

“The Recruiters”
Luke 21:5-8
25th Sunday after Pentecost

November 19, 2023
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

I know we have many die-hard college football fans in this congregation. I wonder if any of you who follow college football remember a name from way, way back...a running back named Marcus Dupree.

Marcus Dupree was a high school phenom in the early 1980's. He grew up in a small town in Mississippi, but when it came to his senior year of high school, every major college football coach in the country knew where Marcus Dupree lived.

Dupree eventually committed to the University of Oklahoma, where he had a magnificent freshman year. But he never was very comfortable in Oklahoma, didn't get along well with coach Barry Switzer, and in his sophomore season he was injured.

Long story short, his career never panned out.
He ended up becoming a truck-driver in Mississippi,
still considering what might have been...

The reasons for Dupree's disappointing athletic career are hard to pin down.

It's not that he wasn't talented enough—some thought he was going to be the best running back that college football had ever seen.

It's not that he got in trouble with drugs or the law.
His injury eventually healed—it wasn't that.

The best that anyone can guess is that he got pulled in too many directions, with too many people wanting a piece of his fame.

As a recent documentary tells his story, back when Dupree was a high school senior, the phone in the Dupree household never stopped ringing!

These were the days before social media and iPhones...but back then, the recruiters still knew all about Marcus Dupree.

They knew what time he woke up in the morning.
They knew what time he went to bed at night.

Coaches would literally line up on the street outside his house—and Dupree would call them inside, each coach would get 15 minutes, and then another coach would take their place.¹

Can you imagine that?
Can you imagine someone wanting you so badly for something, they set up shop THIS CLOSE to where you live?

Actually, you don't have to imagine it.
We all know it's how marketing and social media work these days.

Stores that track your purchases.

Algorithms that determine the kind of content
that will hold your attention, or your teenagers' attention,
trying to keep everyone online all the time...

These days, the recruiters don't live outside our homes.
They're already INSIDE our homes.
Beckoning us...come, spend your energy and money on me!

¹ This story is taken from an ESPN film, "The Best That Never Was," in ESPN's *30 for 30* series.

Do you know what it's like to get recruited?
Jesus says you do.

“Beware that you are not led astray,” Jesus tells his disciples.

“...for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’
and, ‘The time is near!’”
“Do not go after them...”

Now all of this makes it sound like recruiting is never a good thing.
But that's not true.

Churches are not on the sidelines here.
We know how to do recruiting too.
We just don't always call it that!

Join us in pledging to our 2024 stewardship campaign—we NEED
YOU!

Come see what the Magi Market is all about after worship is over.
Christmas is around the corner, and we need a group of able-
bodied adults to decorate the tree in the Atrium this year.

(Men of Westminster, that's me—right now—recruiting you!)

Do you see what I'm talking about?

And it's not like these invitations are BAD invitations.
They're needed.
They're necessary.
Participation and engagement are signs of a healthy church!

All of it makes me wonder, though...

When someone gets recruited for something at this church,
 when you and I sign up to follow Jesus at Westminster,
 do we always know what it is we're signing up for?

Eugene Peterson, the author of *The Message*—he once put it this way. He said that following Jesus means that Jesus promises to change you “from the inside out!”

Hmmm....

We've got new members joining our church today.
 I wonder if that's what they're hoping for, by becoming members
 of Westminster...that Jesus will change them from the inside out!

I wonder if that's what anyone here was hoping for when you came
 to church this morning.

I doubt it.
 Maybe some other time, Jesus.
 But not at this time of year.
 Not right now. I'm too busy right now.

After all, the holidays are right around the corner.
 Thanksgiving is five days away.
 Christmas is five weeks away.

The holidays are NOT about change.
 They're about tradition.
 They're about keeping things THE SAME.

How many of you go to church here at Westminster on Christmas
 Eve?

How many of you find meaning and wonder in the last part of that service, when we light candles and sing “Silent Night?”

How many of you would be more than a little disappointed if I decided to CHANGE that tradition this year?

Right.

Don't worry. I'm not changing it.

I look forward to “Silent Night” every year.

But that's exactly my point.

Our instinct when it's time for the holidays is NO CHANGE.
KEEP...THINGS...THE SAME.

Or maybe, God, you can free to change that member of my family who REALLY gets on my nerves at this time of year...by all means, change them!

But don't change me.

In the novel *Plainsong*, the story is told of life in a small, Colorado town.

Victoria is a 17-year-old whose mother has thrown her out of the house because she is pregnant. Maggie Jones, a schoolteacher, has taken her in, but Maggie also cares for her aging father, who struggles with dementia.

And he becomes dangerous to Victoria.

So one day, Maggie drives 17 miles south to the ranch of two elderly brothers, Raymond and Harold McPheron.

She goes to RECRUIT them.

“I came out here to ask you a favor,” she said to them.
“There is a girl I know who needs some help.”

“What’s wrong with her?” Harold said.
“She need a donation of money?”

“No, she needs a lot more than that,” Maggie replies.

And Maggie explains that the girl’s father abandoned the family years ago, her mother won’t have her in the house because she’s pregnant, and the father of her child doesn’t want anything to do with her.

“All right then,” Harold said. “You say you don’t want money. What do you want?”

“I want something improbable,” replies Maggie.

“I want you to think about taking this girl in.
Of letting her live with you.”

“You’re fooling,” Harold said.

“Oh, I know it sounds crazy,” Maggie replies.

“I suppose it is crazy. But that girl needs somebody...and I’m ready to take desperate measures. She needs a home for these months.

“And you,” she smiled at them,
“—you old [boys] need somebody too.”

“Somebody or someone besides an old red cow to care about and worry over. It’s too lonesome out here...look at you. You’re going to die someday without ever having had enough trouble in your life.

Not the right kind anyway. This is your chance.”

Later, the brothers talk.

“All right,” Harold said. “What do you think we do...?”

“We take her in,” Raymond replies....

“Maybe she wouldn’t be as much trouble.”

“I’m not talking about that yet,” Harold said.

“I’m talking about—why, look at us. Decrepit old bachelors out here in the country....Set in all our ways. How are you going to change now at this age of life?” he says to his brother.

“I can’t say,” Raymond said.

“But I’m going to. That’s what I know.”²

Now...did those brothers know what they were signing up for, when they agreed to care for Victoria?

Did they know EXACTLY what they had just been recruited to do?

No...

They just knew there was more.

There was more to life than the life they were living.

There was more to LOVE...than the love that they were giving.

² Kent Haruf, *Plainsong*, New York: Vintage Books, 1999.

And when push comes to shove, I think THAT'S why you and I come to church.

Oh, we don't like to admit it.

We say we come to Westminster because of the good friends we have here,

or because of the beautiful music we experience here,

or because of the wonderful children's ministries

or the vibrant youth ministries

or the warmth and welcome of this church—

Open Minds Open Hearts...

And we like knowing that through our church, when we get recruited to do something—

to teach Sunday School, or serve as a youth advisor,

or go on a mission trip—

maybe—by God's grace—

we can help change someone's life.

It's all true.

But BENEATH ALL THAT...

I think what we really, desperately want—

is for the God we know in Jesus Christ

to change OUR lives too.

To take our deepest wounds, and heal them.

To take our greatest losses, and redeem them.

To take the most fearful part of each of our hearts, and grant them newfound courage.

C.S. Lewis once wrote:

“To love at all is to be vulnerable.

“Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken.

“If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one...

“Wrap it round with hobbies and little luxuries;
avoid all entanglements, lock it safe in the casket
or coffin [of] your own selfishness.

“But in that casket - safe, dark, motionless, airless –
it will change.

[Your heart] will not be broken:
it will become unbreakable,
impenetrable, irredeemable.”³

Do you know what it’s like to be recruited?

I think you do.

And there are plenty of false-messiahs doing that recruiting in our own lives today.

I’m not talking about the ones that hold up signs, saying:
The end is near!

I’m talking about the ones that try to confuse us about who it is you and I belong to...

³ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1960.

- The voices that tell you to look more beautiful because you're not beautiful enough.
- Or buy more stuff because you don't have enough.
- Or you better get into this college or your career won't be DAZZLING enough...

I'm talking about the voices that say...

PLAY IT SAFE with your love.

No need to reach out to the refugee and welcome them.
 No need to find a stranger and get to know them.
 No need to engage with someone who wounded you long ago...and reconcile with them.

All these false prophets with such a shallow notion of love...
 And we can get distracted.
 And we forget.

We forget the Love to which we already belong.
 The Love that came into this world as a helpless, crying child...

The Love that gave its life for the world...
 as a falsely condemned criminal...

The Love that revealed itself
 by spending time with the outcast,
 by reaching out to the rejected,
 by giving voice to the voiceless and the vulnerable...

Do you know what it's like to be recruited?

Yes, you do.

Because the love that came into this world in Jesus Christ,
 has already claimed and called and recruited you...

In *Plainsong*, the McPheron brothers give Victoria a place to stay. And it's not without its challenges.

On one occasion they learn that the town's been spreading rumors about them, hosting a teenage girl in their house. But they've ALWAYS treated Victoria with respect and dignity and care.

They are now her family, even if she doesn't always realize they're family.

And at the end of the novel, the baby—a daughter—is born.

And Raymond, who has helped birth plenty of calves in his life, but has never held a baby before...he takes her, and holds Victoria's daughter "fearfully out in front of his old face..."

"My goodness," he says... "My lord almighty."

If I didn't know better, I'd say that brother Raymond got changed from the inside out.

Of course, that story is a work of fiction.
But you know what's not a work of fiction?

The grace and love of God.
A grace that has recruited you, claimed you, and called you as God's very own.

May you receive such grace during this upcoming holiday season.
And may it change your life.

Amen.