

Finishing the Work

Luke 13:31-35

Pressure! Where do you feel the pressure in your life? (after some congregational sharing, allow a time of silence to acknowledge what has been shared) I have a deep belief that we gather as church each week, at least in part, in hope that the fears, concerns, worries, and grief that drive many of our feelings are not the final word in our lives. We come together even with a faint hope that the guilt that surely lives somewhere within each of us and the rage that sometimes consumes many of us are transient feelings, not permanent and not ultimately real for us. They are not the reality underlying life. We gather and proclaim that what we fear most is not the most powerful force in the universe.

Life is filled with pressure. There is the pressure of finances and the pressure of relationships. There is pressure due to expectations at work and at home. There is pressure in being a parent, in being a child, in being a teenager or a young adult. There is pressure from expectations at school. The expectations we have for ourselves can bring about some sleepless nights. At worst, they can lead us to despair.

Pressure is real and it is largely self-inflicted. Feelings of guilt or shame are somehow our ways of coping with real or perceived dangers. Pressure can lead to self-doubt. It can affect our performance in many ways. Pressure has an effect on how we cope with life: distracting us, absorbing our energy, destroying our concentration. Why does a great shooter miss two free throws at the end of game when the team needs them to win? Pressure! In the Winter Olympics, why does the alpine skier miss a gate in the slalom or the speed skater slip? Why does the figure skater fall? Pressure! Former Georgetown University basketball coach John Thompson, Jr. used to say: "Playing in the tournament? That's not pressure. A guy without a job, who has a family to feed, that's pressure!"

We cannot really know Jesus from reading the New Testament. It offers a vision of him through the eyes of the early church. They saw him as the Messiah. The stories of his work were not intended to show us Jesus as a person, but rather to persuade people that he was the Son of God. Nevertheless, we can learn a lot about dealing with pressure by seeing Jesus' interactions and behavior in his life as described by the Gospel writers. We can watch him in action and learn. The interchanges between Jesus and the Pharisees were filled with the same dynamic and often confusion that many of ours are today.

In today's Gospel lesson, Pharisees seemed to care about Jesus' well-being. They were warning him about Herod's deadly intentions in a cauldron of confusing relationships. But Jesus seemed to know better. He had a clear sense of who he was and what he was doing.

It had been a long day for Jesus—a day filled with challenging teachings, and controversial healing. The Pharisees continued to criticize him for healing people on the Sabbath in violation of their interpretation of the Law. An underlying fear of reprisal from the authorities, Herod or the Romans, was present. Herod clearly was trying to kill him, which was the usual approach to

silence troublemakers in a culture that tended not to value the lives of the poor or of prophets especially when they hit close to home. The Pharisees were harassing him.

Jesus could see that his days were numbered—the number was three—but he chose to use those numbers as a source of strength and power. “On the third day I finish my work.” (Luke 13: 32) What did that mean to those early Christians who first told this story? It was clearly a reference to his death and resurrection. Jesus seemed to know his destiny. He knew that almost certain death awaited him in Jerusalem just like many other prophets--his death in Jerusalem that would complete his life’s work.

Nothing would turn him aside from that destiny. It was his choice. The power lay completely within him to walk that path, not wishing to die, but unwilling not to finish his work with the same integrity with which he lived his life.

Finishing the work for Jesus was not to focus on his death. It was to focus on his life, how he lived, and what his life stood for. To the early Christians, who gave us the story of Jesus, his death was not the end of his story. Even the resurrection was not the end of his story. Finishing the work meant being faithful no matter what. It was the threshold to new life for him and for us also. The ability to finish our work is not only a perspective from the end of life, but a continuing process of new life unfolding. One writer expressed it well:

Jesus “took away the sin of the world” by exposing [that sin] as different than we imagined, letting us know that our pattern of ignorant killing, attacking and blaming others, is in fact history’s primary illusion and its primary lie. Through Jesus, we all have to face the embarrassing truth that we ourselves are our primary problem. Our greatest temptations is to try to change other people instead of ourselves. Jesus allowed himself to be transformed and thus transformed others. That is the meaning of the necessary death of Jesus.

(adapted from *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality*, 195)

What does it mean for us to “finish our work” as the church? Think of the image of the closer in baseball, or *The Closer* television series, or of players in basketball who finish well around the basket, who always seem to make the key shots. These are people who come through under pressure to achieve the goal.

What is your goal for this church? What is your goal for how faithful this body will be to that vision of church we received from Jesus? How faithful will we live in the oneness of Shalom in this faith community. How faithfully will we promote peace and justice in Kansas City? How well will we promote interfaith community here, interracial community here, social and economic community here? How will we make a difference in the world in terms of loving God with all our being—our heart, soul, mind, and strength? How faithful will we be in loving neighbor as ourselves?

And how faithful will we be when the pressure is on—when the pressures of money, time, fear, and fatigue set in? How well will this community hold open space for each of us, for everyone who comes here, to grow, to discover ourselves, and to live our journey? So how are we doing so far? How will we finish the work?

What is your dream for your own life? What is your goal? What does it mean to live on your journey with integrity? (pause for people to consider these questions) Do you have a sense of how you want to invest your life whether you're young or not so young? How you answer these questions will be crucial to how well this congregation will do in being church? As we seek to finish our work together, we must each be finishing our own work, as author Elizabeth O'Connor has written:

Each person, no matter how old (or young), has an important work to do.... This good work not only accomplishes something needed in the world, but completes something in us. When it is finished a new work emerges that will help us to make green a desert place, as well as to scale another mountain in ourselves. The work we do in the world, when it is true vocation, always corresponds in some mysterious way to the work that goes on within us. (Elizabeth O'Connor, *Cry Pain, Cry Hope*)

There is pressure. There will also be pressure. The choice is ours whether that pressure will distract us or focus us on our work, on the new thresholds that wait for us to cross. Let us cross them with courage in the sure hope that God loves us without condition and without limit. We can do this, in Jesus' name.

Luke 13:31-35

³¹At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." ³²He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. ³³Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.'

³⁴Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! ³⁵See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"