

**Sermons from Archwood United Church of Christ
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**Luke 9: 28-36
Exodus 34: 29
“The Consequences of Punctuation Marks”**

February 18, 2007

There used to be a game show on TV called “Truth or Consequences.” Contestants were asked to answer a nonsense riddle. If they failed to answer the riddle before Beulah the Buzzer sounded, and few ever could, he or she had to pay the consequence, which usually involved performing some silly stunt for which you would be rewarded.

Perhaps what made this game show so popular was that there were really no bad “consequences.” True, you might lose the game. And you could make a fool of yourself, but you couldn’t end up in any worse shape than when you first started. Even the losers received some sort of consolation prize – we all need Rice-a-Roni. Basically, the contestants got the chance to win big or bigger prizes – and neither truth nor consequences entered into the game at all. If only there really were none!

Most of the time we don’t think much about consequences. Putting something else on the credit card, putting newspapers in the trash instead of recycling them, the whole pint of Ben and Jerry’s instead of a scoop, an extra hour of TV instead of an hour at church, sending in just a “few” more troops – minor things, trivial things. Imagine if we *did* consider the consequences. We’d be swimming in less debt, have fewer landfills and pay less exorbitant rates to haul garbage; we wouldn’t be as overweight and tired, which leads us to being more overweight and therefore tired – consequence after consequence; and we wouldn’t trade some political points today for an intractable hostility lasting for decades, with enough debt to choke our grandchildren. What we eat and drink, what we do and throw away, who we listen to and who we elect, have become literally matters of life and death – for ourselves and for our planet. And we don’t take this very seriously, I’m afraid. Perhaps we treat life a little less prayerfully than we should; maybe, a *lot* less prayerfully than we could. If certain consequences were more immediate, would we make the same decisions, make the

same choices? If a "minute on the lips" caused a "lifetime on the hips" right as we were eating that cake, we might take the consequences that are slower to develop - like fatigue, diabetes, heart disease - more seriously. We might treat our bodies as the living temple that they are. Perhaps that life-time supply of rice-a-roni is less of a prize than we thought.

Paying attention to consequences, considering future ones: It takes a lot of discipline to be a good chess player, seeing moves two and three in advance. That's why Jesus was wise to go up on the mountain, truly preparing himself before taking the road that lay ahead of him. Jesus had a difficult decision to make, one he knew would come some day, but for which he needed to gather his strength before proceeding today. Jesus took three friends and went away to a quiet place and prayed in earnest. And he met God powerfully. He encountered God so powerfully that he took on a new light. Luke says, "And while Jesus was praying, the appearance of his face changed."

It may be kind of rude, but have you ever watched people as they are praying? In some people you can see almost an exertion of effort, a look of intensity as though they were trying very hard to pray. In some you can see the agony of their prayer. Jesus is even said to have sweat blood during his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. On the faces of some people during prayer there is a look of peace, almost with a smile. Of course what one looks like *during* prayer is not as important as what one looks like, or does, *after* prayer. Have they been able to let go? Have they turned their need over to God? Do they look up and look around and say, "Where is it?"

Think of this one prayer we all need in three different ways: "Lord, forgive me." Imagine the look or feeling of "Lord, forgive me," as though you are lifting weights. Or imagine the look of, "Lord, forgive me," while tears are running down your cheeks. Or, "Lord, forgive me," with a peaceful look and a slight smile. Forgiveness is basic to our faith, the need we all have. Building up our faith is knowing the need of prayer and the response to our prayer. The need of the prayer is the same, the sincerity of the prayer is the same, the intensity of the prayer is the same, though it may look different. What, however, is the conclusion of the prayer; the sound of the "Amen." Is it, "Amen," with a question mark? "Amen," with an exclamation point! "Amen," with dot, dot, dot...more to come, not sure we're really ready to let go and or whether we should accept that our prayer was enough. Think of ending your prayer with, "I'm ready." "I'm ready now," with a question mark? "I'm ready now," with an exclamation point! Or "I'm ready now," dot, dot, dot...because just saying it is not enough. None of those responses is wrong. Certainty, doubt, fear, confidence are all part of building our faith. But, I want to ask, what is next? The Amen? that keeps moving forward into the questions builds confidence for what lies ahead even as it retains humility. The Amen! that then sits on its behind squanders that confidence and makes a mockery of humility. "I don't need anything else." The Amen...dot, dot, dot, that listens for more to come recognizes that God is still speaking and we have more listening to do. (I should probably have been using a comma instead of my dot, dot, dots!)

But my bigger point is to ask, what, if any, are the consequences to our conclusion to prayer? Such as, bringing the need for forgiveness to God in prayer, "God, forgive me." Such as, needing God in our decision to move forward, "God, I'm ready."

Before going on the mountain, Jesus had told his disciples, "If any of you want to become my followers" – and up to this point it had been pretty awesome to follow him and see him perform miracles and tell stories. "If you want to become my followers, then deny yourself and take up your cross, daily. If you want to save your life, you'll lose it. If you are willing to lose your life for my sake, you'll save it." From this point forward, what had been pretty fun was now going to involve some pretty difficult consequences.

Jesus goes onto the mountain to pray before heading forward to Jerusalem. The three disciples see him transfigured by the power of God's presence in his prayers – like Moses, his face became radiant as he encountered God. The disciples now see two ancestors in faith there to support Jesus – not surprisingly, one of them Moses. Naturally, they say, "This is great. Let's stay here! We'll build something and keep this moment forever. Can't we just stay here, in this moment?"

But, as Peter was saying this, a cloud came over them and out of the cloud came the voice of God, "This is my child, my chosen. Listen to him." If there was ever a clear signal to end the party and move on, this was it. And they left the mountain, transformed by the experience, and followed Jesus on the path toward, what Jesus knew lay ahead, his death. Jesus knew what consequences would result from proclaiming that the kingdom of God is not what the religious leaders and political leaders were practicing. He needed God's strength through prayer on the mountain first. The consequences to prophets are often very high.

But so are the consequences to ordinary people of faith like ourselves. We also, first, need God's strength through prayer. What we believe about the kingdom of God is contrary to some of what our religious and political leaders practice today. Each time we stand up to the homophobia of another preacher, we risk ridicule and alienation and the consequences to some of us have been losing family, a church home, and perhaps more. But what are the *other* consequences? We claim our integrity and dignity and we proclaim God's love, we proclaim that the kingdom of God, that Jesus gave his life to prepare for us, is not an exclusive club for those the world defines as acceptable. Are you ready for those – all of those – consequences? We better pray first – and stop all along the way, just as Jesus did.

What about our disregard for the health of both our bodies and the planet – the consequences? What are the consequences about silence on the war? What are the consequences of our silence when someone needs us – we get some extra time and they get some extra grief. Time spent in prayer would help us discern when it *is* our place to reach out and when it might not be, when what must transpire must be

allowed to come, when only the bottom will transform the journey upward. For his efforts to save Jesus, Peter was told to get behind me, Satan. Some things must happen. We can't fix everyone's pain. We do have to pay attention to our own health or the consequences to us might be dire. We might need to approach life a little more prayerfully than we do now so we are most clearly doing what God asks of us. God did give each of us *certain* gifts and callings. It's ignoring them that costs us the most.

When they got down from the mountain, Jesus told the rest of the group, "Let these words sink into your ears and hearts: I'm going to be betrayed into human hands." In other words, there will be serious consequences for continuing this journey with me.

If I continue to eat with outcasts,
and talk and teach with women;

if I continue to break rules that show that God is not limited to a strict interpretation of the law,

and continue to teach that God is to be worshipped above the government of Caesar;

if I continue to challenge the authority of the religious leaders;

if I continue to be faithful to my beliefs in seeking justice for the *all* oppressed,
even those oppressed by the church;

if I continue to proclaim freedom for the prisoners,

food for the hungry,

clothing for the naked,

and dignity for everyone,

God's love and acceptance toward all people...

if I continue to proclaim what God's kingdom *really* is,

then the consequence will be my death. And the consequence for you will be life,
abundant, meaningful, and eternal.

They will punish Jesus for his treasonous thoughts. He knows, they'll want to get rid of me. But, I can't avoid what God has given me to do, difficult or not. As we all know, delaying the inevitable only lengthens the misery of waiting. *There's* a consequence we don't think about as we ignore or avoid what we don't want to do. What must come will come, ready or not. Perhaps it is then the Amen? with a question mark that is most appropriate because of its honesty.

I'm ready? I'm ready! I'm ready...dot, dot, dot, because there is more to come.

Funny how the consequences of a simple punctuation mark can make such a difference. Interesting how not-deciding results in a decision we would never make, and a consequence we didn't think of praying about first. Funny, interesting, and amazing: the fear of consequences delays the joy making a choice for life. Ready? Ready! Ready...