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**“Tailgating Jesus”
A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth
24th Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 16, 2012
Psalm 19; James 3:1–12; Mark 8:27–38**

Early on the first day of the work week, while it was still dark,
on the first Monday after New Year's Day at 6 a.m.,
my husband and I climbed into our car and followed the beam of our headlights
toward the downtown Durham YMCA
to begin the slow slog back towards thinness
after a season's worth of eggnog, birthday cake, Christmas cookies, and
all things good and fattening.

As we took the exit off of I-85 at Avondale to head into town,
a sheriff's car in front of us flashed its red light and indicated for us to pull over.
Uh-oh! It seems, according to the sheriff, that we had been following him too closely
in our rush to flesh out our new year's resolutions,
and he threatened to give my husband a ticket if he didn't back off his bumper.

We were just trying to start off the new year with good habits,
but it seems that the road to good intentions sometimes detours through Hades!
My husband does have a tendency to tailgate, I will admit,
but I usually call him back with the admonition
that if I can tell what the passengers in the car ahead of us are reading,
(and I am near-sighted), then *we are following too closely!*

I wonder if it is safe to follow Jesus closely?
I wonder if one can be penalized for following Jesus too closely?
I wonder if Jesus calls us to tailgate him anyway, and risk the consequences?

Jesus and his disciples are on a road trip to Caesarea Philippi, and along the way,
Jesus instigates a conversation among them
concerning his identity and their ensuing mission.
The northbound road might be rising up to meet them now,
but what they don't realize at this moment
is that very soon, the road will dip precipitously southwards towards Jerusalem
and the surprising conflation of Jesus' identity and their mission there.
The identity question seems easy enough, to Peter, at least.
Jesus is not John the Baptist or Elijah or one of the prophets, either.
He is the Messiah, the Lord's anointed, the secret servant of the Lord.
But the implications of his identity, as it affects their vocation, is staggering to all of them.
Here, for the first time, in the earliest of the Gospels, Jesus reveals
that as Messiah, he is not the Victor King they are expecting:
the one who will put the kibosh on the Romans, purge the land of paganism,
and establish Israel as the powerhouse of the ancient world.
Instead, he is the Messiah, the Servant King, who will suffer, be rejected, be killed,
and after three days rise again in order to fulfill the promise
God initially made to Abraham long ago:
that all the families of the earth be blessed.
The Gospel writer Mark has Jesus convey this to his inner circle of friends quite openly;
with Jesus, there is no hidden agenda for himself or for his disciples.
His identity, which he draws from the great Servant of the Lord passage in Isaiah 53,
will color their identities, as well... if they follow him closely.
His mission will become their mission... if they follow him closely.
His dying and rising will become their dying and rising
and our dying and rising... if we follow him closely.
And when Peter, the one who understands his identity perfectly,
can't grasp its implications for vocation as well,
Jesus reprimands him with the stern admonition to "Get behind me, Satan!"
I've always thought this response to be quite out of character for Jesus,
who so seldom responds to anyone in such a knee-jerk fashion.

But I wonder now if Jesus might be inviting Peter to follow him more closely,
to tailgate him if he doesn't understand the connection between identity and vocation,
and how they dovetail and grow out of one another.

I wonder if what sounds like a mean-spirited tongue lashing
might have come out of Jesus' mouth more like a challenge to follow more closely,
a dare, even, to tailgate Jesus;
something more along the lines of, "I double-dog dare you, Peter,
or any of you, to tailgate me, you vapid rascallions!
Are you behind me, or not? Are you ashamed to follow me too closely?
Will you support me in what I/we are about to experience?
Can you drink from this cup with me?"

And then Jesus turns to draw in the whole crowd around him, and us as well,
as he issues the ultimate invitation to discipleship, the ultimate dare:
"If any of you want to become my followers, deny yourselves,
your security, your safety, your personal agendas, take up your cross,
and follow me... follow me closely... very closely...
tailgate me so closely that you can tell whose book I'm reading from!"

The Nuns on the Bus know what it means to tailgate Jesus.

Perhaps you heard one of them, Sister Simone Campbell, speaking on TV recently,
about calling attention to the needs
of the poor and the vulnerable in our nation.

The group's objective is to break hearts by driving close, too close, tailgating
homeless shelters, public schools, low-income housing projects,
social service agencies, and making a case for the need
for economic justice and fairness
that will ultimately benefit the common good of all, and not just some.

The Nuns on the Bus consists of little old ladies, mostly little old Catholic single sisters,
grey-haired, bright-eyed, sporting their Rockport walking shoes as they
tour the under-served people in our communities and make
a strong case for Jesus' and our solidarity with the poor.

They know what it means to tailgate Jesus,

in speaking out against the evils of racism, apathy, sexism, ageism and inequality.

Sister Joan Chittister, who is one of the Nuns on the Bus from time to time,

has this to say about her call to either become part of a critical mass of

resistance to evil, or to compliantly become part and parcel of it.

"If there is a major problem in spirituality today," Sister Joan says,

"it may be that we do not do enough to form Christians for resistance to evil.

We form them for patient endurance and for civil conformity.

We form them to be 'good' but not necessarily to be 'holy'.

In the doing of it, we make compliant Christians rather than courageous ones,

as if bearing evil were more important than confronting it.

We go on separating life into parts, one spiritual, one not...

The holy life, if Jesus is any model at all,

understands that one without the other is bogus."

(Joan Chittister. *Called to Question*, p. 129-130)

The Nuns on the Bus also know what it means to suffer the consequences of tailgating Jesus

because, as they have discovered,

it can get you pulled over and cited for proximity to Jesus,

especially by the Vatican.

In April, the Vatican concluded an investigation of the Leadership Council

of Women Religious by criticizing the group's "radical feminist themes"

and its focus on social services at the expense of other issues.

The Nuns on the Bus were publically censured by the Vatican for making

"occasional public statements... that disagree with or challenge positions

taken by the bishops, who are the church's authentic teachers of faith

and morals."

(Samantha Kimmey. *Forbes Magazine*. "Vatican Harangue Makes Stars of 'Nuns on the Bus'".

7/12/12)

Tailgating Jesus, if you do it well, will create friction with the culture around you,

as the Nuns on the Bus have learned. But it has not deterred them from their mission

to promote God's blessing for all the families of the earth.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer also knew, discovered what it meant to tailgate Jesus,
to follow Jesus so closely you could tell whose book he had been reading.
You might remember that last month, I mentioned from the pulpit Bonhoeffer's 26-day
detour to Union Seminary in New York in order to avoid the
compulsory military service and required oath of allegiance to Nazi Germany
in 1939.

Bonhoeffer tried to maintain a safe traveling distance between himself and Jesus
as World War II was approaching, but it just didn't suit him.

He followed Jesus at such a safe travel distance that he lost sight of his leader,
even musing in a letter penned overseas to his best friend, Eberhard Bethge,
"Have I missed the place where He (Jesus) is?"

And so after 26 days of physical security, but of total emotional and spiritual turmoil,
Bonhoeffer returned to Nazi Germany in order to follow Jesus more closely,
in order to tailgate Jesus,
in order that the Jews and all the families
of the earth might have the opportunity to receive God's blessing.

And the friction that ensued as Bonhoeffer returned to Germany eventually cost him his life.

The same year he returned to Germany, 1939,
Bonhoeffer's brother-in-law included him in a group
planning the overthrow of Hitler,
to which he made significant contributions.

He was arrested and imprisoned in Berlin in 1943,
and after a failed attempt on Hitler's life in April 1944, he was transferred first
to Buchenwald and then to Schoenberg Prison,
where he was issued the summons of a condemned man,
"Prisoner Bonhoeffer, make ready and come with us."

It sounds hauntingly akin to Jesus' summons to his disciples, doesn't it:

"Come, follow me!"

Interestingly enough, during his imprisonment, Bonhoeffer refused to allow his name
to be placed on the prayer list of the Confessing Church.

He believed that only those who were imprisoned because of their proclamation or actions in service to the church belonged on the prayer list,
not those who exercised their resistance to injustice through political means!

Bonhoeffer was hanged as a traitor for helping plot an assassination attempt against Adolf Hitler, less than a week before Allies liberated the camp.

(*Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Pastor and Theologian.*

<http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bio133.html>)

Tailgating Jesus can have painful and dire consequences if done faithfully.

But as Jesus tells his disciples and those of us in his crowd of followers,
it will also lead to salvation and life and a sharing of God's glory
when Jesus returns.

Do we have the courage to tailgate Jesus? Can we tolerate the potential consequences?

Do we see, feel, taste, smell, hear, sense the salvific life and shared glory
enough to want it for ourselves, for those whom we love,
and for those whom we know God loves?

Best-selling author and futurist Len Sweet, speaking to PC(USA) church leaders at a dinner in St. Petersburg, Florida, in late July, said something profound.

He said, "We're fixated on leadership conferences, with most of the stuff being on the business of the church... (However), arguably you can't find the word (leadership) in the New Testament.

The closest thing we get is an image about steering a vessel through a storm...

But one can find the word for disciple. Almost 300 times in fact.

It's translated in three ways: as disciple, follower and learner.

"We've gone awry," Sweet said. "There is a leader... *and it's not me.*

It's Christ. Let's learn how to be followers.

We've got to realize the golden calf of leadership has taken us astray," he concluded.

(Len Sweet, keynote address, *Evangelism and Church Growth Conference,*

St. Petersburg, FL, July 31, 2012, as noted by Paul Seebeck, Communications Associate, in press release, "Futurist Tells ECG 2012 to Stop Fixating On Leadership")

At the conclusion of today's service, we will sing "By Gracious Powers,"
a hymn written by Bonhoeffer from his prison cell
on the last New Year's Eve of his life.

I started out with one story about New Year's, and I'll end with another.

The hymn was smuggled out of his prison cell
and has become one of Bonhoeffer's best known compositions.

It is not in our current hymnal, but it will be included in the next *Presbyterian Hymnal*
coming out in September 2013, thanks be to God.

It is beautiful. It gives assurance that God is with us night and morning.

It gives comfort to those of us frightened by the consequences of confronting evil.
It honestly acknowledges the suffering and trembling that mark a journey close to Christ.

And it expresses the ultimate joy of tailgating Christ so closely
that eventually our lives reflect the brightness of his high beams.

May we never forget the gracious powers that so wonderfully shelter us
as we follow closely the One whom we love and serve. Amen.