

# “A Fish in the Sand”

a sermon by

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**Text: “He answered, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.’” (Luke 10:27)**

Earlier this summer, as I prepared for a Sunday School class on the Music and Message of U2, I came across an interesting quote from the band’s lead singer, Bono. U2 are a wildly popular band from Ireland who are Christians, but known more for their rock and roll than for their faith. Studying many of their lyrics, however, it is impossible not to feel the strong sense of faith that permeates all that they do. The band has been both praised and blasted for the fact that their music, with its unavoidable message of justice, love and faith, is popular across all spectrums. Many conservative Christians have questioned why they are not more outspoken about Christianity, and why they act like a mainstream rock band and not a Christian rock band.

They do not wear their faith on their sleeve as do some other artists - you won’t see crosses at their concerts or hear them utter particularly religious language in interviews. But you will hear it in their music and sense it from their deep commitment to and advocacy around issues of poverty and injustice. Hence the questions about their faith. In response to these questions, Bono once said, “We’ve found different ways of expressing [our faith], and recognized the power of the media to manipulate such signs. Maybe we just have to sort of draw our fish in the sand. It’s there for people who are interested. It shouldn’t be there for people who aren’t.”

In his inimitable way, the eloquent and thoughtful lead singer of what is arguably one of the world’s most popular rock bands took an image with which all are familiar - the line in the sand - and turned it into a theological statement. The fish in the sand to which Bono refers is the band’s Christian faith. This statement reflects a maturity of faith that is not often seen in popular culture. For Bono, and for many, Christian faith is not something to be waved before the masses like some sort of war banner, but rather an

integral part of one's life that is ever-present, and vitally important as it is, needing no excess fanfare or attention.

These regular human beings who also happen to be colossally famous rock stars, draw their fish in the sand by living out what they understand is their purpose - sharing their music, and in it, expressing a love for God and a love for others that is not often found in popular rock. They don't need to wear it on their sleeves, and they don't stick other peoples' noses in it.

This is a refreshing perspective in an age of radical self-identification. Everywhere we turn, people are going to great lengths to identify themselves with some group, and disassociate from some other group. It is hard to spend a day without encountering someone wearing their beliefs on their sleeve, or their chest, or their bumper. Not that this is necessarily a bad thing, but like most things, it can go too far. When we overidentify with any group, be it social, political, athletic or - yes - even religious, we run the risk of turning that thing into an idol.

Christian faith is by no means immune from this phenomenon. In fact in some quarters, it seems to have run headlong into this type of identification frenzy. Bedecking themselves with t-shirts and bumper stickers, advocating some books and speaking out against others, many Christians seem to have come to the conclusion that there are certain identifiable marks of the true Christian, and the faith of anyone not falling in line is instantly suspect. The idea seems to be that the strength of one's Christian faith is directly proportionate to the external identifiers one displays. So, the more stickers, slogans, and programs one exhibits, the stronger one's faith.

Hear me clearly, I am not criticizing individuals' expression of their own faith. Not at all. There are countless faithful Christians who feel very called to express their faith through any number of means, and much good has come of this. External identifiers of faith are not in and of themselves bad.

However, being a Christian is not the same thing as being a NASCAR fan. We cannot simply decorate our lives and selves with the right paraphernalia and expect that to suffice for our lives of faith. It is not about wearing the right thing, listening to the proper music, avoiding the bad media. Nor is it about proving our piety through mass-marketed means. These external markers, while sometimes helpful, do not engender faith. Faith, my friends, is a lot harder than that.

And this is not a new phenomenon. For all of human history, people have wondered how best to live a life of faith. And during Jesus' life, this issue came up quite a lot. What are we supposed to do? People wanted to know. How are we to live? How do we know if we will be saved? Every time Jesus was asked a question aimed at clarifying a point of faith, his answers were consistent.

Not once did Jesus answer them with a 5-step plan to salvation. Never did he give them a roadmap to faith or ask them to come up with pithy sayings that they could turn into t-shirts and posters. What Jesus offered was not a list of tasks or behaviors, but rather a

radical, life-altering opportunity. It wasn't ever about the simple things like the things they read or the people with whom they associated.

Though these things came into play, his answers showed that it was much more than that. Jesus didn't ask people to become his fans, he called them to be his followers. And that is a very different thing. Faith, following Christ, has almost nothing to do with the outward signs, and everything to do with inner transformation.

Luke understood this, and perhaps this is why, in his gospel, he highlights this conversation Jesus had with a lawyer about eternal salvation. We know from the text that this educated, presumably sophisticated man was trying to stump Jesus, but Jesus didn't take the bait. In fact, he gave the question back to the man, asking him to answer for himself, which he did.

Instead of launching into theological discourse or describing the steps to eternal life, Jesus asks the man what he already knows about the law of the Lord - the linking of the commandment to love God and neighbor was well-known to the people of Israel even before Jesus began his ministry. Jesus reminded this man that he knew what he needed to know, then told him to go and do it.

It sounds simple enough, but let's not forget what Jesus said immediately before this exchange. "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants."

Before any of us start thinking like that lawyer that we can test God, that we can find a loophole in our calling or even that we can capture the foolproof plan for living a Christian life, we need to heed these words. God is not interested in how wise we are, how capable we are of building the perfect Christian life for ourselves, how quickly we figure out just how to "be" Christians. Our wisdom, our study, our piety are insignificant in the face of our God.

Remember what God said through Micah - what God wants from us is not external acts of piety like sacrifices and burnt offerings or empty acts of worship and service, but rather he desires internal transformation so that we will *do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with our God*.

I think sometimes we just get the steps confused. Because we are human, and live in a culture that seems determined to place people in categories based upon external identifiers, we sometimes think there is some sort of formula to follow to be Christians. But we forget that these things - the books, the programs, the pious language, the personal disciplines - these things are not the way to salvation. We cannot create or do anything that will bring us nearer to God. God is already there - it is our call and our joy to turn to God with all our hearts, and the rest will follow.

And this is where the challenge comes in. I could quote scripture or serve others or attend worship all day, every day and seem like a deeply committed Christian. But if, inside, I'm ignoring the call to love God with all my heart, soul, strength and mind, and love my neighbor as myself, then all of those external signs mean nothing. If I love my

job or my 401(K), my spouse, my child, my lifestyle, even my Christian faith, more than I love God, then I am missing the point. And if I don't truly seek in all that I do to love my neighbor - even the annoying one - the same as I love myself, then I am falling short. And nothing else that I do - no matter how pious - will substitute for those things.

You see, we can't earn God's love. By his grace, we don't need to. It is ours. Anything we do to try to prove our worth to God, to showcase our faith and prove our goodness is a work, and it is futile. God doesn't desire our piety, God requires our love.

Off the northeast coast of Scotland, at the juncture of the Atlantic Ocean and the North Sea sits an archipelago, a collection of some 70 islands known as Orkney. These islands have a rich history, having been inhabited for at least 5,500 years, by Neolithic peoples, then the Norse, finally becoming a part of Scotland in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Only 20 of the 70 islands are inhabited, and the total population of Orkney is less than 20,000. The islands are accessible only by air and boat.

On a beautiful Saturday in late June, I had the pleasure of visiting Orkney as part of the Ivey Handbell Choir's tour of Scotland. Becky Puster and I traveled with ten extraordinary High School students from this congregation to Scotland where we spent 14 days, ringing concerts in churches and soaking up the culture. We sampled haggis and fish and chips. We saw more sheep than any of us ever dreamed possible. We toured the home of John Knox and St. Giles Cathedral, soaking up some of the powerful history and tradition of our denomination.

On the only day the group did not ring a concert, we set out bright and early for a day trip to Orkney. Though a couple of us had done some reading ahead of time, none of us knew quite what to expect. We were prepared for cold, rainy weather and a potentially rough ferry crossing. What we got was the opposite.

The day was glorious, the ferry ride amazing, and the islands of Orkney simply stunning. Our charming, nattily clad Scottish tour guide Sinclair made sure we saw all the important sights, and he described them in great detail (though some of us had a little trouble translating his English!). We visited an ancient burial mound - even went inside it, explored the ruins of a prehistoric community, walked among rings of standing stones reminiscent of Stonehenge, and ate lunch at the beach, looking out at impossibly blue water contrasting with the rocky shoreline. There were quaint stone homes everywhere you looked, and horses, cattle and the ubiquitous sheep on every flat surface. The day was glorious, and no words or photographs will ever do Orkney justice in my mind.

What has stayed with me the most, surprisingly, from that day, is a little place we visited at the end of our tour, almost as an afterthought. It is called the Italian Chapel. Built during World War II by Italian Prisoners of War, it is an odd-looking building from the outside. It's made up of two Nissen huts placed side by side, so it looks like a giant silo sitting on its side, half-buried in the ground. The front of the building has a painted concrete façade with arched windows and a small belfry, the only indication of the building's true use. If it weren't a tourist attraction, mentioned in all of the guidebooks, my guess is that few people would notice it, much less stop to see it.

I think I can speak for all twelve in our group when I said we were a little bit hesitant, to say the least, when our bus pulled into the parking lot. My hesitance disappeared, though, the moment I stepped through the Chapel's front door. Rarely before have I been so struck by the difference between a building's exterior and its interior. For as drab and unassuming as the Italian Chapel is from the outside, it is even more ornate and exquisite on the inside. At the end of a long day visiting arguably one of the most naturally beautiful places on earth, I was dumbstruck by a manmade tribute to God.

Over the course of three years, from 1942-1945, some of the 550 Italian prisoners of war encamped at Orkney were given the opportunity to build their chapel. What resulted from their efforts is truly a masterpiece. One of the prisoners, an artisan, covered the interior of the building with concrete, and then set about recreating a church he would have known from home, using the painting technique of *trompe l'oeil*, which gave the illusion of richly tiled walls and carved ceilings. Another prisoner, an ironworker, produced ornate screens to separate the chancel from the sanctuary.

Standing inside this exquisite space, I was overcome not just by the amount of work put in by these prisoners of war, but even more by their deep dedication to this project. Driven by their faith, in the midst of what was, no doubt, a very trying situation, they created a space that looked like very little from the outside, but radiated peace, reverence and faith on the inside. Quietly and with great dedication, these prisoners created an interior space that was a testimony to an enduring faith and a deep love of and reverence for God.

It is an apt metaphor, I think, for our lives. The outside appearance - what we say and do, what we read, what we listen to, the ways in which we decorate our own lives, though important, is not the full measure of our faith. It is what is on the inside - what our hearts are tuned to, that matters. Because ultimately the life of faith is not about us. It is about our God and his abundant love and grace that are poured out to all people. Only when we accept this and seek to live into our gratitude for this will our external selves begin truly to match our internal lives.

John Leith, in the introduction to a collection of writings of John Calvin, explains the reformer's take on it this way: "Piety, [which] combines reverence with love [and is] the proper attitude toward God, is also a disposition toward creation as the work of God and toward the neighbor who bears the divine image. It is a matter of the heart which can be expressed in outward works, but for which no outward works can become a substitute."<sup>1</sup> And so when we seek to understand how we are to act as Christians in this world which demands so much of us, perhaps it is helpful to think about how we might draw our fish in the sand – how we might live in such a way not that we attempt to prove our faithfulness, but rather that the love of God and love of neighbor are our primary guides, and how these things, which begin inside of us, might emanate God's love to a hurting world. When we do this, everything else will follow.

Thanks be to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Leith, John H. (Ed.) *The Christian Life*, by John Calvin. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1984), ix.