

Rev. Robert S. Duran  
Elder, United Methodist Church -- Order of Saint Luke

SERMON

Asbury United Methodist Church (Tulsa, OK)

Sunday, October 20, 2019

8:00 AM – 9:15 AM – 11:00 AM

MORE THAN ONE MOUNTAIN

Matthew 16:24-28 (ESV)

INTRODUCTION

Mountains come in all sizes and shapes. Our own life experience determines how we recognize mountains.

The first time my wife Brenda and I drove to Eureka Springs, I was eager to share with her the beauty of the Ozarks. Driving north from Fort Smith, I eagerly awaited her comments. I had grown up in southeastern Oklahoma – McAlester; Brenda had grown up in Oregon.

She was quiet for a long time, and finally spoke, saying, “Robert, these aren’t mountains – they’re just big hills.”

To me the Boston Mountains were mountains, with peaks reaching above 2,500 feet, and valleys 500 to 1,500 feet deep. But, to Brenda mountains were the Oregon Coast Range, dramatically rising to more than 4,000 feet from sea level at the Pacific shore only a few miles away – or the majestic Cascades, topped by Mount Hood at 11,240 feet. (Today our family room in Chimney Hills has a lovely photograph of Mount Hood hanging on the wall.)

In the book that Pastor Tom introduced, David Brooks speaks of metaphorically of two mountains representing the focus of our individual lives.

The first mountain defines success as self-satisfaction, self-discovery, individualism. This seems to me to be what our this world calls success – indeed, it is what I called success for decades.

The second mountain defines success as service to others, compassion, and love. Pastor Tom has called this Second Mountain a life of **significance**.

### THE SERMON: MORE THAN ONE MOUNTAIN

When Jesus spoke the words recorded by Saint Matthew in our text this morning, following the shocking rebuke to Saint Peter's protestations that Jesus must not suffer and die ("Far be it from you, Lord!" Matthew 16:22b), all who heard them may well have been shocked by Jesus' clear call, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

My life on the first mountain described by David Brooks did not involve anything like denying myself or taking up my cross. Indeed, my life on that mountain was all about finding success in the eyes of others and avoiding pain or even discomfort!

I learned about success the way pretty much all of us do – from my parents. My parents were wonderful people who loved the Lord and saw to it that our entire family was in church just about whenever the doors were open. Sadly, I used the memory of so many hours spent in

church for my first 18 years as an excuse afterward that I didn't need to go to church because I already had "a lifetime of church."

My father, Otis S. Duran, came back from serving with the Army Air Forces in the Pacific and became part of the group of war veterans that formed to get Carl Albert elected to Congress in 1946. Our family's connection with the man who would be the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives from 1971 to 1977, during some of the most turbulent years of our nation's history, would impact my life in many ways.

Dad served as President of pretty much every organization he ever joined, and I determined to do the same. He was President of the Board of McAlester Regional Hospital and was on the Board of First National Bank & Trust Company of McAlester, for decades.

My mother, Evelyn Sewell Duran, was equally driven to achieve the kind of success described by Brooks in his book. She was a serious amateur genealogist back in the days when that meant visiting elderly cousins in their homes, carrying on correspondences by mail with many, and making rubbings of old tombstones in weed-clogged rural cemeteries, and spending hours poring over old records in many a County Courthouse.

Her love of history, family and regional and national, eventually led her to join with Carl Albert and Dr. Thurman Shuller to found the Pittsburg County Genealogical & Historical Society in McAlester.

When she determined to join the Daughters of the American Revolution (D.A.R.), she was not satisfied to find just one American Revolutionary War Patriot, but proved enough such ancestors to bring

her 3 sisters and 2 daughters each into the D.A.R. on a separate ancestor! She became the Founding Chapter Regent of the Kilihoti Chapter of the D.A.R. in McAlester.

I learned to find meaning in success, achievement, recognition, eliciting first approval from my parents and then praise from others.

At the age of 17, I first felt God's clear call on my life to serve in pastoral ministry, but my newly-adopted life-goal of being the first in McAlester to own his-and-hers Mercedes caused me to look around and realize that not one pastor of any church in town had even ONE Mercedes. And I ran away from that call to service, to God and to the people of God, and kept climbing Brooks' First Mountain, exclusively and single-mindedly.

It wasn't a smooth journey – no life journey ever is, really. My Senior Year picture in the 1965 McAlester High School yearbook was captioned: "I'm desperate, I think I'll do something sensational."

Leaving McAlester with a diploma and as a National Merit Scholar Semi-Finalist, I got to the University of Oklahoma and absolutely loved college. The only thing I didn't care much for was the campus and classes. OU put me in a program called University Scholars – at the first gathering of the 52 members, they handed out a lot of gear for us including a lovely gold ring – and the Dean of the University College, Dr. Glenn C. Couch, spoke to us. Dr. Couch looked around the room and then said, you all won't need 4 years here at OU; we're awarding you taking any advance placement exam for any course without charge, without any pre-requisites. None of you should still be here as an undergrad beyond 2 or 3 years!

Well, in a way, Dr. Couch was right – I was gone in 2 and ½ years. Unfortunately, it was because I didn't go to class ... At. All.

My roommate at the old Kappa Sigma fraternity house got me to show up for the mid-term in the much-feared and greatly-dreaded Business Statistics course at Adams Hall. He bought me the book for the course, and then took on all comers with his bet that I would set the curve on that mid-term exam. And I did! And Jim split the winnings with me. Unfortunately, he made the same bets on the final exam and I failed to even show up for it, so he lost nearly all that he had won earlier. I was gifted but had no discipline.

My dad had already sent a check for the 2<sup>nd</sup> semester tuition before OU suspended me on the way to expulsion. OU sent his check back to him with a letter, which he kept.

In early 1969 it didn't take long for getting kicked out of school to lead to a draft notice. I took the notice down to the Air Force recruiters office. I made that choice mostly because while in Army ROTC the first 2 years at OU I had observed that while us Army ROTC guys were busy with Brasso vigorously polishing our collar brass and belt buckles, and spit-shining our boots, the Air Force ROTC guys were running a damp cloth over their Corfam shoes and brushed aluminum belt buckles! Seemed smarter to me!

The Air Force took me from Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio to Keesler in Biloxi, Mississippi, back to San Antonio, and then to Clark Air Base in the Republic of the Philippines. I served in the Air Force Security Service, as tasked by the National Security Agency (NSA) for SIGINT work around the world.

After discharge from the Air Force just before Christmas 1971, I applied to go back to OU. I was not welcomed with open arms.....

My application wound up with the Dean of the College of Business, who had me come in and sit down with him. He explained that I had 30 hours of F grades and it seemed impossible to ever get my GPA up above 2.0 so I could earn a degree. I told him I'd make a 4.0 if he'd just let me back in, so he agreed that I would come back on probation – if I made a 4.0 the next semester I could stay. And that's what happened, and how I got a degree at OU.

I went back to the family insurance agency, Duran & Duran, to work with my dad and half-brother. The business had been founded by my grandfather before World War I (1914, McAlester). As one of the largest agencies for the Inhofe family's Mid-Continent Casualty Company, we got to know them rather well. Senator Jim Inhofe came to McAlester, briefly, to run a branch claims office dedicated to our Mid-Continent insureds.

CNA Insurance Group had me as the Chair of the Oklahoma Producer Advisory Panel, and on the Southeast Region panel, with luxury trips to marvelous resorts – including the Doral Golf & Country Club, which is in the news right now as the Trump National Doral.

I made a lot of money but felt increasingly bored and dissatisfied with my life. I spent the money as fast as I could bring it in – yes, I did manage to get to that his-and-hers Mercedes goal: a 350SL roadster for me and a 280SE sedan for her.

President of many civic and non-profit organizations, and on the Board of more, including for the Salvation Army (you all do know that the Salvation Army springs from Methodist roots, right?).

It was when I was serving as President of the Rotary Club that I came to the realization that I had never WANTED to be the Rotary President – I just wanted to be Past President, and the only way to get there was to endure a year as President. I began to question what I really wanted in life. I found myself repeating the words to the Peggy Lee song “Is That All There Is?” (the lyrics taken from an 1896 short story by Thomas Mann, “Disillusionment”).

*Is that all there is, is that all there is  
If that's all there is my friends, then let's keep dancing  
Let's break out the booze and have a ball  
If that's all there is*

Along the years, I got to know Carl Albert after he retired from Congress, as we shared pews at Grand Avenue United Methodist Church in McAlester.

Another Grand Avenue fellow member was former Chief Justice of the Oklahoma Supreme Court, Steven W. Taylor; Steve was Mayor when I was President of the Chamber of Commerce, and we went to Washington, DC, to present McAlester’s proposal for the Army Defense Ammunition Command to bring its USADAC School permanently to the Army Ammunition Plant just south of McAlester. I remember one General getting us confused and then telling another Pentagon General that “oh, it’s not important which is which because those McAlester boys are all thick as thieves anyway.” We were successful in our endeavor – this is a picture of that school headquarters building now.



I was elected to represent the Southeastern Oklahoma Region on the board of the OU Alumni Association, and after serving for almost a decade on that Board, I was selected to serve as President in 1987. What a thrill it was to take my son, Rob, with me down to the field at halftime of the Missouri game to crown the Homecoming King and Queen along with University President Frank Horton.

Oh how it felt like a First Mountain moment when I was on stage in the Lloyd Noble Center, in front of about 7,000 graduates and their families, to address the graduates with The Alumni Charge and to present the OU Distinguished Service Citation to a pair of graduates: Dr. Kenneth Cooper (the “father of aerobic exercise”) and Dr. Prentice Gautt (first black football player at OU). This is a picture the OU photographer later sent to me – back when I had dark hair and beard.

**[that photo of the photo that Tim made into a slide on Wednesday]**



When addressing the assembled 1987 graduates in the Lloyd Noble Center, I pulled out that letter my dad had saved and read the first paragraph: “Mr. Duran, we do not want your money or your son at the University of Oklahoma.” My theme that day was, “never give up” – even when it looks impossible. I told that, the largest audience I ever addressed [SANCTUARY SERVICES ONLY: you are the next largest], you graduates are now and forever will be Sooner alums (alumni and alumnae), but what you do with it remains to be seen. I had figured out that it takes discipline to move forward, to climb the Second Mountain.

Brooks says in his book that many people climb that first mountain only to find it unsatisfying, strangely empty, despite whatever level they achieve toward the tallest peak. The allure of gaining the world is powerful, but it will not satisfy your soul.

Jesus said:

**For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?**

(Matt. 16:26 ESV)

Blaise Pascal, the great 17<sup>th</sup>-century French mathematician, pioneer in computers, and theologian, famously put it this way: “There is a God shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus.”

Steve Jobs, the multi-billionaire founder of Apple, in some of his last words before he died, put it this way:

“In other eyes, my life is the essence of success, but aside from work, I have [only] a little joy. And in the end, wealth is just a fact of life to which I am accustomed.”

Perhaps you, too, have found an unexpected emptiness in vainglory, in riches, in power, in basking in the admiration of others. I believe most eventually do just that.

When T. Boone Pickens, grandson of a Methodist preacher, with the funeral service at my sister's church (Highland Park United Methodist Church), I daresay most people knew well about the more than 1 Billion Dollars he had given away – much of it to his alma mater, Oklahoma State University. Boone had this to say about his life:

For most of my adult life, I've believed that I was put on Earth to make money and be generous with it. . .

Some, perhaps most, get to that second mountain without leaving the success of the first mountain. First mountain success is not a bad thing in and of itself – it is ultimately just empty and unsatisfying.

One of John Wesley's best-known teachings speaks to us about the benefit of both the First Mountain and the Second Mountain:  
**EARN ALL YOU CAN – SAVE ALL YOU CAN – GIVE ALL YOU CAN**



Brooks goes on to say that some, not all, may experience a valley after discovering the dissatisfaction with what can be achieved on that first mountain. I did – for me it was a failed marriage (my own fault) and then a heart attack. I finally had to come to terms with my life and decide what to do with the rest of it after a heart cath procedure at Saint Francis here back in early 2000.

The story of my climb up that second mountain, and my journey into pastoral ministry in the United Methodist Church, will have to wait until another time.

Brooks thesis is that the second mountain consists of living with a moral guide from a belief system of some sort that enables one to live for something bigger than oneself.

I say to you this morning that it is not just finding a moral life, a belief system, that will bring you to the real joy of life on that second mountain. It is hearing Jesus' call to take up our cross and follow him – and knowing that it is meant for us.

It is in Jesus Christ that we will find meaning and significance for our life.

Going up that Second Mountain makes our lives meaningful and brings great joy. Last week I found myself in an elevator at St. Francis Hospital, with 3 others when a lady darted in just as the doors were closing. She reached over to jab at one of the buttons, but didn't get it pushed in, so she tried again. She couldn't see the tiny red light in the center of each button so asked if we could see the light. I saw it and found myself singing out, "I see the light, I see the light." The other 4 in that elevator joined in and we sang a chorus of the old Hank Williams, Sr. song. That

may be the only time that has ever happened in a Tulsa hospital, but I was moved by the joy of living for Jesus that moment.

When you draw close to God joy is immeasurable. Now is the time, sisters and brothers! Go and find your Second Mountain by taking up your cross and following Jesus Christ.

### CONCLUSION—SANCTUARY SERVICES

Have you felt the pangs of emptiness amidst the hectic pace of climbing that first mountain?

If you sense distance from God, it is not God who has moved, but you. Jesus is calling you to take up your cross and follow him – to a life of real significance, real meaning, through **Salvation** and into what Methodists call **Sanctification**. This is the Second Mountain for Christians

*Draw me nearer ... blessed Lord, to the Cross where thou hast died.*

### PRAYER RESPONSE – 9:15 Traditional Service

As Hart leads us in that powerful old hymn, “I Am Thine, O Lord,” the prayer rail is here for you to respond to God’s call this day, kneeling in prayer, seeking God’s Will for your life. Pastor Andrea and I will be here as you need us.

