

Ultimate Responsibility: Finding Out for Ourselves

Psalm 34

O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in God.

Ephesians 5:8-14

Life as children of light—for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord.

We use some heavyweight words here in the Church of the Covenant, like “ultimate responsibility.” Ultimate responsibility is a significant part of how we go about our ministry, but I can see how it could scare you off! Most often we use “ultimate responsibility” with regard to the missions to which we feel ourselves called and with which we work in mission groups. It is important for the person and the group called to a particular ministry to take ultimate responsibility for every aspect of it.

Ultimate responsibility starts with the person who feels God’s call in her life to meet a particular need in the church itself or the world. Or when a person decides to shape his life around a gift he feels entrusted to him to be exercised for the benefit of the community of faith or the wider world. When this happens, we are ready to understand the importance of ultimate responsibility. It means that we commit ourselves to this call and the exercising of this gift. We don’t look to someone else to do it for us. We take it upon our own shoulders, as it were. It is the piece of God’s kingdom given into our care.

The usual pattern in churches is that someone sees something that needs to be done, brings it to a board or committee, or the minister, and says, “Somebody ought to do something about this.” Then there is discussion of how someone really ought to do something about it. The effort is then made to talk someone into doing it. Or a committee is formed. The committee frets over how to get the thing done, may have no clear vision, and, if it gets done, no one’s heart is really in it. That may sound unfair, but in my experience it is pretty accurate.

Ultimate responsibility clears things up. It means that when I see a need, I must ask myself, “Am I called to respond to this need?” And if the answer is a yes from deep within me, then I am on the threshold of call, and I begin to commit myself to it. I stop looking to someone else and begin to give myself to this particular work as a ministry of God’s love working through me and the gifts that God has given or will give me. Ultimate responsibility begins as I, like the prophet Isaiah, say to God: Here I am, send me!

Ultimate responsibility does not mean that we do not receive help from others. It just means that I don’t expect someone else to do it when it is something I am called to do. When a mission group forms around a particular call, some vision for ministry within the church or the wider community of the city or world, then that group needs to grow into the clear understanding that it is responsible for every aspect of the mission—learning what needs to be learned, making the decisions, finding the resources, whether human or financial, facing the obstacles, challenges, and conflicts, and doing the work. Ultimate responsibility also involves staying in touch with the core vision, the essence of that mission all along the way so that it does not get lost.

A part of ultimate responsibility is recognizing that, while this is what I am called to, others are called by God to other ministries, other missions. This is Paul's understanding of the community of faith as a body having many members, not just one [1 Cor. 12]. God works through a diversity of ministries, not sameness. Taking responsibility for my own call and commitment to that call means that, at the same time, I grow in my respect for the ways God is calling others to serve. I grow in the understanding that God's work through us is manifold, not uniform. Maintaining this view can keep us from falling into expectations that others respond to our work the way we think they SHOULD respond or feeling that what we are doing is more important than what others are working with.

That is, in brief, what we mean by ultimate responsibility. However, I want to back up and talk about ultimate responsibility as the very first movement in the spiritual life, the life of discipleship to Christ. Here it helps to make a distinction between religion and spirituality, or the spiritual life. They are related in an important way, but are quite different. We can consider ourselves adherents of a particular religion without necessarily being persons in whom faith lives and who live by faith. We can hold certain beliefs, belong to a religious organization, participate in the ritual life, and so forth. Many consider themselves Christian in this sense. The difference comes when I make the move from religion to life, from formality to reality, from thinking of myself as a religious person to becoming a person who lives life as a journey of faith. That turning point I would describe as taking ultimate responsibility—I choose to make this thing real in my life.

Paul writes to the Ephesian community: "Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord." He is urging them to discover for themselves what it means to live as followers of Christ. You have come into the light of God and now you ARE light, Paul writes. The next step is to live as those who are light. We need to do this for ourselves, within the fabric of our own unique lives and relationships. Find out for yourself what is pleasing to God, what is in harmony with God's purposes and love. I remembered that Psalm 34 says the same thing: "O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in God." The literal meaning of it is: "Find out for yourself that God is good."

Find out for yourself. Discover who God is and what the life of faith means in your own life. No one can do it for you. The life of faith cannot be vicarious. It is a matter of discovering for ourselves what the life of faith is about, what it means to love, trust, and serve God and God's purposes for the world. This is taking ultimate responsibility for our own lives and faith. To me, that is just what the spiritual life is about—finding out for ourselves who God is and what our relationship with God means for our lives. It is about discovery. It is the opposite of getting people to buy into some ideas or doctrines, then plugging them into the structure somewhere so that they help keep the church going. But keeping the church going is not what the life of faith is about and it is not what the community of faith is about. We are to be about discovering, tasting and seeing for ourselves the goodness of God and how our diverse and unique lives can become expressions of that goodness.

I think this is one reason why many young people do not have great interest in the church. The natural questioning, curiosity, and sense of adventure they had as young children gets co-opted by an adult world that does not tolerate questioning and resists things that are new or challenging. But it doesn't stay suppressed. It re-emerges. Things suddenly don't make sense, and young people begin to ask questions. Formal religion, more interested in its own perpetuation and need for order, resists their natural energy and desire to live life as an adventure. [We need to recognize and confess that this tendency exists also here in us.] So they go off, do their thing in college or start jobs and families, never finding much that is compelling about the church.

But what if we as the church really took the psalmist's and Paul's advice seriously? You ARE light. Didn't Jesus say we are the light of the world? Live in the light. Find out for yourself that God is good. Go and discover in your own life what is pleasing to God, the kind of life that harmonizes with God's love, compassion, justice, and peace. The words that we speak in the church about faith, following Christ, loving God with our whole being, serving those in need, and so forth...all those words are good and true. But they cannot stay as words. They long to be tried out, to take on the flesh of our unique lives. And that is what it means to take ultimate responsibility for our own lives and lives of faith—finding out for ourselves the living meaning of the things we read in scripture and talk about as the community of Christ.

This is why it is so important that our community here does not try so much to give people answers or tell them what to do. Instead, we try to hold up this invitation to taste and see, to find out for ourselves what the life of faith is about. What we do offer is a kind of structure that can give our lives a certain shape that enables us to undertake and sustain this journey in our own lives. We call these spiritual disciplines. They are practices that, through the centuries, people have found important, even essential, to making faith something that lives in and through us. They are a means, tools that can awaken us to the light Paul was talking about and help us live out of that light. Silence. Prayer. Study of scripture. Journal writing. Material giving. Regular worship with the community. Discerning our gifts and the particular ways God is calling us to serve. Sharing our journeys with one another through what we call accountability. These are practices we commend as ways to help us continue to take ultimate responsibility for our own lives and faith, to continually find out for ourselves the goodness of God, what it means to take refuge or trust in God, and what is pleasing to God, a life in harmony with God's purposes and love.

Jesus met this man who was blind from birth. His disciples wanted to discuss whose fault it was, his or his parents. Rubbish, says Jesus. Let's not waste time and energy trying to pin suffering on someone. Let's get to the alleviation of suffering. So he makes mud out of dirt and spit, and rubs it on the man's eyes. Then he tells him to go wash his eyes in the pool. The man goes, washes, and comes back seeing. There's a lot that we could talk about with this story. But what I want to point out is that Jesus told the man to do something, to participate in his own healing. Go and wash your eyes in that pool over there. The life of faith is utterly passive with regard to God's love—we can only receive it, and have to do nothing at all to earn it. And yet there is an important active part of the life of faith. We have to do something, make it our own, find out for ourselves, embark on this journey of faith each day.

One last thing. We need to remember that when we talk about ultimate responsibility, we are talking about taking responsibility for ourselves and our own lives as a journey of faith. We do not mean that everything in the world depends on us! When we speak of God, we are speaking of the ultimate source and power of life, which is always beyond our understanding or our control. Our ultimate trust is in God, not ourselves. When we take ultimate responsibility for our own lives, we are choosing and discovering how to live as human beings in our true and right relationship with God, trusting God in all things. It is only as we take ultimate responsibility for our own lives of faith that we then become open to experiencing this truly ultimate care that is at the heart of life itself.