

## *On the Road: Practicing Our Footwork*

Luke 12:22-34

We're still on this path—walking, together, until we make a road of it—a road that we will travel again and again, a road where our children and grandchildren will be able to see our footsteps. It is a road made not only by our steps but by all those feet in walking shoes that have come before us.

Maybe you already know that our friend Melinda is planning to hike the Pacific Crest Trail next spring. That's the trail that runs from the California/Mexico border all the way to Canada, through the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Four months Melinda plans to be gone, and she's been training by taking shorter backpacking hikes most weekends. She's trying out different pairs of hiking boots, so she can see which ones will be best for those longer distances. She stretches the length of each hike, to get her body ready for the long days—120 of them—that she wants to be ready to walk. You'd never think about starting a hike of that distance without months and months of this kind of preparation, of practice. Practice is an important part of everything we want to get good at doing. It's not just important; it's critical.

John Wooden, the legendary basketball coach from UCLA, wrote a memoir about his coaching life and philosophy. I'm really not much of a basketball fan, but even I know that John Wooden is famous for the success of the basketball teams he coached. In his book Wooden credited much of his teams' winning to his insistence on fundamentals of the game, which he drilled into his players. Probably some of you know without even reading the book that one of the distinctive things about Wooden's basketball teams was that every time *any* player took a shot at the basket, every UCLA player had both hands up, ready to catch the rebound. Immediately. Every player. No hesitating to think first about where the shot might come down. Wooden drilled this reaction into his players; every day they practiced it, over and over again.

I started thinking about how unnatural this must have felt to those players when they first started on the team, how silly even, to put your hands up *every* time, whether you saw the rebound coming toward you or not. But Wooden was insistent, and because he was the coach, they practiced the drill every day, until it became part of the way they played; so that when they were in a game, no matter how stressed they were, or what their position on the court, the action came instinctively, without their even thinking about it. The ball went up toward the basket, and every UCLA player's hands went up above his shoulders. The ability of UCLA teams at rebounds became a huge factor in their success.

Now, as you can imagine, I'm not so interested in that story for its tips on winning basketball games. But I love that image of players with their hands up in the air. That motion—hands up, palms out—is similar to the motion that Jesus spent much of his life coaching his followers toward. What Jesus talked about, and lived the example of, was living with your hands out and your palms up, in that posture of giving and trust that is so unnatural for most of us. Our culture drills us to practice another posture, which is something more like this: arms folded in front of us, holding on as tightly as we can to all that we care for and hold dear, for fear that we'll lose it, or that it will be taken away from us. To open your arms and your hands in front of you, the posture of giving, feels vulnerable. Sometimes it even feels a little naïve.

And it always has. Jesus spent more time talking about letting go of your money than he did about prayer, or the law, or almost anything else. I think he spent so much time talking about money and possessions because he knew that for most of us, in every age, anxiety and faith will always be woven together, always in tension, always pushing us in different directions.

There's an ancient story about medieval knights, perhaps in the days of King Arthur's Round Table. The story goes that before they went into battle, many of the knights wanted to be baptized, so they could feel like God was protecting them as they marched into danger. But when those knights waded out into the middle of the river for baptism, it was also the custom for them to hold their sword in one hand, high above the water, as if to say, "*This part of me will not be subjected to the change that baptism brings. This part of me belongs to someone else. The part of me that does battle belongs to the king, not to Jesus Christ.*"

*That's* the natural action for us, the motion that comes instinctively: to hold something out of our commitment, to hold our possessions and our money tightly against our chests, or above our baptized heads, lest God ask us for something that is hard for us to give. Lest someone ask us for something that we might need for ourselves. Lest our conversation about trusting God to take care of us make us people who actually *need* God to take care of us.

The work of the Church is to coach us into that other, vulnerable, position--as unnatural as it seems. A position in which every part of our lives is immersed in the water of our baptism. Every fall when we talk about stewardship, and every Sunday when we talk about giving, and every time the Church invites you to see the need of someone else, the Church is drilling you—calling you to practice--a life of self-giving, a life we live with our hands out, ready to give ourselves for something we believe in and for needs that are not our own.

That's the Church's work: to stand in contrast to a culture that says, over and over again, in a thousand different ways, "Hold onto everything you can. Don't give anything away until you're sure you'll have enough for everything you might someday want and need." The Church is like our coach, showing up every week to drill us in the practice of giving, for the work that God not only wants, but needs us to do—to give ourselves away for love of the world.

That's the same drill Jesus was coaching his disciples toward in the passage that we read this morning. Jesus said all kinds of things that must have sounded just as unrealistic to those disciples as they do to us. "Don't worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will wear...Sell your possessions and give offerings to others...Don't keep striving and worrying for the things you need to survive...Put your energy into work for the kingdom of God, and all of these other things will be taken care of."

"Oh, really?" we're inclined to ask, as our arms return instinctively to cover ourselves. "That doesn't make sense. It's completely unrealistic." The Bible doesn't tell us the disciples said those things, but Jesus must have known that's what they were thinking. And so he ended this lesson with one of those truths that he knew and that we have to be taught: "The place where your treasure is, is the place you will most want to be, and end up being." In the translation that is more familiar to us: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” What does that mean? The reverse of that statement would be obvious: where your heart is, there your treasure goes too. That’s how most of us have heard this saying preached, even how I have preached it myself: that you can see where your heart is by looking at where you spend your treasure—your time, your money, your energy. That’s true, but it’s not particularly good news; it’s just obvious. And it’s not what Jesus said.

He said it the other way around: Jesus said that where you put your treasure is the place your heart will follow. The point of this saying is not that how we spend our money reveals what sort of people we already are. The point is that how we spend our money determines what sort of people we *become*.

According to Jesus, there is a way to alter your affections, to steer your heart toward the things you want to love. We can decide what we *want* to care about, and then we can do something that will change us inside until we really do care about those things. Now *that’s* good news.

Do you want to love God more? Then *practice* loving God. Pray. Read the Bible. Spend time with other people who are practicing loving God. Give ten percent of your income away. Not because it’s a rule you’re supposed to follow to be a good person. Do it because it’s how you will learn to trust God more. It’s a pathway to a deeper, more meaningful spiritual life. Martin Luther, the great reformer of the Church, used to say that everyone needs to experience three conversions: conversions of heart and mind and purse. He didn’t say that because he was a fundraiser. He said it because he wanted people to know how deeply satisfying the spiritual life can be, and he knew that unless we commit *all* of ourselves to it, without reservation, we’re not likely to know that for ourselves.

The Stewardship Committee has written you a letter, asking you to calculate what percentage of your income you *have* been giving to the church, and to think and pray about raising that percentage—so that if last year you gave 2% of your income, in 2015, you might give 3%; and so on. I know that’s not the way we usually think about how much we will pledge to the church. We usually think about whether we might be able to give a little more next year without noticing the money is gone. But we’re *supposed* to notice. Giving to God’s work *should* make some difference in how we experience life from day to day. If giving to the church is like taking the spare change from your wallet or checking account at the end of the month, then your giving doesn’t have enough meaning; it’s not enough to change your life.

The church is the coach that is asking you, for the next year, to *practice* living as though you trust Jesus’ promise that you don’t have to worry so much about having enough. It’s coaching you to practice a drill that does not come easily or naturally, maybe even one that feels a little bit risky. But the church is also the collection of people who are on the same team, practicing the same counter-intuitive, counter-cultural skill.

I’m suggesting that next month when we make our pledges to the church for the next year, you make a pledge that’s beyond your comfort level; that you write on your pledge card an amount that you might otherwise be inclined to say, “I’d like to if I could.” Do it because you *want* to be

able to trust that Jesus meant it when he said, "...all these things will be given to you as well."  
Do it because just making that step toward God with your treasure has the power to change your heart and your life.

*Practice* the life you want to live.