

Giving It Up: Our Lives Sunday, 4/2/17

1 James Hudson Taylor was a uniquely effective 19th century missionary who gave up his life for Christ. I don't mean that he was a martyr, but his story makes clear that he was sold out for Jesus, entirely focused on living out his calling to make disciples for Jesus. One modern missiologist said of Taylor, "More than any other human being, James Hudson Taylor, ...made the greatest contribution to the cause of world mission in the 19th century." Taylor spent 51 years in China, founded the China Inland Mission, recruited over 800 missionaries, started 125 schools, established a church of 125,000, and personally baptized over 50,000. He was so dedicated to his mission that he chose to live among the common Chinese people, even adopting their style of dress and growing a ponytail, despite being widely mocked by his peers for doing so.

The story of Hudson Taylor is one of adversity: Poverty, disease, fire, political upheaval, rejection, depression, and just about any other obstacle you can imagine was faced by this man of God during his life time. When he first arrived in Shanghai at the young age of 21, he was shocked to find himself in the middle of a civil war. And yet, remarkably, in the face of so much adversity, including the death of his wife and son, he persisted. Why?

Disciples of Jesus have always faced adversity, including the black despair and grief that comes so often with death. Last week I mentioned that only twice in the Gospels is Jesus recorded as having wept in public. Our second Scripture reading this morning is a record of one of those accounts. I'm reading from the Gospel of John, chapter 11, starting with verse 1. **{Read John 11:1-7, NLT}**

2 Let's pause for a moment to reflect on what this scene would have looked like in 2017. Imagine that someone in your family was seriously ill, ravaged by an infirmity that would likely result in their death. For some of us, we don't even have to imagine that, do we? We've lived through that scenario. Imagine then contacting a close friend who can make your beloved well, but who appears to shrug off the emergency as if it's nothing. Hopefully you haven't lived through that. How would you feel? Would you be angry? Anxious? Desperate? For Martha, Mary, and I imagine some of the disciples who also knew Lazarus, there must have been some serious eyebrow furrowing and hand wringing. Let's continue now with John's account, picking up in verse 11.

{Read John 11:11-16, NLT}

Wow, did you hear what Jesus said? He knew that Lazarus was going to die, but he allowed it because he had something in mind that somehow made his death count for something greater. Now I want you to imagine how you might have received that kind of statement in the midst of your grief. From the perspective of grief, doesn't Jesus come off as just a little bit callous? Facing the death of your beloved, don't the words of Jesus sound a little bit like that awful thing people sometimes say today to the bereaved, "God must have needed another angel?" Jesus knew that Lazarus was going to rise again, and very soon, but how could Mary or Martha or the disciples even begin to comprehend that the death of Lazarus wasn't to be his end? Notice also the morose comment by Thomas at the end of that passage: "Let's go, too- and die with Jesus." Not only did Thomas, and perhaps the other disciples, doubt that Lazarus would rise again, they believed that a return to Judea meant the certain death of Jesus at the hands of the Jewish leaders, and probably their own death as well. And yet they chose to follow Jesus. Why?

3 What is it that leads Christians to follow Jesus into the jaws of certain death?

Hudson Taylor's motivations are revealed in some of his more notable quotations. For example, "There are three great truths, 1st, That there is a God; 2nd, That He has spoken to us in the Bible; 3rd, That He means what He says. Oh, the joy of trusting Him!" Some might say that his faith was simple, and perhaps it was. But that simple faith produced powerful fruit! If someone asked you to summarize three great truths, what would you say? How closely do the actions of your life match with your three truths?

Or how about this Hudson Taylor quote, "Fruit-bearing involves cross-bearing. We know how the Lord Jesus became fruitful – not by bearing His Cross merely, but by dying on it." Fruit-bearing involves cross-bearing! You know what this kind of cross-bearing means, don't you? It means sacrificing yourself for the sake of others. When was the last time you did some cross-bearing, letting a part of yourself die so that another might live? Is cross-bearing what was in the minds of the disciples of Jesus as they followed him back to Judea and the homicidal Pharisees and Sadduces? Maybe we don't give them enough credit after all!

4 Let's continue the account of the death of Lazarus now, picking up in verse 20 of John 11, as Jesus is confronted by the grieving Mary and Martha. **{Read John 11:20-27, NLT}**.

I invite you to place yourself again in this scene. Perhaps you're like Mary, the grieving sister of the now dead Lazarus, who is apparently so upset with Jesus that instead of rushing out to greet him like Martha does, decides to stay home and sulk a while longer. Perhaps you're more like Martha, who goes out on behalf of her sister and now dead brother and scolds Jesus with these words, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." She's exactly right, of course, even if her perspective on the situation isn't quite large enough. But Jesus, full of compassion, does his best to explain what is so hard for Martha, and so hard for us today, to understand: Death is not the end of life. But Martha is confused, just like many are still confused today, thinking that the life Jesus offers only applies to the resurrection of the dead at the end of time. Jesus, as was his style, explains a profound and divine mystery as plainly as he can: "I am the resurrection and the life."

5 It's easy for us to repeat some of those glib phrases from Jesus, but wrestling with their meaning- wrestling with God- is harder and requires us to dwell on the mystery for a time. Did Jesus mean that he had the power to raise Lazarus that very day? Yes, and as he often did, he gave the grieving sisters and all the gathered mourners a sign of his divine authority by raising Lazarus from his tomb. But the miraculous signs of Jesus were never intended to be an end in and of themselves. There never would have been enough hours in the day for Jesus to raise all the dying people in and around Jerusalem. Jesus was trying to show the crowd, and to show us, something bigger, something transcendent, something eternal: That Jesus is the Lord of life, and that we need not fear losing our lives when we give them up for the sake of His Gospel. But first he had to speak to the crowd in terms they could understand, and even the imminent resurrection of Lazarus was pushing the faith of Mary. Notice her doubtful attitude as we conclude John's account of the raising of Lazarus, picking up in verse 38.

{Read John 11:38-46, NLT}.

6 One of my favorite quotes of Hudson Taylor is this: "Let us give up our work, our thoughts, our plans, ourselves, our lives, our loved ones, our influence, our all, right into His

hand, and then, when we have given all over to Him, there will be nothing left for us to be troubled about, or to make trouble about.” Hudson Taylor clearly understood the bigger picture that Jesus was trying to give us. Giving up our lives means more than dying, just as receiving the life of Jesus means more than our resurrection. Giving up our lives means putting everything we have and everything we are and hope to be into the hands of Jesus, believing with an unshakeable faith that as we do that, one faithful moment at a time, Jesus relieves us of our worry and fear. Yes, there will be a complete resurrection of all people on the last day, body and soul, and we rightfully take great solace in that future. But today, as we continue our Lenten journey of “giving up,” we’re challenged to give up our lives while still living, so that we may have life today in even greater abundance!

What might that look like? At the most basic level, I think it starts with making choices that take the perspective of the other and place their priorities before our own. Time and time again, Hudson Taylor made choices that served the people of China rather than catering to his own needs and preferences. And don’t think that just because God hasn’t called you to go overseas on mission that this essential teaching of Jesus doesn’t apply to you. This very day, at this very hour, there are simple decisions you can make to lay down your life for the sake of the Gospel.

I invite you to take out the bulletin insert now and seek God’s leading. As we continue in this breakthrough season for our church, how is God prompting you to lay down your life for the sake of the Gospel? Please take a few moments now to reflect and then record your response. You’ll be invited to bring your insert forward as an offering to God as you come to receive communion.



Buffalo United Methodist Church

...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!

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