

“A PRINCIPLED PEOPLE”

Jeremiah 35:1-10

Sunday, July 31, 2016

Let me ask you: which promise is likely to be kept: the promise spoken by a politician to a crowd of ten thousand, or the promise exchanged between two friends?

In his book ‘Run With the Horses: the Quest for Life at its Best,’ Eugene Petersen writes: “it is puzzling that the appeal to numbers continues to carry so much weight with us....the engagement of a majority of people in a certain moral behaviour is set forth as evidence of its legitimacy....not only the truth that is spoken but the truth that is lived is reduced and distorted by the crowd.... Sometimes crowds lie. The more people, the less truth. The crowd makes consumers of us, inertly taking in whatever is pushed at us.”

I’m sure we’ve all heard it said: “Just because everybody else is doing it, doesn’t make it right!” Integrity is not always strengthened by multiplication.

So, let me ask you: Is your life ‘crowd conditioned’ or ‘God conditioned’? What about the principles and the values that shape your life - do you find your life influenced by the ways of the majority, or by the ways of the minority? Whose voice do we really allow to shape our behaviour?

In his book, ‘Run With The Horses,’ Peterson asks: “How can we be moved to live life at its best, instead of living life on the fringes.”

Jeremiah had dealt with crowds most of his life, but he was not crowd conditioned. Jeremiah was a man of the city, but the crowds did not shape his message or his values. Jeremiah’s life was God-conditioned. God’s word shaped his behaviour. God’s word directed his life. Every day he stood apart from the crowd preaching God’s word, trying to get the people to turn back to God. And yet, conditioned by the crowded ways of life, of distraction and indulgence, the people were very stubborn and refused to listen - even tossing him into prison.

One day some strange people, known as Rechabites, appeared on the streets of Jerusalem. They were an oddity in the streets, conspicuous in their strangeness. In many respects, the Recabites remind me of the Mennonite/Amish people who hold to a distinct community identity....a particular dress code and ride around in horse-drawn buggies on the county roads of Norfolk and Oxford counties - as well as up in the Elmira area north of Waterloo. The Recabites were a unique clan, living a purposefully distinctive way of life.... intentionally countercultural, intentionally separated from the crowds around them. Following the commands of their ancestors, they lived a very principled life - abstaining from intoxicants

and living a nomadic way of life. The Rechabites held to that commitment when other Israelites let it slip. The community of the Recabites were living proof that a minority group of God's people could actually maintain a distinctive pattern of life and not become assimilated into the selfish, moral values and hedonistic lifestyles of the masses.

Could there be a message for God's People today? What about the principles that shape our lives? When the world looks at the church, do they see us living life at its best, patterned after Jesus....or do we simply blend in, assimilating with the crowd? Does our daily walk reflect our profession of faith?

It was the middle of the Hot Summer of 606 B.C. Then the Word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, "Go visit the Rechabite community. Invite them to meet with you in one of the rooms of God's Temple....and serve them some good wine." Have a wine and cheese party!

There was only one problem. The Recabites don't drink. Why invite tea-totelers to a wine and cheese party? Why invite them to a party they can't enjoy?

The Recabites didn't join in. Not for one moment did they relax their principles. The moral principles that had given unique shape to their lives was more important than giving in to the popular lifestyle of the masses.

Once again God spoke to Jeremiah, "Go and say to the people in Judah and Jerusalem, 'Come and learn a lesson about how to obey me. The Recabites do not drink wine because their ancestor Jehonadab told them not to. But I have spoken to you again and again, and you refuse to listen or obey. I have sent you prophet after prophet to tell you to turn from your wicked ways and to stop worshiping other gods, so that you might live in peace here in the land I gave to you and your ancestors. But you would not listen to me or obey. The families of Recab are a people of principles. They have obeyed their ancestors completely, but you have refused to listen to me.'

Then it dawned on Jeremiah. The Rechabites were living proof, right on the crowded streets of Jerusalem: ordinary people could maintain a distinctive way of life, and not be assimilated into the ways of the crowd.

Let me assure you, Jeremiah's message is not about prohibition, abstinence or about selling our homes and living in tents. God's Word is not about becoming Recabite clones. Rather, it was about the integrity of our relationship with God, and be moved to live life at its best.

Throughout the pages of holy scripture, God has set out timeless principles for a way of living that will be different than the ways of the crowd. "For we are God's masterpiece," says Paul.

“God has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things God planned for us long ago.” God’s desire for our lives is that we would show the world what a People of Principle really look like.

In the book I referred to last week, ‘Good Faith’, I came across this comment: “When communities of Jesus-followers commit to living good faith the results can be summed up like this: Christians are a counterculture for the common good....bringing good faith - a vision for what is orderly and right, abundant and generous, beautiful and flourishing with life and relationships - to the broader culture....where believers love and care for one another well and then invite others in to experience the same grace.”

Recently, I came across an amazing story about Arland Williams Jr. - one person who truly lived his life by a set of guiding principles. The story is about life, death and the moment in between....the moment when someone becomes, more than just another face in the crowd. It was in one of those moments, Arland D. Williams, Jr. stepped forth and redefined human resolve, on a January day in 1982.

Arland Dean Williams Jr. was a passenger aboard Air Florida Flight 90, which crashed on take-off in Washington, D.C. on January 13, 1982, killing 78 people. He was among the six people to initially survive the crash. His actions after the crash, handling the initial rescue efforts as a first responder, became a well-known example of extraordinary heroism, although it cost him his life. He did not know any of the other victims personally. In fact, his identity was not even known until some time after the bodies were recovered.

In the words of a clergyman, Williams heroism was not rash. Aware that his own strength was fading, he deliberately handed hope to someone else, and he did so repeatedly. Arland Williams’ turn came at last. The chopper crew was eager to meet him and salute his selfless heroism. But, as they approached the wreckage, they saw he was gone. He had been in the paralyzing cold for 29 minutes—a minute or so too long.

Rescue officer Gene Windsor wept as he related the incident to his wife. “He could have gone on the first trip,” said the pilot, Donald Usher, “but he put everybody else ahead of himself. Everyone.”... a very selfless person.

Whether he had written a set of guiding principles or not, Arland Williams is certainly an example of someone who lived by higher principles. How easy it would have been to save himself. Who would have blamed him? But in a moment of crisis, he could not do so. Loving one’s neighbor, caring for others, being unselfish, however he would have expressed it, overruled all other motives or considerations.

From our earliest beginnings in Sunday School, to our senior years in church, from the cradle to the grave, God intends for us to be more than just another anonymous face in the crowd. The Christian life is a life-long journey of applying God's principles to our lives.

The Psalmist said it best, "Lord, who may dwell in your sacred tent? Who may live on your holy mountain? The one whose walk is blameless, who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from their heart; whose tongue utters no slander, who does no wrong to a neighbor..."

Responding to the question put to him about "what is the greatest commandment (the greatest life-principle)," Jesus said: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength...and your neighbour as yourself." Jesus also said: They (meaning the crowded world beyond these walls) will know you are my followers (they will distinguish you in the crowd; you will stand out) if you have love for one another - a love that reaches out beyond this place - a love that loves the loveless - a love that is a friend to the friendless - a love that cares for the lost, the least and the last.

John Ortberg, in his book 'The Life You've Always Wanted,' writes: "We know that as Christians we are called to 'come out and be separate,' that our faith and spiritual commitment should make us different somehow. But if we are not marked by greater and greater amounts of love and joy, we will inevitably look for substitute ways of distinguishing ourselves from those who are not Christian." Ortberg goes on to say, "Instead of focusing on the external boundary markers, Jesus focused on the centre, the heart of spiritual life - "Do they love God, and do they love the people who mean so much to God?" These are the fundamental principles that will eventually divide those who choose to follow Christ from those who don't.

It has been said, "the church is a people - people who have been summoned by the God who is good enough to call as His own those who are not-good, people who have been set apart from the ordinary run of things in order to belong especially to God, to be God's people in a crowded world." In other words, don't worry about the growth of your church. Focus on living the life God has willed for you to be and become.

You may not be a "Recabite".... You may never be called upon to be another Arland Williams. Nevertheless, our greatest legacy to our children today, and to our children yet unborn, will be our faith in Jesus Christ and the principles that have given shape and expression to an uncommon way of life. We have the potential to make a difference in our world....for Jesus' sake.

Is your life 'crowd conditioned' or 'God conditioned'? The novelist Annie Dillard once said, "How you spend your days is, of course, how you spend your life." The principles that shape

and influence our lives today is what eventually defines us. “For this very reason,” writes the Apostle Peter, “make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

And so I conclude this month, and our many times together, with a few promised words from our theme song: *Though I am small, my God, my all, you work great things in me. And your mercy will last from the depths of the past to the end of the age to be. Your very name puts the proud to shame, and to those who would for you yearn. You will show your might, put the strong to flight, for the world is about to turn.*