

How High Is Your Hurdle?  
Josh 24.14-18  
August 16, 2015

Have you ever watched a high hurdle race? The contestants sprint to the first hurdle, jump over it, sprint to the next, jump over it, and so on. The object isn't just to finish the race first, but also to successfully jump every hurdle.

We all have something in common with those hurdle runners? We all have hurdles in our lives that we must jump over. Today I want to ask you about one specific hurdle in your life. I know that each of you has this hurdle because everyone does, but I don't know what the name of your hurdle is because, even though each of us has this hurdle, it's different for each individual.

The text for this message is today's Old Testament reading from Joshua. Joshua said to all the people: *Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel. And they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people, "Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."* Then the people answered, *"Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods, for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our fathers up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight and preserved us in all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed. And the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God."* (Jos 24:1-2a, 14-18 ESV).

The personal hurdle that I want to talk about is the hurdle that stops you from serving God. We've all got one because we're all human. Each of us has something in our lives that comes between us and our God – between us and our God's mission to save the lost. Listen the story of Abraham Bininger and the hurdles which popped up in his service to God.

In 1735, Abraham Bininger and his parents left Zurich, Switzerland on a ship bound for the colonies in America. On that same ship was evangelist and founder of the Methodist church, John Wesley.

Sea travel was difficult in those days. During the journey across the ocean, both of Abraham's parents died and were buried at sea. When the ship finally docked, young Abraham walked down the gangplank alone in a strange and bewildering land. This was his first hurdle.

A short time later, Abraham felt the call of God to go and preach the Gospel to the native slaves on the island of St. Thomas. When Bininger arrived in St. Thomas, he was

confronted with another hurdle – a very unusual law. He learned that on this island it was illegal for anyone but a slave to preach the Gospel to the slaves.

That didn't stop Abraham. He wrote a letter to the governor of the island and begged to be declared a slave, so that he might have the freedom to proclaim the Gospel. The governor was so impressed that he forwarded Abraham's letter to the king of Denmark. The king was so touched by Abraham's drive to preach the Gospel that he sent back an edict allowing Bininger to preach the Gospel where, when, and to whomever he chose.

Abraham Bininger must have taken today's text very seriously. He was so eager to serve God that he was willing to volunteer for a life of slavery, if that was the price of his service. Abraham Bininger had a choice to make and he made it. He chose to serve God despite all obstacles and setbacks, despite the cost.

Like Abraham Bininger, you, too, must choose – each and every day. And choice is a subject that we, as Americans, are well acquainted with. We know how to make choices. After all, we live in the land of free choice. We have the right to choose to marry or remain single. We can choose to live where it snows or where it never snows. We can drive a Toyota or a Ford, vacation in Florida or California, be a doctor or a dock worker, vote Republican or Democrat.

But how about making the choices that count for eternity? Are we just as quick to make the choice to serve God? Or do we step back and say, "I'd like to serve you, God, but you see there are these things in my past. Lord, I've done some really bad things."

Or maybe we say, "Lord, some really bad things have been done to me. I've been hurt. I've been abused." Or maybe we say, "I can't be of service, Lord. Look at me. I'm under educated, physically handicapped, the wrong gender, the wrong race, the wrong ethnic background."

What does this have to do with our text? Any time we have a hurdle that stops us from serving God we stop bowing at the altar of God and start bowing at the altar of our problem. Our problem becomes more important than God and that makes our problem our god. We become guilty of idolatry.

"But," you cry, "that's an unfair accusation. My hurdles are taller than other people's. I have acted worse than others. I've been abused more, hurt more, rejected more. My limitations are greater than anyone else I know. Can you show me someone who served the Lord who was worse off than me?" I'm glad you asked. Here are a couple of them.

Without a doubt, she was not the town's social butterfly. In fact, when she met Jesus she was drawing water from the town well at noon. Why is that important? Ladies of good standing drew water in the morning when the sun was low and the air was cool. Women of scorn came to the well during the hotter times of the day to avoid humiliating social contact.

But it wasn't the ladies of good reputation that Jesus went out of his way to see. Jesus came to see this social outcast, this talk of the town, this woman with a history – five divorces and living with a man she wasn't married to. That's quite a history. Anyone want to open their closet and compare skeletons with this woman?

Yet it was this non-Jewish, multiple divorced, living-in-sin woman Jesus enlisted into God's service. Once Jesus exposed her sin and explained her forgiveness, this woman became a missionary of the Gospel. She went back to her town and witnessed about her Savior. The apostle John writes: *Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in [Jesus] because of the woman's testimony* (Jn 4:39 NIV). Jesus chose the least likely ambassador for his message. Nonetheless, her witness was successful.

But that was a long time ago, wasn't it? That was in Jesus' time. Today, would God still pick up one of the dregs of society and use that person like he used the Samaritan woman? He not only would, he does.

Her name is Ria. I met her at my field work church while I was in the seminary. She calls herself a colored person. She calls herself colored because she says she's too dark to be white and too light to be black. Ria cuts a striking image – over six feet tall and over 200 pounds. Ria's not someone's sweet grandma she's tough as nails with an iron will. Here's how she got that way.

Ria grew up on the streets of Worcester, South Africa. Ria not only grew up on the streets she grew up in a street gang. Her determined nature and leadership skills soon made her the leader of the gang. In time, Ria became the warlord of the neighborhood and, from there, the warlord of the city.

Ria became as cruel as she was powerful. In fact, her power and cruelty grew in equal proportions. She made loans and foreclosed on family properties. She trafficked in drugs, prostitution, and anything that could be sold on the black market. The local authorities wouldn't touch her because they were all on her payroll. And this was handy since Rea's enemies had a way of turning up dead.

Then one day, at the height of her power and wealth, two young, white American girls knocked on Ria's front door. I'll tell you the story as I heard it from her.

"When I heard the knock, I put my hand on the butt of the gun which I always wore. I was holding the gun behind my back when I opened the door to find these two small white girls. The older said, 'We're here to ask you if you know about our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.'

"When she said the name, Jesus Christ, my hand locked so tight on the gun that I couldn't let go. The gun grew hot in my hand. I could feel it beginning to burn my fingers. I asked the girls to come in. Then I rushed out of that room and literally pried the gun from my hand.

“At the name of Jesus, a force took hold of my body and soul that to this day I can’t explain. Those girls spent the next several hours in my living room telling me about Jesus and God’s plan of salvation. Before they left, I prayed with them and asked God to forgive my sins and to make me one of his children.”

That’s some story, uh. It sounds like something you might expect to hear from some shyster televangelist looking for your money. But it’s not. This story is true. How do I know that. Because Ria gave away everything that she had gained illegally. She quit her gang activities and began to live for God.

Today, Ria uses her leadership and organizational skills to operate a program to get South African gang kids off the street. She teaches them trade skills, many of which she must first learn herself. That’s how we met. Ria was in America to learn how to sew and to beg for money to buy sewing machines so she could go back and teach others. Ria also teaches these homeless children about Jesus and how they can have salvation.

I’ll repeat the question I asked earlier. Anyone want to open their closet and compare skeletons with this woman? Ria’s past makes the Samaritan woman look like a saint. But just like God made the Samaritan woman fit for his service, he made Ria fit for his service. And, friends, no matter what hurdles there are in your life, no matter how high those hurdles are, God can and will make you fit for service in his kingdom.

If you only remember one thing that I say today, listen carefully and remember this. God doesn’t require a resume and a job interview. He doesn’t hire and fire like most bosses, because he’s more our Daddy than our boss. God doesn’t look at your financial gain or loss. He’s not prejudiced or partial; not judging, grudging, sassy, or brassy; not deaf to our cry; not blind to our need. God’s plan works through us because that’s the way God designed it. I know that sounds crazy but it’s God’s plan – so it will work.

It doesn’t make any difference who you are, where you came from, or how you’ve lived your life – you can serve God. More important, Jesus doesn’t care who you are, where you came from or how you’ve lived your life. He still loves you, he still died for all your sins, and he still wants you to be of service in his kingdom.

Satan tells to you, “You’re not worthy.” Jesus tells you, “Don’t worry, I’ll be your worthiness.” Satan calls you to look back at all your mistakes and shortcomings and become depressed. God calls you to look back and see the cross where he redeemed you, and rejoice.

Sure, there are lots of reasons why God shouldn’t want you, but he does. He knows full well that you’re not perfect, but he loves you anyway – just as you are. So the next time Satan reminds you of your past remind him of his future.

Today, because of God’s tremendous love for you, you can look Satan straight in the eye and tell him to go back to hell where he belongs. Today, because of God’s

tremendous love for you, and despite any hurdle past, present, or future, you can stand with Joshua and say, “As for me, today and every day, I will serve the Lord.”