

Sermon: November 16, 2008

“Buy one ... get one free”

Our son is getting married next weekend ... so, I’ve been instructed to buy a new suit!! I guess the blue jeans and double-breasted jacket aren’t gonna cut it!!

So, down on LaGrange Road I see a sign in the window --- “buy one, get one free.”

I figure --- hey, two suits ... this should cover me right through my funeral.

I’m a bit nervous ... because I haven’t bought a suit for 10 years. That was when then congressman Jim Nussle invited me to pray before Congress ... but ---- had to be in a suit!! I went to Men’s Warehouse ... hooked-up with this distinguished gentleman named Willie ... and \$800 later walked out the door. Suit, shirt, tie, shoes, belt, socks ... maybe even a used car ... he sold me everything!!

So, I’m trying on this suit. I ask the gentleman helping me ---- “Now, if I buy one like this ... I get one like this free.” He looks at me ---- “Not exactly ...” Yes ---- the catch is coming.

“You need to buy a designer suit ... and then --- you get a suit like the one your are trying-on free.”

Certainly --- the ol’ “designer suit” routine!!

Well ... I end-up getting the suit ... I’m ready to pay the bill. I notice a series of “alteration charges” --- which I had assumed were part of the package. Well no. Separate.

I say to the salesperson ---- “The waist is the size of Montana ... and the pants are 8-feet long ... of course, they need to be altered. But, at these prices ... can’t you do the alterations as a courtesy???”

In life --- you can’t go by the sign on the window.

It’s not ‘til you get on the inside ... that you really discover the truth.

You can put anything on the sign ... say anything to get people to walk in. But the truth? ... reality? ...

it’s an inside job.

You want to get elected?

You want to be noticed?

Want to get someone to buy your product? ... to get them to try your church?

Want someone to buy into your philosophy or theology?

Well ---- say anything you want!! Put it on a sign!!

But the truth? ... it’s in here ... inside my heart and soul.

Speaking of “signs” ...

The last few weeks ... the lessons have been dealing with the so-called “signs of the times.”

In fact, the cover of today’s bulletin has these words:

“THE LORD WILL COME LIKE A THIEF IN THE NIGHT.”

Isn’t this comforting???

When I think of God & Jesus ... I certainly don’t think of a thief!! My thoughts turn to words like:

comforter ... shepherd ... healer ... forgiver ...

a judge with a heart ... not a judge who rules with fear ...

The early church wasn’t pretty ... and some of this “un-pretty-ness” is present today.

Too many preachers and churches want to divide God’s children into the “haves” and “have-nots” ... the righteous and the unrighteous ... the save and the un-saved.

The early followers of Jesus were convinced ----- he would come back “like a thief in the night” ... scoop-up all the “believers” ... and leave behind all the others to rot in hell.

Well, you know something???? ----- it’s like the sign in the window ... it’s like the empty promises of a satellite preacher ----- it ain’t gonna happen!!

Jesus is back. Always has been ... always will be.

He lives in the spaces and places where we work & play everyday. He lives in garages and factories ... in love buckets and tail-gate parties ... school hallways and lawyers’ offices ... church offices and school gyms ...

Yes, the only sign that counts is the one each of us chooses to wear ... inside our hearts, in the way we treat our brothers and sisters in our journey through this world.

The gospel this morning is a bit angry ... but it does have a point.
Each of us has been given talents ... true, some of us more or less than others. And we do have a tendency to worship and honor and pay homage to those who have the most.

But ... life --- at least the way Jesus wants us to live it --- is not about “how much” or “how little.”

Life is all about what we do with what we have.

Whether you pour coffee at Starbucks ... preach or teach ... wash dishes at the local restaurant ... or wash-away someone’s sins in your local temple ... it’s all about using & nurturing whatever gifts you’ve been given.

You may be in a wheelchair at Manor Care nursing center ... maybe your memory isn’t what it used to be ... but our “talent” never goes away. Each of us has wisdom ... and time ... and our God-given humanity ----- and nothing or nobody can ever take it away.

The other day ... 200-plus folks gathered in this humble sanctuary to say “good-bye” to Patrick ... whose earthly journey ended at the age of 29. Like the signs hanging in store windows up-and-down LaGrange Road ... there are those who made assumptions about Patrick --- from the “outside.”

Yes ... Patrick was too young ... and he had a tough life.

But with Patrick – like all of us – the truth about him is on the inside.

For years he battled an addiction.

He was so proud of his recovery.

Every morning he woke up ... knowing he had to battle being bi-polar ... it was part of his journey, part of his humanity.

He loved comin’ to church on Thursday nights with his mom ... sitting right there in the 3rd row. Patrick ... he never hid his battles ... always reaching-out to others ... trying to help them deal with their “issues” by telling his story ---- clearly and honestly.

Patrick’s “talents” weren’t the run-of-the-mill ordinary kind. They were born of struggle and hardship ... nurtured and accepted by his loving family ... no pretense ---- his gift, his contribution to making our world a better place.

The bag-piper leads the hearse out of the parking lot.

As they turn onto LaGrange Road ... the motorcycles “kick-in” ... and Patrick is on his way.

On his way ----- to a “kingdom” of peace and comfort ... and some new-found joy.

This scene is a reminder:

Jesus doesn’t come “like a thief in the night.”

He comes as a savior ... a friend ... a shepherd.

And --- the “signs of the times”????

They are all around us. We don’t need to read them ... just live them.

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