

Christian Education Sunday Message for June 11, 2017

“You Didn’t Join the Navy, You Joined the Pirates”

By Cathy Cono

Please pray with me: “May my imperfect and finite words be acceptable to You, O Lord, and a worthy vehicle for speaking Your Word to Your people. Amen.”

In 2003, I was working for a small marketing analytics firm that was owned by a British advertising conglomerate. One day, the 100 or so employees gathered for a meeting with the CEO of the parent company who was visiting the US. At that time, advertising operated like many large and mature industries. Key players controlled the field and battles were done to win accounts and deliver the newest, flashiest, most engaging advertising for the biggest dollars. Think Super Bowl ads. But they operated a formula that was tried and true and nobody dared go outside the time tested way of operating. It just wasn’t done. Against this backdrop, the CEO praised the work of our company saying that we were pioneers in using data and analytics to develop unprecedented insights into consumer behavior. And the data showed that the tried and true wasn’t always working. In some cases, it was failing miserably. Our combination of statistics and large volumes of retail sales data was leading to conclusions that would change the way marketing was done. And he was clearly very excited about it. He believed we were leading the industry from our small outpost in Wilton, CT and he wanted us to understand just how revolutionary it was. He told us that “we didn’t join the Navy, we joined the Pirates”.

Great, so other than the fact that it’s Pirate Day, what could this possibly have to do with today’s scripture readings or your faith journey at all? Rest assured, I’m not going to start promoting violence and illegal behavior. Nor am I going to cast the Navy or any of our military

in a negative light. That's not where we're going at all. Instead let's look more closely at today's Gospel readings. They paint an extreme picture of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Hate your family, carry your cross, don't go back to say goodbye, don't even take time to bury your father! What are we to make of these extreme statements? Are we not to follow the commandment to honor our mother and father? Love our neighbor? I think Jesus uses extreme examples to impress on us just how far we are expected to go in following him. He doesn't want hesitant or timid followers. He doesn't want you to simply show up, do what everyone else is doing, or preserve the status quo. His mission is so much bigger than that. He needs followers to transform the world! You need to be comfortable rocking the boat, changing course, and going where no one has gone before. You need to get that uncomfortable feeling when something's not right and do something about it, even at great personal risk – for the sake of the kingdom. It takes pirate thinking to have courage and be the one that goes against the tide. To say yes to inclusion when the world says no. To say no to destructive behaviors and addictions when the world says yes. To tithe when the world says you need a 72 inch TV and an iPhone 8.

Mary Taylor has a pretty good track record of pirate behavior. Years ago, one member urged us to switch from paper goods to dishes at fellowship time because our actions were inconsistent with our stated values of stewardship and sustainability. Did everyone agree with the change? No, of course not. It's more work to wash the dishes every week and we wondered how we could ask even more from those who were already doing the work of hosting. But that pirate held firm and eventually made us realize we had to walk the talk. As our denomination struggles to fully accept openly LGBTQ individuals into the life of the church, we are a reconciling congregation that proclaims a resounding welcome to all. Our pastors affirm this at personal risk by performing same sex marriages and appointing our LGBTQ brothers and sisters

to leadership positions. Yes, we show signs of risk taking for justice, but we need to do more. We need pirates to bring bold ideas for contemporary worship, engaging our youth, incorporating technology more fully into our church life, and reaching a more diverse population. Are there ideas for your ministry that you've thought about, but never acted upon? Is there a role to which God may be calling you, but for which you don't feel equipped? Have you planned to spend more time in Bible study "when the time is right"? Is there something that you think needs to change at Mary Taylor, but you're afraid it will be seen as too radical? You didn't join the Navy, you joined the pirates and you need to take action!

Today is Peace with Justice Sunday. I'd like to tell you about Rev. Dr. Tina Carter and Rev. Dr. Mindy Johnson-Hicks who head up an organization called "Redemptive Work" out of Austin, TX. Their mission is to build work experience and professional connections for individuals deemed "traditionally unemployable" due to a prison record, homelessness, health problems, or troublesome family situations that discourage potential employers. Rather than accept society's designation of "unemployable", they saw possibilities beyond the barriers. They work with clients one on one to redirect God-given skills in a constructive manner. They tell the story of a man whose business skills gained through drug trafficking were discerned through intensive counseling and eventually redirected to a successful position with Goodwill trucking. They took the risk, met him where he was, and worked with him to turn his life around and strengthen the kingdom. In 2014, Drs. Carter and Johnson-Hicks launched a Kickstarter campaign to fund their book "A Bias Toward Action", a tool to inspire churches and ministry organizations to boldly approach their own call to action. In the book, Dr. Carter explains her philosophy in this way "I have lived my life trying to dance with God rather than waiting to make sure I know every step before I enter the dance floor. My idea of a Christian life well lived

usually plays out more like a comedy improv than a perfectly scripted drama.” As Pastor Brian reminded us last week, we are all “cracked pots”, but it’s more important that we carry the water, flaws and all, than shy away from the job because we’re not perfect. Through grace, God uses us and our imperfections to minister to the world. Our Peace with Justice Sunday offering today supports Redemptive Work and many other organizations that exhibit pirate thinking.

Incidentally, one of the standard criteria on performance evaluations at that marketing analytics firm was “Bias for Action”. I don’t think this is a coincidence!

At today’s festivities, there will undoubtedly be talk about Captain Kidd burying treasure on Charles Island in the 1600’s. Captain Kidd, Blackbeard, and Anne Bonney plundered to enrich themselves. You’re plundering to enrich God’s kingdom. The essence of daring, risk-taking, and shaking up the establishment is the same, but the motivation and the treasure is completely different. When you leave the sanctuary today and see a pirate flag bearing that familiar skull and crossbones, I hope you’ll remember the skull of Golgatha, the cross of Calvary, and the charge you have from Jesus. Don’t put a hand to the plowshare and look back. Be bold for him, have courage to take risks, go in a different direction, and work for justice in all situations even when it is messy, costly, and uncomfortable. Remember that Jesus will be with you every step of the way and that your pirate thinking will reap treasure for God’s kingdom.

Luke 9: 57-62 - The Cost of Following Jesus

⁵⁷ As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.”

⁵⁸ Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”

⁵⁹ He said to another man, “Follow me.” But he replied, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.”

⁶⁰ Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”

⁶¹ Still another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.”

⁶² Jesus replied, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”

Luke 14:25-27 – The Cost of Being a Disciple

²⁵ Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said:

²⁶ “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.

²⁷ And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

Matthew 28:16-20 – The Commissioning of the Disciples

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.

¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.

¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”