

Marching Orders

Scripture: Joshua 1:1 – 9 & John 21:15 – 19

For six years I was an assistant basketball coach for the Millville HS boys basketball team. We were called the Millville Quakers. The head coach was Rick Thomas. He was an excellent coach and motivator. His motivational pre-game talks for the players were instructions on what to do and what not to do. After the players marching orders, I would then follow up with a prayer. When we left the locker room before each game, I believed that the players would walk through fire for Coach Thomas!

I did have a situation that Coach Thomas had me address as assistant coach that I would like to share with you. After player introduction at the beginning of a game, our players wanted to know if they should do something as a team. Many others team did stuff like this – make a pile of players lying on the floor or stand together in a mass and jump up and down together or chant something in unison together. Our players thought they should do something as the Millville Quakers. I asked the kids – ‘What are your thoughts?’ They shared a few suggestions and then they asked me what I thought. I told them – ‘We are the Millville Quakers, we should make a circle at the foul line and sat down quietly for a few minutes!’

They did not take up my suggestion! And we never did anything together as a team except win!

I guarantee you, at this time over 100 football players have received their marching orders for today’s Super Bowl. 53 players from the Kansas City Chiefs and 53 players from the San Francisco 49ers have heard their marching orders for the biggest sporting event and the most watch event in the world. Now in Miami, these players are getting ready to take the field and show us their skills and talents. They are preparing to entertain us in 6 hours.

In our Old Testament reading from the Book of Joshua, God gave Joshua his marching orders! God's marching orders to Joshua were to lead the Israelites, his people, across the Jordan River into the Promised Land! Joshua knew challenges would come all along the way. Joshua also knew that God would be with him. Joshua knew that God had commanded him to be strong and courageous. Joshua got his marching orders!

Now a story – When a husband graduated from college, he accepted a teaching position 1200 miles from his home. He and his relatively new wife would be separated from family support. They had always enjoyed family support and neither of them had ever been away from home. His teaching job made family support no longer available from 1200 miles away! They were looking ahead to their future together but they were very sad that family support was so far away! They were afraid and sometimes discouraged. After they settled in a new city, a neighbor welcomed them with a pie to which the words from Joshua 1:9 were attached. Those words are – *I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.* As he and his wife read this verse, they were encouraged. It was not long before they found a church and their future began to look brighter.

I wish this was my story. I retired from 20 years of ministry in a small community in NE PA. I moved here, separated by 4 hours from my family, but then I found this church and you called me out of retirement to be your pastor. So today, I have brought with me four pies – two cherry pies and two apple pies – to share with you with a note on each pie – *God hereby commands us to be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed for the Lord our God is with us wherever we go!*

There are times in everyone's life when the rivers look too wide to cross. There are times in everyone's life when the mountains look too high to climb. But God is with us wherever we travel.

There are times in your life when the rivers of life look too wide to cross. There are times in your life when the mountains of life look too high to climb. But God is with you wherever you travel.

In our reading from the Gospel of John, three times Jesus asked Peter – Do you love me? Three times! Why three times? Is it just because I have learned that you must say something at least three times for someone to understand it? Well not this time, the three times asking Peter if he love Jesus was a painful way to shaking up Peter’s memory to uncover the night of Jesus’ crucifixion when Peter denied three times that he ever knew Jesus. Peter’s heart was breaking as the shameful memory surfaced once again. Peter was humbled and grateful to think Jesus cared so much about him that Jesus would uncover the sin to cleanse and heal Peter. He recognized that Jesus knew all about him. He recognized that Jesus knew his shortcoming and his inability to carry through with what his heart wanted.

Jesus is asking each of us – Do you love me? What is our answer? Jesus is asking us a second time – Do you love me? What is our response? And finally, for the third time, Jesus is asking each of us – Do you love me? What has Jesus uncovered within you? What painful memory has come to your mind in which you denied your faith in Christ?

But think of this - Peter was humbled and grateful to think Jesus cared so much about him that Jesus would uncover the sin to cleanse and heal Peter. He recognized that Jesus knew all about him. He recognized that Jesus knew his shortcoming and his inability to carry through with what his heart wanted.

Let us humble ourselves and be grateful that Jesus cares for each of us because Jesus uncovers our sins to cleanse us and heal us. We must recognize that Jesus knows all about us. We must recognize that Jesus knows our shortcomings and will carry us through whatever comes our way.

Humanly speaking, Peter was unable to be what Jesus wanted him to be. He also knew how inadequate Peter was. Jesus knew Peter needed help! I can see the tears welling up in Peter’s eyes after Jesus asked him the third time – Peter, do you love me!

Humanly speaking, you are unable to be what Jesus wants you to be. Jesus knows how inadequate you are. Jesus knows you need help! Are tears welling up in your eyes? Jesus is asking you for the third time – Do you love me!

Feeling safe, Peter looked directly at Jesus and he quietly said – *Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you!* Feeling safe, let each of us look directly at Jesus and quietly say – *Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you!*

Let us pray:

O God of the open road, teach us to be strong and courageous. Gracious God, let nothing in our lives be hidden from you. May your gentle and persistent love invade our lives. We humbly come to you to be cleansed and restored.

(Read morning prayer)