have gotten me this wealth.'"

A nation that assumes that its greatness is measured by the accumulation of possessions, and the amassment of arms to protect those possessions, and that says, we have done this by our own arm, we have done this by our own power, therefore this belongs to us for us to enjoy, is set for a fall. If you take the Bible seriously.

If you take the Bible seriously, then you will take the story of Jonah seriously. It says that we as a nation, like Israel, have a responsibility beyond our borders. In this day and age I think we would all agree, it is primarily a humanitarian responsibility, particularly to those nations in this world that dwell in poverty, while we lounge in luxury.

I read the other day that there are twelve million children who die every year in this world. Eight million of them die from causes related to poverty, such as malnutrition, inaccessibility to medicine, the immunizations that we take for granted in this society.

I tell you, we who have been given so much have a responsibility toward those who have so little. Particularly because their poverty and our luxury, in an increasing sense, are interdependent. The resources of their land, and their cheap labor, make it possible for us to be comfortable.

If you take the Bible seriously, that means that we should go to them. We shouldn't run away from that, the way Jonah did. We should face it, our responsibility, and share the wealth, share the good news, share what God has done for us, both in word and in deed.

Which is what we do in this church through our missions, both budgeted missions and special missions. And, with our service. There are hundreds of people in this church who are involved in direct service, particularly with the poor in this community. We support missionaries who go to places like Nineveh, to share the Gospel.

This is the Sunday that we launch a festival emphasizing the missions we support through special offerings. We support through your gifts a benevolence apportionment that goes to support the missions of the United Methodist Church around the world, to the tune of \$355,000 a year. But in addition to that we add another \$50,000 in special offerings. A \$15,000 special offering for three missionaries is what we are going to be asking for next Sunday. We are launching that campaign this week.

If you don't know about this, if you don't know what is happening in the world in missions, if you don't know what contemporary missionaries are doing in this world, if you still have outdated, antiquated ideas about missionaries, then I invite you to come tonight. In fact I urge you to come tonight to hear Dr. Stevens speak. We have three missionaries that we support around the world: one in Malaysia, one in Congo, and one in Moscow. Three exciting missions that are going on in critical places in the world, and we have a chance to be a part of that.

I have another text for this morning. You heard it read as the New Testament lesson, the Parable of the Two Sons. A man went to his son, and said, "Go to the field and work." He said, "No." But afterwards he repented and went. He went to his second son, and asked him, "Go to the field and work." The son said, "I will go." But he didn't go. Jesus asked the question, "Which one did the will of the Father?"

This parable comes in a scene where Jesus is confronted by the chief priests and the scribes in the Temple, challenging him to declare where he gets authority to do what he does. He won't answer them directly, but instead tells them the Parable of the Two Sons.

He is clearly implicating the Temple bureaucracy as the second son, who says "yes." But when it comes to working in the field, when it comes to doing something in the world, he doesn't do it. They keep religion as a personal matter. They are the people who say, religion is a personal matter. It is just between me and God. It is a private affair. It is something that shouldn't go beyond the walls of the Temple.

Just as clearly he had himself in mind as the first son, who refuses to do what the religious establishment thinks he must do if he is going to be a religious man, especially if he is going to claim to be Messiah. He refuses to do it. Yet when God calls him to make a sacrifice, to do something in the world, he does it.

This insight is made even more poignant in the knowledge that this scene is set in Jerusalem, just a few days before his crucifixion. On the night before his crucifixion he will pray in the garden, "Let this cup pass from me." Which means, "I don't want to do this." He is clearly the first son, the reluctant son, and he is honest about it. "Let this cup pass." Which is like saying, "I don't want to do this, but I will do it because it is my duty to respond to the will of God." *I*

We have an example in our Lord himself, who was condemned for not being sufficiently religious, but who says "yes" to the call of sacrificing his life for others.

Let me point out another insight about this parable. Jesus was also condemned for associating with sinners and publicans, the irreligious, the people who were outside of the religious establishment of that day. He says in a number of places, including this passage, "The tax

collectors and the harlots will go into the kingdom before you.”

Why would he say such a thing? There is only one reason why he would say it. Because those are the people that he saw responding to the call of God to serve their neighbors, who said “yes” when they were asked to do something for somebody else, who said “yes” when they were asked to help the poor, who said “yes” when they were asked to give of service, who said “yes” when they were asked to give of their resources to help somebody with less. It was Jesus’ teaching throughout. “Not those who say, ‘Lord, Lord,’ but those who do the will of my heavenly Father will go into the kingdom.” Which makes them like the first son. Those who said, “no,” but who went anyway.

I would hate to think that the Church, that this church especially, did less than its critics in serving the world. I would hate to think that those of us in church who mouth the words of religion, do not practice it when we leave. I would hate to think that those who scorn the Church, but who give themselves to their community, and who give their resources to make the world a better place, and we don’t. I would hate to think that we as a church are like the second son, singing pious hymns, but doing nothing.

Do you ever pay attention to the words of the hymns we sing? Words like,

“Are ye able,” said the Master,  
 “To be crucified with me?”  
 “Yea,” the sturdy dreamers answered,  
 “To the death we follow thee.”

The second son said “yes,” but he did nothing.

Or hymns like,

Take my life, and let it be  
 Consecrated, Lord, to thee.  
 Take my silver and my gold;  
 Not a mite would I withhold.

Onward, Christian soldiers,  
 Marching as to war.

I’ve discovered that marching is not what we had in mind when we joined the Church. Sitting is what we had in mind when we joined the Church. In fact we think that is what defines a religious person. How do you know a religious person in our society? They go to church for an hour a week, and they sit.

“A man had two sons. One son was uncomfortable with piety, but he felt a responsibility that he couldn’t get away from. He felt an obligation to do what he could to make this world a better place. The other son liked to sing, go to church, but said no when he was asked to make a

sacrifice. Which one did the will of the Father?"

Talking about hymns, John Wesley's brother, Charles Wesley, was a hymn writer. He wrote the hymn that we will use to close the service today, "A Charge to Keep I Have." It is said that the Methodists would sing their theology. Other churches had creeds, and they would recite their theology to define who they were and what they believed, but the Methodists put beliefs in hymns and sang them. Charles Wesley did that. So I want you to notice the second verse of the hymn with which we will sing to close the service. It goes like this.

To serve the present age,  
my calling to fulfill;  
O may it all my powers engage  
To do my Master's will!

That's what we believe. And if we are going to sing it, then we better believe it. And if believe it, then we better do it. That's why we are here.

There was a television show some time ago based on an actual incident of a young man who was kidnapped in San Francisco, held for ransom. He came from a wealthy family, and the hoodlums held him for a sizable ransom.

The suspense in the play was created by the part the newspapers played. The district attorney asked the newspapers not to report anything of this lest the life of the kidnapped person be endangered. So the tension in the story was between the drive the newspapers have to get the news out, to beat the competition, and a sense of duty to do something greater than their own self-interest.

When it was over and the hostage was released, and he was all right, the camera zoomed in on the face of a hardened city editor, who said, "For twenty-five years I have been writing about life. This is the first time that I have had a part in making the story come out right."

What a wonderful way to talk about what you and I should be doing, what the Church should be doing. We are not called to sit and observe life. We are called to get up and to do something, to give something, so that we can say that we had a part in making the story come out right.

*I am indebted to Susan Pendleton Jones for this interpretation of the Two Sons.*

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,  
that we might be servants of others,  
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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