

1/4/70

" THE LONGEST STEP OF THE YEAR "

Text: "He that findeth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his
life for my sake shall find it."

Matthew 10:39

Sermon by: Rev. Richard M. Cromie

Parkwood United Presbyterian Church

January 4, 1970

Over across the room on a little landing two steps above the living room floor, the little girl was learning how to walk. At that moment she was trying to turn around so that she could come down the two steps backwards and reduce the possibility of tumbling over. Going through the paces and the pain of this new parental strategy, she sensed the anxiety and the impatience of two parents who for an interim period with the first child only, offer too much encouragement and demand too much performance, as a trainer might put his puppies through their repertoire of tricks, not so much to teach them anything, but to show them off at their next public appearance. "This is the way you go down these steps" was the lesson on that particular day. The eleven-month old baby was just about fed up, crawling could get her almost everywhere she wanted to go anyway. And to symbolize this unspoken decision and her resentment of the routine, she had somehow managed to get her right hand caught under her left foot, pinned tight against the floor, and the harder she pushed, the more helpless and hopeless it became. She was caught in the matrix of learning how to turn around. And, you might guess, she did what any girl does when she doesn't get her own way, any little girl, that is, she cried.

From the noise and embarrassment of that indelicate stance, came this sermon. For someone asked her the direct and pertinent question: "How can you expect to turn around if you stand on your own hand?" How can you expect to get anywhere if you stand in your own way? Now try that on for size as we turn the corner and step out into the New Year. Try it as a reminder for the road through 1970. Try it as a last minute briefing session comment in the sanctuary before we jump out into the open air of another year of work, or semester at school, or a year of living in the home. The parties are past, the holidays are finally over, the Christmas trees and decorations will come down, that is a promise, it is time to pick up again and get back into the routine of workaday world.

So try the question again before you go, before the routine of everydayness comes back, where nothing exceptional or particularly exciting will happen, when all that is ahead is the long pull through another year, day by day, trouble by trouble, joy by joy. Try it as a starter for our thoughts. There is a time for pleasure. There is a time for the joy we find in our friends and family. There is a time for relaxation, but there is a time for moving forward.

How can you expect to get anywhere if you stand in your own way?

Under normal circumstances we are clever enough now a days to keep our right hands out from under our left foot, but as a pithy rule of thumb, as a terse epitaph for all those who do not get where they want to go, the problem is remarkably the same. The question is the same this year as the last, and unfortunately in most cases, so is the answer. With the author of Ecclesiastes, there is nothing new under the sun. Ask those who have carried an illness from last year into this. Ask those who have carried some enormous personal problem through the year end festivities. Ask those who are lonely and unhappy. Ask those who are getting old. What's new? Perhaps the only answer is that it is the symbolism that spreads out before us, the deep down desire that we want a change and a chance to start things again, to make over the sorry mess we made for ourselves, to turn around and go down the two steps in a new and different way. Want life to change, to take on meaning, to get down at last, to basic fundamental concerns. That's all, just the symbol, the wish, the desire, the hope. And that's not new, we have had that for a long time. The Bible says it bluntly -- you must be born again. You have to be redone.

Last week we spoke of some of the larger issues of the decade. Today let's talk about you. Look back for a minute at what happened in the year that is past. Not in the dime-a-dozen year end summaries by columnists and television commentators, or even preachers. Not what happened to someone else, what happened to you. Did you get where you wanted to go? Did you know where you wanted to get?

Did you take hold of something great and new, add some dimension of depth to the quality of your character, or better, did you let something great and new take hold of you? Was it a new year, or just another, new and different, or just the same, the same complaints, the same fads, the same collections, clutching the sea shells gathered at the ocean shore while we missed the sea altogether? The same moving, the same planning, the same going, but never getting anywhere, accumulating all the equipment without the practice, all the books you never read. We can smile at the ad in a Chicago newspaper, under positions wanted. It read, "Outstanding speaker wants first-class cause". We can smile at the notice, but it's a pathetic smile because of the pathos in its humor. It is funny because it describes so many people you know, all fired up and ready, all educated and equipped, all dressed, but no place to go. All dressed up, but milling around with the crowd at the edge of the parade. There is envy to the watcher, if you think about it, in watching a parade. Envy because the marcher has something to march for and somewhere to go. Then the parade moves on out ahead of you, and you short-cut around the block to find it again.

As in one of Edwin Markham's poems, the issue is posed by God himself:

I will leave man to make the fateful guess,
Will leave him torn between No and Yes;
Leave him in tragic loneliness to choose,
With all of life to win, and all to lose.

It is more than a parade which marches around the blocks of the city, only to break rank when they reach the pre-set finish line, only to run off again home to other tasks and duties and after-parade parties, with all of life to win and all to lose. There is an old Chinese proverb to the effect that the longest journey begins with but a single step, and which first single step you take depends on where you want to go. On where we want to be at the end of this year or the next, or the one after that. You don't take life two steps at a time -- one will do.

How can you expect to get anywhere if you stand in your own way? That's the one obstacle which no one else can remove. That's the one obstacle in the course that you have to go around alone. A parent can give you life and guard your steps through infancy. A parent can place before you an open road with the sign-posts and warnings already planted before you go, the equipment for the journey can be made up and placed on your shoulders, tied down securely for the march, the step belongs to you. A teacher can prepare you to recognize what you will see on the way, to distinguish the really beautiful from the false. A teacher can tell you what to seek in the priceless moments, that will pass too soon: how much effort it should take to climb each hill. Experienced travelers can tell you where to pause for a rest, how long to spend in each place without wasting your time, how much it will cost, but you have to take the step yourself.

We will describe that step in general here in this sermon. To give a faint outline, a sketchy adumbration of what it should look like and where it will lead you. For our topic is "The Longest Step of the Year". And by now it should be no secret, in the context of our subject, the longest step of the new year, the longest step of any year, is the first step you take away from yourself, the

untangling of the hands and feet, the motives and movements and the getting out of the way. The hardest, most difficult step of the year will be the one we take, if we take it, when we move out from ourselves into an unknown but proven world where others have found meaning and purpose for the road. This is the way it looks:

He that findeth his life shall lose it, says
Christ, and he that loseth his life for my
sake shall find it.

You and I would never say it that way. Oh, once in awhile in a holy moment the lips may speak the words and the heads nod their silent approval that what the Bible says is true. But we belie it in our lives, you and I would never say it that way, not in our world of getting and going. We would never say it that way because finding a life to us means finding something tangible and immediately satisfying. Some gain in our status or salary, some new responsibility, some office in the organization, some new let-me-get-my-hands-on-it, let me brag about it. How silly Christ sounds in the world we know, a world that listens to the voice of progress. How silly Christ sounds in our split level dream houses, and in all the smooth working machinery so dutifully carrying out our every whim. How silly Christ sounds in our completely calculated worlds, but the laugh of it all -- is our miscalculation of what is important in life. He who finds a life shall lose it, shall give it away to something or someone greater than himself. Shall waste it in an investment which yields nothing, no gain -- has no growth value, no fixed income. That's the open secret you and I miss, that's the puzzle you and I can't figure out, when the key is right there before our eyes. That's the step that you and I so seldom take, so fearful and afraid. It tells us to step out onto the surface of the water in the middle of the storm, where raging currents may sweep us away. It tells us to leave the boat, or the house, or the life, so safe, so secure, so content with what we have, so lacking the kind of courage worthy of that noun. Courage. It takes courage to make that first step. For we might be abused, whatever we move towards may move further away; it might not work out the way it looks now, we may lose something. Step away from myself? God helps those who help themselves! But it doesn't say that in Scripture. Give up the honest concern I have for my future and the future of those I love, you must be crazy. Courage. It was Emerson who dropped the bold reminder into the stream of worthwhile living: "God will not manifest himself to cowards", he wrote. God will not manifest himself to the man who is standing still, for God is a god of movement, of action.

We can wonder sadly with T. S. Eliot:

Where is the life that is lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
The cycles of heaven in twenty centuries
Bring us further from God and nearer to the dust.

The human race, and you and I in it, end up in the same place -- in the dead end street in which there is no turning at all. Further from God and nearer to ourselves because we wanted to be safe and secure.

While Christ says, I have set before you an open door which no one is able to shut. I have set before you an open door that leads into the kind of life you say you want. I stand at that door with the offer of a new life for all who enter, a life that has the depth of meaning you say you want. A life that will put you at ease in more than your own little room. It will make you at home in the

whole universe. But you don't want it! A life that is yours for the asking, but you will never find it, you will never even see it in shadowy outline down at the end of the road, unless you take that one first step away from yourself. Unless you determine to get out of the way, losing a life for my sake, you will find it.

Well, I can vouch with unmistakable testimony that that little girl learned to turn around and to walk. You can see her almost anytime now running and occasionally falling, but always getting up again. Someday, we pray, she will learn to walk with grace and love with greatness. Someday, we pray, she will hold her hand out to the world until someday, she will learn to live for the things we love. Someday, we pray, she will learn, as indeed she learned to get her hands out from under her feet, she will learn to take that great step, the longest and hardest and the best, the first giant step away from herself into the unknown needs of others. And losing a life that way, to find that life is grand and gloriously new. So too, perhaps, with you and me.