

September 8, 2019/Proper 18C
Deuteronomy 30:15-20/Luke 14: 25-33

Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him;

Moses is giving the Israelites marching orders for the last time. After forty years of wilderness wanderings, the time has come for the people to enter the Promised Land. Moses won't be going with them. So, rather like a parent, sending a first born off to college, he has all sorts of admonitions and advice to share before the parting.

Blessings and curses are both possibilities, he says. It is up to you. Again, he is sounding vaguely parental: if you study hard, keep up your grades, stay in touch, your tuition will be paid, your spending money will arrive, and your laundry will be done when you come home to visit.

"But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray . . ."

Lots of us have been on one end or the other of that speech.

Choose life, says Moses. And I suspect that is why we come here today – trying to make that choice. Trying to understand what that choice looks like in our ordinary lives and troubled world.

Hoping for the wisdom that will take us to a Promised Land – for company for the journey, for comfort in the passage of time, seeking direction for our own lives, and asking blessings upon our descendants, literal and figurative, that they may grow in the ways of love and obedience and steadfastness in the eyes of God.

We know all too well that even right choices do not guarantee pain free existence, long life, and abundant prosperity.

But what Moses is offering is God's own wisdom, that living and loving as God would have us do, is how a community is sustained and nurtured for holy and humane existence, as that source of company and comfort and wisdom and blessings for each other, and as a beacon that draws others into these same ways.

"Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple."

This is not why we come.

Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

Neither is that.

So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."

Nor that.

Jesus has been on his way to Jerusalem now for the last five chapters of Luke. And for ten weeks we have been handed one hard saying after another.

- We have been challenged, perhaps embarrassed by a Good Samaritan.
- We have been confronted by narrow doors, lowest seats, and empty purses.
- Disciples have been chided for their weak faith,

- Pharisees have been told to redistribute their wealth and enlarge their circle of friends,
- and the poor have been encouraged to look not at the world for their sustenance, but to God.
- This troublesome Messiah has warned us of moth-eaten and rusty treasure,
- to put our hand to the plow and not look back, let the dead bury the dead,
- and then warned us that he has come not to bring peace, but a sword.

Still the crowds who follow him get larger and larger. What are they thinking?
Are they really listening?

Don't they realize that this journey to Jerusalem is a foray with the forces of evil, a march into the face of death?

The crowds are well-disposed to Jesus. They are amazed at his words, bowled over by his deeds. They are part of the five thousand that he feeds. They watch him heal the sick and raise the dead.

They look upon him as a prophet mighty in deed and word.

Yet, in the end he loses them. They're gone before he carries a cross to Calvary.

Today, Jesus calls his growing band together once again and lays it on the line once again. Like Moses, he calls for choices.

If you would be my disciple you must hate father, mother, spouse, children, self, possessions.

The word "hate" is laden with emotion in our cultural context. It suggests repulsion at a visceral level.

In the context of first century middle eastern culture, to "hate" one's own self means that a person disconnects from everything that has heretofore defined that person.

Like a prodigal son, or like someone who would take off after an itinerant teacher to help him proclaim the coming of the Kingdom of God, in a world that had grown hopeless and oppressive and barren and stuck.

To put it another way, one's past no longer defines who they are. One's identity is no longer formed by one's former allegiances, nor one's experiences in life, nor even one's genetics. These are part of the old world which is giving way to the new world of God. Followers of Jesus are not defined by the past, but by their work in the present and their future hope.

That may as hard for us as it was for them.

Yet, in straightforward, no nonsense exhortation and in parable Jesus calls this crowd not to something more but to something other. To count the cost. To wake up and see that they stand at the fork in the road ahead of them. It's time to make decisions.

As harsh as he has seemed for weeks now, maybe there is something hopeful here. Jesus does not want just a part of us. He does not see our religious life isolated in one corner, and our family life in another, and our jobs in yet another. He wants it all.

And he wants us to count the cost.

What is demanded of disciples is that the network of relationships in which we live be redefined in the light of Christ' call to walk the way of the cross. A way of sacrifice and service.

So, try to imagine a world at peace; imagine a world where self-giving sacrifice can address poverty and hunger and hopelessness.

Can you imagine a world that lets go of racism, sexism, and homophobia?

Imagine a world not driven by terror, greed, hate or fear.

Can you imagine a Church that is willing to let go of our personal wants and personal agendas in service of a Gospel mission in the company of one another?

I've been doing some historical reading – about Germany before WWII, as Hitler came to power; how the Protestant churches of Germany simply went silent and compliant in the face of fascist threats and violence. No word of dissent from pulpits or people.

There was in fact an underground Christian resistance – the confessing Churches – with an underground seminary; one of its leaders the Pastor and Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Whether or not Bonhoeffer and his friends and colleagues counted the cost as they preached and wrote and acted in challenges to the Nazi regime, they paid in full. Bonhoeffer himself, his brother and brother in law, all executed with weeks of the war's end. Like millions of others.

I'm reading Bonhoeffer again now. I'm trying to understand what helps any Christian, what might help me, stand fast in the face of evil, risking everything, even crucifixion, for another, for Jesus.

In this deeply divided society, it seems to me that silence or violence are the usual modes of confronting powerful forces. And neither option seems Christlike.

The norms of constitutional government, of civil discourse, of mutual respect for difference, or regard for simple truths are being relentlessly eroded. And I wonder how the Church is preparing God's people if we are called to speak out and stand up in the face of danger, hate, threats of violence, because there is a Christlike truth to tell.

Maybe it will never come to that in this nation. But I work with an organization whose mission is worker rights, and these days that means immigrant workers. I find that there is a frightened community in our midst who think it already has.

I have no easy answer to such hard questions, although it seems to me that bringing them to speech opens my heart and imagination, not simply to potential tragedy, but to the Lord who promises his presence in our struggles to be faithful.

Bonhoeffer once wrote that "*When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.*"

Jesus reminds us this morning that he said it first.

Count the cost and decide.

Of course, when such a moment comes, it will take more than we can muster to make such a decision. It will take a power that comes from beyond ourselves.

If we only do what we think we can we will remain imprisoned to our own notions of ourselves as limited, self-contained, isolated, powerless.

We might fail; we probably won't get it right, the first or the fiftieth time we try, but grace will still abound, for we will be forgiven.

Jesus promises that such decisions may cost us much, maybe even our lives – and refusing to make them will cost us more.

The sign of that cost will be placed in your hand in a few moments.

The bread will be broken -- a sign of what happens to those who follow this God; a sign of what happened to this God who was broken on a cross that he might make the whole creation new.

I wish that every one of you had the opportunity to see what we see (clergy and chalice bearers) as we distribute communion Sunday after Sunday.

We do see what this brokenness accomplishes.

What we see in the faces and hands of those who receive the broken bread and who sip the wine, is God's abundance, God's new life, God's possibilities for all our decisions.

To all of us who participate in liturgy, whether it is the Altar Guild who washes the vessels that carry the brokenness of God, the usher who puts self aside in opening this congregation to the hospitality of God's table, or the congregation who kneels in gratitude for this extraordinary gift -- we participate in, for the moment, we really become part of, God's realm, God's reign.

It is not some parade that the crowd is following down the street. But it is a journey, a procession -- like the one you will join in a few minutes.

A procession marked by counting the cost, by decision making, a procession that calls us to imagine a new life, God's life, in us, through us, with us, for us. Not once, but over and over again, week in and week out.

A procession from a starry-eyed crowd to a rag tag band of disciples, ever dependent on this gracious, loving God.

A procession from a whole loaf and a single cup--to a broken piece and a tiny sip, that life might be returned, resurrected in a fullness that we, even in our wildest imaginations could barely hope for or imagine.

"Do not pray for easy lives," said Phillips Brooks, the great preacher of the Episcopal Church. "Do not pray for tasks equal to your power. Pray for powers equal to your task. [We] will find that [we] are able to do things [we] never believed [we] could do and it will be no miracle. [We] will be the miracle.

Choose life.

(The Very Rev.) Joy Rogers+