

## Faithfulness is its own reward

Jeremiah 15:10-21

August 28, 2005

What is my duty?

Is it my duty to serve you faithfully as pastor of First Congregational United Church of Christ? No. That may be my job and my pleasure, but it is not my duty.

Is it my duty to be a loyal minister of the United Church of Christ, faithfully keeping covenant with the diverse group of people and churches that make up this denomination? No. That may be my responsibility and my calling, but it is not my duty.

Is it my duty to do whatever I can to provide for my family, to ensure their safety and well-being? No. That may be one of my most solemn and lasting commitments, but it is not my duty.

Is it my duty to do whatever I can to serve this country, to ensure the safety and well-being of my fellow citizens? No. That may be my privilege as the citizen of a nation founded on the principles of liberty and justice for all, but it is not my duty.

I have only one duty. You have only one duty. And that duty is to follow Jesus. Our one duty is to be faithful in following Jesus.

You must be clear about this! You must be clear about this because a fierce battle is being fought for your heart and mind. It is not a political battle. Your vote and your political persuasions do matter, but on the cosmic scale of things, whether you are red or blue is not that big of a deal. It is not a cultural battle. The saddest part of the so-called culture wars is that both sides are defending noble values. So why must we resort to tearing each other down instead of looking for creative ways to preserve the best of our humanity -- liberty and mutual accountability, freedom and responsibility, integrity and tolerance, justice and love?

No, the fierce battle being fought for your heart and mind is a spiritual battle. At issue is your spiritual allegiance. Will you follow Jesus' way or will you follow the way of the prince of this world? Will you listen to Jesus and obey? Or will you be swayed by other voices, other loyalties?

You must be clear about this! And you must be careful, because things are not always what they seem to be.

A case in point ... Mr. Pat Robertson is an ordained minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ; founder of CBN, the Christian Broadcasting Network; host of the *700 Club* television program; a sometime presidential candidate; and one of the leading lights of the religious and cultural right. Did you hear what he said on his television program this week? Did you hear it? Pat Robertson explicitly advocated the assassination of Hugo Chavez, the duly elected president of Venezuela!

It was a stupid, unconscionable thing to say! But that's not the worst of it. For whom does Pat Robertson claim to speak? Whom does he claim to represent? Christians? Jesus? What do you think? Does he speak for Jesus?

You're right! Pat Robertson's proclamations have nothing to do with the way of Jesus. Listen to Jesus!

*You have heard that it was said, "Love your friends, hate your enemies." But now I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may become the children of your Father in heaven ...*

*Happy are those who work for peace; God will call them his children!*

*Forget yourself; take up your cross every day ...*

*Love your neighbor ...*

And just so there is no confusion about who your neighbor may be, Jesus tells a story that points to the least likely candidate!

If we do our duty and follow Jesus, this is what it will look like. We will forgive those who have wronged us, we will pray for the well-being of those who oppose us, we will work tirelessly for peace. We will welcome outcasts, we will set aside our own needs and desires, we will take risks and make sacrifices, we will give ourselves away. In other words, we will be going directly against the cultural mainstream, and lots of folks will be very unhappy with us. People who do their duty are not very popular!

Jeremiah knew it. Jeremiah was God's chosen prophet, charged with bringing a most unpleasant message to the people of Judah.

*The Lord is angry with you! Your enemies will rise against you and you will not be able to withstand them, because the Lord is against you!*

It was a unwelcome message, but it had to be said, because the people of Judah had turned their backs to God and hardened their hearts against their neighbors.

It had to be said and Jeremiah said it. He did his duty, and he paid the price. He bore the insults and hatred of his own people. They rejected him and plotted against him. And Jeremiah complained to God. It was the cry of Job: *Why? Why God?*

*Why do I suffer for doing the right thing? Why you are so patient with those who oppose you? Look at me! Remember me! Don't let me down!*

And this is God's answer to Jeremiah.

*Return to me. Proclaim my message . Do your job.*

It's like the old joke: *What reward do you get when you do your work well? ... More work!*

That's the way it is with a duty. You do it ... just because. Not for reward, not for praise, not for gain, but just because it is your duty. Faithfulness needs no other reward, because faithfulness is its own reward!

What is the reward for following Jesus? Following Jesus! We follow Jesus not because it will make us popular. It won't. Not because it will make us successful. Who knows? Not because God will bless us if we do. Blessing always comes by grace; it is

never earned. We follow Jesus because that is where we want to be ... with Jesus!

There is a deep secret here. It may seem so obvious, but there are not many who know this secret. The reason for doing the right thing is because it is the right thing. You do your duty because it is your duty. You love God because you love God!

And you find joy ... when you choose it. Joy doesn't happen to us, fluctuating with the ups and downs of our experience. We choose joy. We choose joy by following Jesus, because following Jesus is joy. Faithfulness is its own reward.