

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 1; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33

“The costs of discipleship”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

It’s hard to believe it’s already September, and yet it seems we don’t want to leave August behind. Even the date on today’s bulletin mistakenly still says that it’s August! As we bask in the easy closing days of summer, today’s gospel comes as a bit of a shock. It is difficult, and there is no way to sugar-coat it. The gospel text for today contains some of Jesus’ most challenging words. Jesus says, “*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.*”

What in the world is Jesus talking about? We’re supposed to love our families. What Jesus is talking about is the way human beings can place value on and prioritize their relationships with people, material things, and even their own lives. Jesus is saying humans not only love all that they possess: family, material possessions, and even themselves – we can love our possessions more than we love God.

Let’s first be clear about the little word translated into English as “hate.” The word “hate” is a strong word, and in Greek, the word means to “love something less than” or “esteem something less than” someone or something else. As in, “Whoever does not love their father and mother less than me, cannot be my disciple.” Jesus is asking anyone who follows him to love him as their Lord and Savior. Jesus is asking us to intentionally count the cost of discipleship to him.

Jesus then goes on to say, “*Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*” Jesus’ invitation to follow him means loving him above all others. This means becoming a servant of the cross. One of the great things about Lutheran theology is our theology of the cross, meaning we find grace most visible in Jesus and the cross. When writing about the cross, Martin Luther always pointed to Jesus, at a very particular place – the cross. Jesus healed the sick, ate with sinners, and cared for many in need, but only at the cross do we encounter the love of God in Christ who gives his very life for others. The cross reveals God crucified and hidden in suffering love for others. Luther called this “the love of the cross.”

Jesus Christ is the one who emptied himself of all possessions to carry the cross. In becoming human, Jesus emptied himself of his divine authority and power in this world. He became weak and

powerless in the world. God loves each of us more than anything. Christian love is the very opposite of “hate”; it is the very opposite of loving someone less than someone else. In the cross Jesus loves all of us unconditionally and without limit.

By asking us to consider the cost of discipleship, Jesus is inviting each of us again today to rededicate our very lives to him. Jesus is inviting us to empty ourselves of all we possess: our authority and power, our material possessions and the ways in which we often seek to possess others.

Some of you may be looking around wondering, “Is it Lent? This sounds like a Lenten sermon. I know the pastor was away on vacation, but I didn’t think it was that long!” No, it is not Lent, but as we end the easy days of summer, Jesus again invites us to make discipleship to him the starting point of the Christian journey each and every day. To follow Jesus means that daily we die to ourselves and all we possess, so that we might be raised in to live with Christ for others.

Your presence here today is a sign of your desire to choose life, that the reality of Jesus’ presence has given your very life to you. This is why we come to church - to hear the good news. The gospel is very simple: follow Jesus, empty yourself of all you possess, imitate him, becoming a servant of others. This is the core of the gospel: discipleship means daily following and imitating Jesus. Each day, like a builder building a tower, or a king going to war, Jesus asks us to count the costs of following him.

Jesus’ words are tough words, especially in one of the most affluent and powerful nations on earth. Jesus invites us to consider the costs of discipleship, so I would like to ask you a question: What do you possess? Citizenship, bank accounts, perhaps stocks or land, relationships of family, friends and work, you might even say that all of this means that you possess “a good life.” Jesus is inviting us to reconsider all we possess, or think we possess, in light of our discipleship to him. To use his words, we must love all our possessions less than we love Jesus. In letting go of our possessions we also gain them back, renewed in service to Jesus.

I think this is the reason Paul’s letter to Philemon is read with today’s gospel. Philemon is the briefest of Paul’s letters, but is also one of his most powerful because it shows us what letting go and following Jesus can mean. Paul wrote to his friend Philemon from prison, because one of Philemon’s “possessions,” a slave named Onesimus had run away. Not only was Onesimus a runaway slave, he had become baptized while he was with Paul, making Onesimus now also a fellow Christian. Paul wrote to Philemon appealing to him as a disciple of Jesus, to both let go of

his possession of Onesimus so that he could receive him back forever as a beloved brother.

Philemon is an example of someone who needed to reconsider all that he owned in relationship to Jesus.

Like us, as citizens of a very great nation, Philemon possessed great power. He was a Roman citizen, owned slaves, land and wealth. He had the law on his side, because Philemon could legally compel Onesimus to remain enslaved. Paul's appeal to Philemon is one of the earliest examples of a Christian social ethic that viewed people not as possessions, but as part of Christ's family. Paul's social ethic is in essence the first salvo toward encouraging Christians to give up their rights of possessing fellow human beings and the ending of slavery.

Paul was essentially telling Philemon, "When you became a servant of Christ, you emptied yourself of everything. You cannot continue to own Onesimus because he has now also been freed by Jesus Christ." Jesus' words in the gospel could also have been words to Philemon: "*None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.*"

Imagine with me a world in which people made all of their decisions, and esteemed all of their possessions and relationships, in light of their discipleship to Jesus. Imagine with me a world in which all Christians emptied themselves of all power, authority, wealth, status, in other words, all they possess, so they could now use all they possess in service to Jesus. Poverty, discrimination, oppression, injustice, would be viewed very differently. No one would be hungry, homeless, forgotten, or oppressed. Discipleship to Jesus means daily serving alongside Jesus.

We carry the cross by letting go of ourselves so that, dying to ourselves, we might live to Jesus and our neighbor. Your life matters to many other lives. Discipleship to Jesus means your life matters to the issues of our world today: poverty, discrimination, oppression, injustice, racism, sexism, classism, imperialism.

The call to follow Jesus and carry his cross of suffering and service costs something. It costs us our lives, for when Jesus invites us to carry the cross, he is asking us to die so that he might live to him and our neighbor.

Consider the costs of discipleship, and choose life again today. Allow yourself to die again to Jesus. Empty yourself, letting go of all you possess so that you might gain everything in Christ. Amen.