

I'll Pledge Allegiance...in a Minute
Luke 9: 57-62
Don Lincoln



In downtown Annapolis, MD is a restaurant called Chick and Ruth's Delly. It opened in 1965 and was a family business for 52 years, until their son sold it in 2017. But the menu and traditions remain: crab omelets; chicken and waffles, pastrami sandwich – if it's classic diner fare, they've got it at Chick and Ruth's.

I lived in Annapolis for 10 years and ate there many times, but I'll never forget my first time eating breakfast at Chick and Ruth's, I was digging into my eggs, hash browns and scrapple, when suddenly, at 8:30am sharp, everything stopped – wait staff; kitchen staff; diners alike – and everyone – and I mean EVERYONE – stood up – faced the American Flag, and recited the Pledge of Allegiance. I'd never seen anything like that in my life.

No ifs, ands or buts. You didn't take another sip of coffee; you didn't stay in your seat. You didn't DARE stay in your seat. In **that moment** nothing else took priority over your obligation to stand in Chick and Ruth's Delly and say the Pledge of Allegiance.



Our text from the gospel of Luke does not speak of a moment of focus – a little brief declaration of who you are at 8:30 in the morning and then back to your breakfast. This is about a lifetime of engagement – the primacy of the call to follow Jesus, and His claim on our lives.

When an enthusiastic follower gushes about his loyalty, Jesus mentions having no place to lay his head. If you don't get it in those few verses, Jesus is making it clear the implication is that the Christian life has no guarantee of being easy or comfortable, and may in fact be ripe with inconvenience. If this would-be, enthusiastic follower wants a soft and cuddly Savior, he has not found one in Jesus.

Jesus calls another to follow him, but that one offers the excuse of having to bury his father. Some interpreters suggest since burial took place quickly in those days, the man's father had not yet died and the man was basically saying, "Let me wait until my father is gone and buried, and then I'll join up." "Let the dead bury the dead," Jesus says. The time to follow is NOW!

Jesus is selling intensity and urgency. Another traveler on the way offers to follow Jesus: "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at home." I love the metaphor Jesus gives because even if you are not a farmer, you understand it. "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." You will not plow a straight line looking over your shoulder. **Nothing** should cause us to hesitate, or take away our sense of urgency for the Gospel and the world God loves.

But how many times have you and I offered Jesus a version of this last excuse? "Sure, Lord, I'll follow you! I'll give you everything I've got, I promise. But later. After I..."

After I what? After I finish these last few **super important** projects. After I find a spouse. After I lose twenty pounds. After I get over my dysfunctional past. After I raise my kids. After I spend a few more years cozying up to my boss. After I get a raise. And pay off my grad school loans. And buy a house at the shore. And retire. And turn forty, fifty, sixty, seventy, eighty...I will, Lord, just after...

The list is endless, and that's precisely Jesus' point. If our to-do list **ends** with Jesus instead of beginning with Jesus, we'll never get to Jesus.

It's clear from this text if you and I want a God who respects **OUR** priorities; honors **OUR** social, cultural, and economic boundaries; keeps **OUR** lives neat and orderly, Jesus is not that God. If we want a spirituality that's comfortable rather than costly, stable rather than transformative, we should walk away now.¹

Now I know, that sounds harsh and pretty radical. But you and I see glimpses – hints of that kind of response to the call to commitment almost daily.

After all, what motivates people to place themselves in harm's way in efforts to save others? What moves firefighters and police officers to rush into deadly danger zones to put out fires, rescue those in peril or try to settle unrest and restore peace? What drives military personnel to place their lives on the line in defense of a nation? What spurs the

Nelson Mandelas and Martin Luther King, Juniors to risk their lives in protest of institutional or national iniquity?

It's some higher calling – some deeper allegiance – deeper even than convenience, more primary than even family or friends. A commitment to some greater good, some common good, or even some **uncommon** good!

It's clear in Scripture that all allegiances are always secondary to our allegiance to God. When the early Christians said "Jesus is Lord," they knew without question it was a political statement.² Because if Jesus is Lord, than Caesar is not. No nation, not even ours, demands a higher allegiance than our allegiance to Jesus Christ as his followers in the world.

This Gospel text – and the call to allegiance – is the perfect introduction to our upcoming preaching/teaching series on the Letter to the Colossians.

What was happening in Colossae was an attack on the total adequacy and the unique supremacy of Christ.³ Jesus, plus this. Jesus, along with that. Or Jesus, minus this. They were in danger of dethroning Christ from His unique place as the only true mediator of God. Scaling down the person and work of Christ; limiting the scope of his redemptive work, filching from Him His uniqueness.⁴

Because of that, some were questioning the authority of Christ in one's life. "So," one scholar says, "Colossians is a letter about authority. Not a coercive authority like Rome – but a liberating authority – the One who frees us to be who we are really intended to be."⁶ Frees us to live life in relationship with God and others as God desires, as God hoped, and as God designed in the beginning of Creation and for us to revel in the fruitfulness of that life.

Yes, Jesus bids us come and die – die to self – but even more, Jesus bids us come and live! I pledge allegiance – to THIS Christ – who sets me free from the burden of sin, free to love and serve and be fully human as I was intended to be.

We will discover the epistle to the Colossians was an explosive tract, animating a way of life that was subversive to the ethos of the Roman empire. And it can and ought to function in an analogous way in the imperial realities of our time.

Colossians insists that an alternative vision of reality; an alternative imagination and an alternative way of life can be formed and sustained in the context of community – in this case the community of those who have pledged allegiance to Jesus Christ.

A community not called to overthrow the empire's social order, but rather by their life together to disarm it, to reveal its emptiness, to show its prejudices and inequities

compared to their gatherings in house churches in Colossae where slave, master, husband, wife, Jew and Greek are equals in love and service to one another, and to Christ.⁷

You'll find most of all that there's no letter in the entire New Testament that has a loftier view of Jesus, than this letter to the Colossians. Those who know it well say here is proclaimed the cosmic Christ – the cosmic Christ - the One overall who bids you and me to follow Him. And so we do.....

1. Debi Thomas, www.JourneyWithJesus.net, June 23, 2019.
2. Jim Wallis, Sojourners Online, July 3, 2019.
3. William Barclay, the *Daily Study Bible* Commentary on Colossians.
4. Archibald Hunter, *Layman's Bible Commentary*, Letter to the Colossians.
5. The Rev. Dr. Mark Achtemeier, author, theologian, former professor of New Testament from Dubuque Seminary, SKYPE conversation with Westminster team about the Letter to the Colossians.
6. Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed*, Intervarsity Press.
7. Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired* – chapter entitled “The Letter,” Thomas Nelson Publishing.