

Dr. Lonnie H. Lee

2/27/11

The Call to Serve

Matthew 6:24

There is an apocryphal book that dates from the 3rd century church called *The Acts of Thomas*. The book is very unreliable as history. It is full of fantasy. But as a legend it is entertaining and in many ways faithful to the picture of Thomas' character that we find in the New Testament. The Acts of Thomas picks up where the Gospel of John leaves off. John tells us how Thomas worked through his crisis of belief. Thomas struggled with his doubts about who Jesus was and how Jesus could conquer death. But in the end he learned to confess that Jesus Christ was his Lord and his God. It was a confession that changed his life. But had he changed enough?

According to the legend, the next crisis for Thomas was learning to serve. This becomes a crisis because Thomas has not changed enough. *The Acts of Thomas* opens with the eleven disciples trying to decide how to obey the Lord's last command, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel." At this point the disciples look a lot like Presbyterians because they set out to do things decently and in order. They methodically divide the world into eleven parts, one for each disciple. Then they cast lots to determine who would cover which territory. India falls to Thomas. Thomas, however, is not happy with his assignment and refuses to go. First, he claims he cannot travel that far. Then, looking for a better excuse, he points out that he doesn't speak any of the languages of India. Even when the Lord appears in a dream and says to Thomas, according to the legend, "Go to India Thomas for my grace is with you," the stubborn apostle refuses to go. Thomas has learned to trust Jesus about some things, but he has not changed enough to do the work of serving God.

The point of the story is not whether Thomas will go to India, but whether he will obey the call to serve. This call can take us far away, but more likely it will point us to a need that is very close to home. It may be a situation in your own family. It may be a need in your community. It may be a crisis in your place of work. It may be an opportunity in your church. Fred Rogers, of "Mr. Roger's Neighborhood" was interviewed on NPR some years ago in recognition of the 25 year run of his television show. The interviewer wanted to know how his television career was related to his earlier studies at Pittsburgh Seminary and his ordination as a Presbyterian minister. The interviewer asked, "Do you see what you do on television as a ministry?" And Rogers said, "It certainly is a ministry. I want the children to know that they are special unique human beings. I can think of no greater ministry than to help children discover who they really are." You and I have the opportunity to live by that understanding of ministry every day of our lives. But like Thomas we always have too much on our plates. And the call to serve may not be the voice we most want to hear. Like Thomas we struggle over how to respond to the call that comes to each of us.

In the third chapter of Paul's second letter to the Corinthian church, we find the apostle wrestling with this same issue. Paul points out that the struggle over how to respond to the call to serve is one of the central questions of the Old Testament. Paul remembers Moses coming down from the mountain carrying the covenant written on new tablets. The first tablets were destroyed by Moses when he had returned earlier to find the people had not been faithful to the Lord.

But this time when Moses returns to walk among his people there is something about him which makes the people deeply afraid. The book of Exodus describes this new attribute of Moses by saying that the glory of God was reflected in his face. Out of deference to the people's fear, Moses begins to wear a veil to cover his face.

Paul argues that the purpose of Moses' veil was not just to hide his face. It was also intended to conceal Moses' message. The people were happier with Moses veiled because they did not want to come to terms with the central thrust of his message. They would rather not hear the call that would send them where they did not want to go or direct them to serve others. They were afraid of what God might ask of them.

This is why these Israelites talked so much about obedience to the law of Moses. They made a big deal out of living by the letter of the law. They engaged in debates, and arguments, and power plays over the letter of the law. But Paul believed that the message of Moses and the Ten Commandments had been reduced to legalisms by the Israelites. The minds and hearts of the people had been hardened by their attempt to avoid Moses' teaching. When the call to serve was issued the people no longer had the power to say, "Yes." They could respond only in the manner of Thomas in the ancient legend.

But it is here that Christ comes in. Paul proclaimed that Jesus appeared on earth to remove the veil. Jesus came to challenge every religious system that prevents human beings from responding to the call to serve God. Matthew's gospel records Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount which addresses the divided loyalties that paralyze so many people of faith. The Greek word for "anxiety" in this passage refers to the experience of split attention. The anxious are those who cannot act decisively on what they believe. They suffer from the impossible condition of trying to serve more than one master. He tells his disciples that the way to restore a healthy balance in their lives is to act decisively in serving God. If they do that their anxieties will take care of themselves.

This has been a very difficult week in the life of this congregation. We have suffered two deaths, one under especially tragic circumstances. As we struggle with what we cannot understand, God's grace is at work. It is at work in the love and support that is extended to both of these families. But grace is also at work in the legacy that Andrea Butler and Heather Huitt have given to us.

They belonged to different generations and moved in different circles in this church. But in one important way they were very much alike. They both showed us what it means to be decisive in answering the call to serve. When Andrea received the call to serve in the Peace Corps in Africa in the 1960s she said "Yes" and never looked back. When Heather received the call to serve as the youth director at another Presbyterian congregation in this city she said "Yes" and never looked back. Their lives provide a powerful reminder of what Westminster is all about. Our mission statement says it best, "Let the door of this church be a way to service."