

"INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE JOURNEY"
MATTHEW 9:35-10:8

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University Church of Chicago
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Think with me for a moment about three of the most commonly used words in the American language. Note that I did not say the English language. Our American way of speaking is different from English. As Winston Churchill remarked, "The British and the Americans are two cultures separated by a common language." The thought is derived from a book by one of my favorite unorthodox authors, the inimitable Kinky Friedman, who used to have a country-and-western band called "Kinky Friedman and His Texas Jewboys," but lately has become a mystery writer. He most recently ran a political race to become the Governor of Texas. The book is not worth reading but the title has intrigued me for several years, because it brings together the three most widely used proper names in the English language: "Jesus, Elvis and Coca-Cola."

Moreover, the three name a trinity of powerful urges. Elvis represents our entertainment culture. More popular and probably long-lasting than Michael Jordan. The King of Rock and Roll, the most popular recording artist in history, he has sold over a billion records, more than anyone in the history of music. The only three albums for which Elvis received Grammy awards were for gospel music. He was, after all, from Tupelo, Mississippi, and was raised as a fundamentalist Christian.

Elvis's home, Graceland, is the most visited home in America after the White House. Over 700,000 people per year go to Memphis, shop big time in the Graceland souvenir shop and spend time in its "Meditation Garden," a place the King himself never visited.

There's a culture issue at stake here. It may be best explained by a list our son Jim faxed me last week: "Thirty-six Things You Will Never Hear a Southerner Say." As tempted as I am and as much as you need to hear the whole list, I will give you only a selection:

"I'll take Shakespeare for 1000, Alex."
"Duct tape won't fix that."
"You can't feed that to the dog."
"Honey, did you mail that donation to Greenpeace?"
"The tires on that truck are too big."
"She's too old to be wearing that bikini."
and, "I thought Graceland was tacky."

Coca-Cola started out as a Southern product, the long-hidden recipe manufactured by the brother of one of our most despotic Methodist bishops. In a wonderful book I read several years ago, **For God, Country and Coca-Cola**, Mark Pendergast maintains that Coke has "entered the lives of more people...than any other product or ideology, including the Christian religion." "Coke is the holy grail, it's magic," one of the company's executives declared to Mr. Pendergast. "Wherever I go, when people find out I work for Coke, it's like being a representative from the Vatican, like you've touched God. I'm always amazed. There's such a reverence toward the product."

Forty thousand Cokes are consumed per second. Coca-Cola is sold in every major league stadium except Wrigley Field. Is that perhaps why the Cubs have not been in the World Series since 1945 and haven't won the Series since 1908?

Mr. Pendergast maintains that "Coke has achieved the status of a substitute modern religion which promotes a particular, satisfying, all-inclusive world view espousing perennial values such as love, peace and universal brotherhood. It provides a panacea whenever daily life seems too difficult, harried, fragmented or confused. As a sacred symbol, Coca-Cola induces varying 'worshipful' moods, ranging from exaltation to pensive solitude, from near-orgasmic togetherness to playful games of chase."

What Coca-Cola represents is the apogee of a consumer culture. Who among us doesn't want to feel good, to experience pleasure? Preachers like to blame the advertising industry for consumerism, because preachers like simple, easy, moralistic answers to difficult problems. But consumerism is not just the result of outside forces which convince us to buy. In fact, many in-depth studies have revealed the cynicism of the American public about commercials.

One way anthropologists study a culture is to look at its taboos. What will the people not discuss? What is out of bounds for conversation? In our culture, it used to be sex. McCauley, the great nineteenth century British historian said that there are three things you never discuss in polite company: sex, politics, and religion. Well, we talk about nothing but the first two in modern North American culture. But the one subject we don't talk about is money.

Because money is the most taboo subject, the hidden part of our lives, we harbor all kinds of fantasies about its power and it assumes incredible proportions in our imagination. So, we buy because we think money will open us to life's hidden secrets, will reveal meaning to us.

We seek meaning in our lives. I am convinced that more people go to church on a Sunday because they are bothered by God's absence in the world than because they have experienced God's presence. All those sightings of Elvis in our time are evidence of our search for meaning, a quest for something beyond the ordinary so that we can find meaning in the mundane.

In today's Gospel lection, Jesus gives some mundane instructions to The Twelve. Instructions about first-century corollaries to Coca-Cola and Elvis sightings and money. Jesus' instructions to the Twelve define the arena of their work and the work they are to do. They are to go to their own first, the Jews; then to the Gentiles. But most important is the work to which he calls them. The list fits the contours of Jesus' own ministry as recorded by Matthew: preaching, healing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing lepers and casting out demons.

The first verse of today's Gospel lection reads, "And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity" (9:35). That verse virtually repeats Matthew 4:23, forming what is known in literature as an inclusion. Matthew very neatly concludes a whole section of his gospel with the same verse with which he began it and thereby giving it unity. He's telling us that what we have learned about Jesus' teachings and miracles of healing we must now practice as his disciples.

Henry Hitt Crane used to say that the way you spell Love is L-O-Y-A-L-T-Y. Your loyalties define your real loves. Don't tell me you love me if your loyalty is to someone else. Don't talk to me about your love for Christ and His Church if you show up at Christmas or Easter or—as some folks do—whenever it suits your fancy. Your loyalties are the measure of your true love. It's

easy to figure out what and whom you love. Check your date book: with whom do you spend your time. Look over your bank statement: where do you spend your money.

Jesus is calling his followers to measure their loyalties, their love by the way they spend their energy and money and time. Christopher Lasch did a lot of writing about what he called “the minimal self,” the self that cannot tell the difference between the self and the other, between the self and what is not really authentic in one’s life. We are lost, says Lasch, in a world of flickering images, unable to tell the difference between fantasy and reality. We think our self is defined by the roles we play. We have lost any sense of our life as a story or a narrative.

But for a follower of Jesus it’s all about the story of salvation and redemption and forgiveness—and living it out in the small things of life.

Do you make lists? I live by lists. I have a list of things to do that is mile long, and while there are a number of things that I genuinely want to do, the majority of them are things I think I ought to do. I live by oughts and shoulds. As Barbara Brown Taylor has said, “I may believe that I live by God’s grace, but I act like a scout collecting merit badges...the truth is that every human being who longs to know God lives with the tension between grace and works. On one hand, we long to believe that God comes to us as we are, utterly unimpressed by the tricks we do for love. On the other hand, we live in a world where those tricks often work really well, so that it is next to impossible to give up believing in them, too.”

So, when Jesus gives these instructions to his followers, he is not telling us to keep living by the tricks, by works. Every day, dear friends, is not a talent show. God has better things to do than keep up with my score and yours.

Jeremiah Wright preached a sermon at Trinity UCC Church several years ago in which he likened some of these biblical instructions as “unhitching the trailer.” That is, Jesus is telling us to get rid of some of the burdensome, destructive baggage of our past as a church. We need to unhitch some trailers around here, don’t we? When we unhitch some trailers that are filled with anger, regret, memories of past slights, all the meetings in which we did or did not get our way and nobody paid attention to our wisdom. We need to travel lighter as a congregation by forgiving and forgetting and embracing one another as sisters and brothers in Christ.

One of the most surprising and delightful aspects of the life of University Church is that you all have potluck suppers. We tried them a couple of times when I served in the Loop, mostly when nostalgia gripped us. But they were not successful. Even suburban churches have forsaken them. Potluck, covered dish, by whatever name the food is generally called can vary in tastefulness, but the fellowship is wonderful. We have also found other ways to eat together, because we know inchoately that when you sit down at a meal with someone, you share a special experience.

We do that when we go out to eat in restaurants. It’s a secular way of experiencing something spiritual. In a culture in which most of us eat at least half our meals outside the home, we understand the shared intimacy of talking and laughing and sharing dreams and disappointments, hopes and hurts. We’re seeking something. The community of faith called the church offers something that no other group can give: forgiveness coupled with faith, help coupled with hope, rejuvenation coupled with joy.

I don't read Stephen King's books, so I didn't read **The Shawshank Redemption**, and I saw the movie on an El Al flight across the Atlantic when I had failed to acquire some earphones from the flight attendant, so I had to decipher it from the Hebrew subtitles. Thus, I'm not sure about all the message of the movie, but bear with me as I try to reconstruct one of the sequences.

Andy Dufrense is sentenced to two back-to-back life terms for crimes he did not commit, and he is imprisoned in Shawshank, the most vile and evil penitentiary of its time. Andy becomes the prison librarian and petitions the state legislature for books and records so that Shawshank's inmates can read and learn and enjoy some of life's beauty.

When a huge shipment of used books and records arrives one day, Andy becomes intoxicated by Mozart's "Marriage of Figaro." He locks the warden and the guards out of the warden's office and plays the Duetto-Sull Aria over the prison loudspeaker system. He is put in solitary and systematically tortured, but he later explains to his friends, "I had Mr. Mozart to keep me company." He points to his head and heart as he continues, "It's in here. That's the beauty of music...so you don't forget that there are places in the world not made out of stone, that there's something inside that they can't get to, that they can't touch. It's yours."

"Do you love me?" Faith is a personal relationship with Christ (Jn. 15:1-8), and this relationship has its expression not only in words but in obedience (14:15). One particular form of this obedience is caring for others as Christ did (10:1-17; 20:21). For some, like Peter, this caring will result in death by martyrdom (16:2); but to all of us, wherever discipleship may lead, the word with which we began our relationship with Jesus is still the final word: "Follow me."

This word to the church to proclaim the Good News demands that the church which has freely received should freely give. The most important part of Our Lord's instruction for the journey is summed up in Matthew's coda: "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them" (9:36).