

"ON PRETENDING TO BE OF HELP . . ."

**Text: "Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts his hand to the plow
and keeps looking back is fit for the Kingdom of God.'**

Luke 9:62

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Charlotte, North Carolina
September 14, 2008**

It took place years ago on a freezing, blustery, perfectly awful late January afternoon in Western Pennsylvania, up on the back side of Mt. Washington: not on better known front side with its photogenic view of the Three Rivers the promenade along Grandview Avenue. Two hundred fifty one years ago a then young George Washington gazed down at the confluence of the Allegheny and the Monongahela Rivers which meet at the Point to form the Ohio. Bob and I were over on the steep and narrow bumpy, cobble stoned, back side of the hill, on Southern Avenue, which then as now, was not what you call the "high-rent district." Not that it wasn't nice; it was and is. You don't have to have a fortune to live a fine and comfortable neighborhood.

Anyway, over there is where Louie Tambellini's Seafood Restaurant used to be. What a place: everybody who was anybody came up there, and all the rest of us, no matter how difficult it was to get there. How one restaurant can continually offer the finest and the best is a mystery -- not often found. I said Tambellini's "used to be" up there. One day, Louie got smart and moved his famous eating establishment down to the bottom of the hill, on the other side of the Mount, right on Route 51 South, where it sits on level ground with a level parking lot (That's important to this story). It has Italian style fine plush furnishings, a great huge bar in a room all to itself, and of course - progress always costs a little more. I still drop in there from time to time when I go back home. The new place is nice . . . but I still cast a nostalgic glance back up to the south side of The Mount. I don't like change anymore than any of the rest of you do.

Funny, but as I recall it, I often ended up at Tambellini's in the wintertime, which was not too smart, but which is part and parcel of the story I am about to tell you. That day I met my dear friend Bob Holland for lunch - Dr. Robert Cleveland Holland, to be exact. Some of you have no doubt heard of him. Thirty years ago he was one of the best known preachers

in the nation, and rightfully so. We often had lunch together and shared some stories about how the parishioners did not understand us, and tried to mold us into the pastors who used to be. That day we ate and talked, enjoyed our lunch, paid our bill and left. I said goodbye: "See you soon, Bob"; and, being parked on the high side of the not-so-level parking lot across the street, I drove gingerly off to do the preacherly chores which beckoned me that afternoon.

Robert, on the other hand, had parked down on the low side of the sloping lot, back bumper fast against the wall; and, he later found, with the thickest three inches of the most slippery ice you ever saw exactly underneath the wheels of his big and handsome brown Mercedes. And horrors, there were two other cars in front of him. (Do you get the picture?) I felt a little guilty leaving, but not so guilty as to turn around and help solve his problem.

Later that day Bob telephoned and said, "Richard, the minute you left, I knew I was in trouble." (I said the same thing in reverse a few months later when Robert left on a far, far longer journey. He died suddenly eight months after that cold afternoon.)

Well, anyway, there were several cars and erstwhile diners sharing his predicament in the lot: stuck fast against the not-so-neighborly wall. But, (there is an organizer in every crowd) one chap up and suggested that if they all helped each other, they would all get out . . . sounds sensible enough and sorta' almost Christian. So, Bob said, they all began to push and shove each other's cars and sure enough, one by one, they were extricated from the mess, Bob's Mercedes being one of the last. (Cast your bread upon the frozen waters and you will find it after many cars.) Heave-ho, heave-ho, away we go! Fortunately, most of the winter drivers that afternoon were young and strong.

The problem was that Dr. Holland was not that young and he had already had a heart

attack. His expert cardiologist, Dr. Robert Kleinschmidt, had ordered him to eat no fat, a little lean, no salt, no cheese fondue, no chocolate sundaes, no brownies, no brandy, no nothing-at-all-which-tasted-good; and no strenuous work. And especially, the Doctor might have added, apropos of the joint activity in the parking lot, "No pushing cars on a zero day on the ice across the street from Tambellini's!"

So, there you have a "moral" problem, if you have ever heard one: What do you do when you are not allowed to help the others who are expecting you to help, in return for helping them? (They don't cover that in Christian Ethics at the Seminary!) With the suspense building at the other end of the line, as he roared with laughter and relief through the telephone, I asked, "Well, Bob, what on earth did you do? You didn't help them push, did you?"

He, not one to be caught for long on the horns of a moral dilemma, and as any good minister, seldom short for words . . . "Well no," he chuckled! "What do you think? I leaned against the cars with the other fellows . . . grunting dutifully on key . . . and . . . and . . . I pretended to be pushing. I pretended to be helping, when I was only leaning on the car." By then, I was roaring with laughter, too. He, a fine and marvelous preacher, was pretending to be helpful: it looked like he was in the company of arduous workers. But, looks can be deceiving. I felt a sermon coming on. In fact he felt one too. He made me promise not to use it in a sermon before he got his chance first. I don't think he ever got to it. So by now I am free to share the story with you.

"I pretended to be helping." (Are you listening?) I know a lot of good Christian folk who could sing that song on key. They were baptized at a certain time and place; they still belong; they even come to Church when it is convenient. But they live out in the suburbs of faith: in enough to be respectable, but not far in enough to share the responsibilities.

Pretending to be helpful, hand on the plow and all that, but they look back at who is watching and what it all might cost, reluctant to get involved or to give with gusto or with grace.

The sermon I promised you is a story from St. Luke, with a variant rendering in Matthew 8. Luke 9 tells some of the detail of the final weeks on earth of Jesus Christ our Lord. In his own words, he told his disciples that he was "heading for Jerusalem," and the cross. "Jesus set His face" that way, and he took His body, too, to see what God might have in store, as if He did not know.

Heading towards Jerusalem: In Luke it says that as they were going along the road a certain man came to Jesus and said, "I will follow you wherever you go." Matthew says the man was a "Scribe", i.e., one of those who professionally were entrusted with copying the scriptures from one scroll to another, they were the Librarians of the ancient world, preserving the materials people needed to carry on the faith. While the Scribes are often seen as opponents to our Lord, this one had apparently been converted, or at least he was caught up in the enthusiasm of his new belief.

Somehow, Jesus figured him out in a hurry for he said to him: "Foxes have holes; birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." In other words, "To make good on that promise will be costly. Count the cost. Be careful what you promise, for I intend that you should keep it. Following me will not be easy." The ancient scribes studied studiously, but they went home each day at five, except on Fridays, when they took their family to the synagogue. They had well paying indoors office jobs.

I don't want to be unfair. Perhaps the scribe wanted to join the "The School of Jesus," to sit at His feet and adore Him. But Jesus never invited anyone to sit at his feet. We are invited to hurry forward and catch up. The Lord is always on the move. The scribe betrayed himself by his bravado. "Think it over, my friend. I am not about to overcome another theoretical postulation and to try to fathom the unfathomable imponderables of the universe, I am about to overcome the world. And that will take your full devotion. It will mean you will have to sacrifice some other things.

Parenthetically, let me ask you listening: Have you ever sacrificed anything for Christ? Have you ever gone out of a limb for Jesus? Have you ever taken a risk to prove your Christian faith? Are you prepared to sacrifice anything for Him now? "Foxes have holes; the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." "I will follow you wherever you go," the man said, "so long as it's nice and comfortable. Otherwise . . . I'm out of here."

We tread in deeper water with the second man. Jesus said to him: "Follow me." The man said, "Sure, Lord, but first I have to bury my father." Jesus' answer is abrupt and sounds awful: "Forget about your dad, follow me now." In fact it is so antithetical to what he normally said that a ton of serious scholars through the years have speculated that there must be some problem with the translation and that Jesus surely did not say that as it reads in English.

What he actually said was, "Let the dead bury the dead!" I say "deeper water," because for Jesus to tell a man he could not take the time to attend his father's funeral, especially when under Jewish law a man was compelled to provide a proper burial for his parents, sounds so harsh and incongruous.

There has to be more to the story. Knowing what we know about the ancient Palestinian way, we can piece a few tentative thoughts together. The ultimatum that Christ be first in our lives, more than wife or husband or children or parents or brothers or sisters or job or anything is first and final.

But we must not "over-interpret" the saying. The tense and phrasing of the sentence allow us to conclude that the man was not speaking of the literal present funeral of his dad. It seems he could have been saying that his father was growing older, and when the day came that he was gone, i.e., after he had finished those familial obligations, one of which was to be present on the day his father would pass away, and he could settle the estate: then he would come and follow Jesus.

The third man in Luke's story said (There is no third one in Matthew.): "I will follow you, Lord, but first I have to go home and say farewell to those at my house." That sounds tame enough, too: Lord, I am willing to follow you, but just let me go and say good-bye to the folks. We can guess, from the context of the situation that Jesus knew this was a man who was good at procrastinating and making excuses. This particular delay is an innocent enough excuse, but once accustomed to thinking up good excuses, others flow off the tongue quite easily.

By the way: there is an interesting story in I Kings where the Prophet Elijah, shortly after he had bested the 40 prophets of Baal at the altar on Mt. Carmel, as he went along, he saw Elisha, the son of Shaphat, plowing his father's field with 12 yoke of Oxen. Elijah, the senior one, as he passed by, cast his mantle, his cape, over the shoulders of Elisha - which was a sign that he had chosen him to follow him and become his successor. (Some say Jesus

had this story from I Kings in mind when he cited this answer in Luke 9.) Anyway, Elisha was elated and ran after Elijah, but he stopped suddenly and said: "Yes, I will follow you. But first let me go back and kiss my father and mother goodbye." Elijah said, "Go ahead; I will wait for you to come back." But just to make sure, the Scripture says, Elijah sacrificed Elisha's 12 yoke of Oxen and gave what was left away to the neighbors, just in case Elisha changed his mind. He didn't; and he eventually took over Elijah's school of prophecy. (I Kings 19:19-21)

The idiomatic expression, "to say farewell to home," actually was a shorthand-slang Greek expression for, "I have to put my house in order." I have to get everybody all set, all my obligations met, bills all paid, the roof repaired, the paper canceled, the mail redirected, the dogs off to the kennel. In other words again, the third man was saying: "I'd love to follow you, Lord, but I can't manage it just now! Or, in modern parlance, "I'd love to enroll in a Bible class, raise my pledge, help at the church, or the singles, or the women's groups, or the benevolence program, or the stewardship program . . . but first I have to take care of my other things."

The same young couple who says, "We cannot give generously to the Church this year because we have young children and we are saving to buy a house," is the same middle-aged couple who say, "We cannot give more because the expenses of college and our summer home and boat are costly;" is the same couple who later says, "We're sorry we cannot manage to increase our gift this year because. . . you know . . . we are retired now, and you never know what could happen next. We have to save against a rainy day.

The eighteen-year-old who needs his rest on Sunday morning is the same thirty eight-year-old who plays golf or fishes on the day of rest, is the same fifty-eight-year-old who is too tired to get up for church after his Saturday night outing at the club is the same 74 year old who...

you fill in the blank.

Jesus continued saying to the third man: "No one, having put his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God." That was the third man's problem. He wanted to join but he didn't want to pay his dues. He said he loved his church, but he meant he wanted to bask in reflected glory, to listen to great music, to hear a good sermon, and turn up at the festive times and join the outdoor picnics in the spring and fall. You can meet nice people in the church. You can hear re-assuring words about how God loves you and how Jesus Christ guarantees your salvation. How grand, that's great! That's all.

No, that is not at all; it isn't even it, at all. This is the Kingdom, after all: Onward Christian soldiers, marching off to war" – We used to sing that hymn until some revisionists took it out of the hymnbook. But, by golly, it is a battle out there, and no one is sure who will win! God needs every one of us to help win the victory.

Last Thursday, on September the Eleventh, the seventh anniversary of the horrendous attack on the World Trade Buildings and the Pentagon, we gathered for worship in the Parlor as part of the Thursday Noon faith group. (By the way lunch and worship are open to any and all of you every Thursday.) When you lose someone you love, seven years is just like a watch in the night. The hurt and the loneliness and the emptiness continue unabated. We pray that nothing like it will ever happen again. To make sure that prayer comes true, we each and all have to keep watch: vigilance is still the price we pay for freedom. God bless America.

The same is true with the Church of Jesus Christ. It takes all of together to share the Good News, and spread the Love of God to all who need to have it. We are called by Christ to follow the One who died upon a cross, so that the world and everyone who believes in him

might live in peace and share in life eternal. The Christian faith should not be a sometime thing. “If you are not for me, then you are against me.” Jesus said bluntly. If you are “looking back” to all that was and all that might have been, then you have misplaced your view and Christ can never use you to go forward.

It’s a battle out there. And sometimes I am not sure who is winning. All the problems with drugs and crime and corruption, people playing games, pretending to be decent, yet their ridiculous eccentricities come popping up in the newspapers or public trials. Sure, God could choose to win the battle on his own, but He desires to have more Christian soldiers digging in to take on the evil of the world. Otherwise it is all a farce. So I ask you: what are you doing in the Army of the Lord? Have you ever sacrificed anything for Christ?

You people at Sharon Church do a lot. I am proud to be here with you. The Church buildings have stood on this marvelous location since 1831, 177 years of declaring God's love and power and peace. But its best times were never the ones when the sailing was easy. The best were the ones when its members were called upon to make a difference in the world, to adjust to the times, not to dig in and fight against the future.

A church needs a purpose. It has to stand up for something, or it will fall for whatever happens by in the present generation. And that purpose goes far beyond our gathering together on Sunday morning. The Church is not a gift to enjoy; it is a place to revive your soul and to equip us with the whole armor of God. It should be like a spiritual armory, an arsenal, a training ground. It is not just to receive the Good News, but to teach us to live it and share it.

"Pretending" is a powerful word. I know a lot of people who pretend. I knew a man once who pretended to be my friend. But I later found out he was talking nonsense about me and

our Church behind my back. I know a man who pretends to be a good father and husband. He is on the Board of a couple of agencies that work with families and children. Take a quick look and you will say "What a great family man. He loves his wife and children more than anything." But turn around twice and take a second look, or better, talk to his wife. She will tell you . . . well, maybe she won't tell you, but she could if she wanted to. He's pretending, playing a game. In his private life he places himself and his pleasures first.

And, I know bosses all around the country who could tell you about workers who pretend to do their part. They turn up for work, especially on payday. But they go through the motions, do just enough to be acceptable. They listen, but they insist on doing it their own way. They talk a good game, but they are not committed or devoted to the team. They pretend to care, but it is just a job.

To say nothing of Washington politicians. It is an enigma how some of those who are elected to defend the Constitution and the nation, end up feathering their own nests. It is not true with all politicians. Of course not; nor it is true only with politicians. But maybe the political process encourages people who set out to work for the good of the nation, or the good of their state or district, and it turns out they end up pretending. You read about a new fallen leader almost every day.

We could go on. Don't worry. I would not be so unkind as to come too close to you in the pews this morning. I don't want to make you fidget. I will point no fingers. But you know I know it, because you know it too. I'll whisper it so as not to wake those who have fallen asleep: there are a large number of people, here and there and all across the nation, who claim the glories of church membership and who even brag about it. They like the gatherings, so long as it is convenient. They like the things they like. But they never grow in their knowledge of the Bible or improve their theological perspective. When it comes to

giving of their time, talent and treasure, they are pretending to be helpful but are actually just leaning on the car.

I apologize to those of you who shame the rest of us with your devotion. Some of you within the sound of my voice are doing your part and more. I am not speaking to or about you. And, I apologize to those listening who do not have the mobility or the energy any longer to rush about for the Kingdom, I know. Some of you served wonderfully for a long time. God bless you. Don't feel left out. But now that life is quieting down, your presence is still required. You can still root for the home team. You can pray for God's blessings to rest on Sharon Church. You can pass word along. You can be positive about the Church and its future. And, as we come closer to Stewardship and Pledging season for next year, you can give with all your might.

Earlier in the long ninth Chapter of Luke, Jesus said "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, will save it. For what does profit a man, or woman, if they gain the whole world and loses themselves." (Luke 9: 23-25) That's heavy, I know.

Well, it's time to go, past time, some of you are thinking. Louie Tambellini's Restaurant is not up there on Mt. Washington anymore. And my friend Bob is not here any longer either. He went away to be forever with the Lord. The other ones involved, the ones who helped to push his car, who never knew he was pretending to be helping, they too could be gone, I guess, at least I do not know where they are.

But you and I are here. We, who need to learn to lean upon and help each other. We need to love each other; but more we need to equip ourselves to reach out to help the others in the world. Do Christ the favor, will you? Don't pretend to be his friend. Don't pretend to be someone you are not. Better to be an open enemy than one who pretends to be a friend. And the Book of Revelation adds: "I know your works; you are neither hot nor cold...so because you are luke-warm, I will spew you out of my mouth!" (Rev. 3:15-16) "Did Christ really say that?" "Yes, he did." "That's not nice." "I know..."

Set your face to the wind. Get behind the good Christian men and women of the world, who work for peace and freedom, who pray for faith and justice, who live for love. Join the Army of Christ. Get in the game. But be honest . . . please do not insult the Savior by pretending to be helping . . . when you are really only leaning on the car.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German theologian, who was executed by the Nazi Gestapo on April 9, 1945, wrote a book in 1937 entitled The Cost of Discipleship. It's a great book, still the classic study of what it means to be a courageous Christian in an alien world. Grounded in the Sermon on the Mount, it covers some of the issues I have shared with you today.

The problem with the Christian faith, he wrote, is that it tries to deal in "cheap grace" – the attempt to take an easy ride. When it should be costly, as was the life and death of Jesus. The cost of discipleship, according to Professor Bonhoeffer, is nothing less than the complete devotion of your life, your whole life time long, in response to the love Christ has given you.

I don't know if you want to take it at that price, but that's the price it is. For now and forever more. Amen

