

9.7.2025 Pentecost 13

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

“The Cost of Discipleship”

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

It’s rare that we think about our lives in ultimate terms – in terms of life and death – as in a path that leads to life and a path that leads to death. We tend to avoid such ultimate thoughts, or perhaps when we have them, we close our eyes and lie down until the thought goes away!

Yet today’s readings are about choosing a path leading to life, a path that is life giving and life affirming. Each day we have an opportunity to walk on this path of life and love. The reading from Deuteronomy says it this way: “*See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity...choose life so that your descendants may live...*” Psalm 1 also speaks of “two paths,” the path of the wicked and the path of the righteous. Based on these Hebrew scriptures, we might well ask, “Which path am I on? Am I daily seeking a path of life over death?”

In today’s gospel, Jesus is echoing these Hebrew texts when he speaks to the crowds, saying, “*Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*” To follow Jesus is to walk on a path leading to life. To be a disciple is to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, imitating him as a student imitates and learns from a teacher. To be a disciple is to carry the cross as Jesus carried it with life-giving compassion and forgiveness for others. Everything Jesus did was motivated by a life-giving love for others – compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and welcome. Today as we remember Habitat for Humanity and Bread for the World, we seek to share this life-giving love.

Compassion (in Latin, *compassio*) means “to suffer with,” which is how Jesus carried the cross throughout his life. Jesus’ cross *is* compassion for all humanity, expressed in the forgiveness of human sin from the cross. When Jesus invites us to carry the cross and follow him as disciples, he is inviting us to walk this path of life with him with compassion and forgiveness for all.

Jesus’ words, “*Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple,*” are difficult words, because they are ultimate words. Jesus is really saying there is no “part-time” discipleship to him. To be a disciple is a 24/7 path. In response to Jesus, we might ask ourselves, “Am I a disciple of Jesus?” Notice the question isn’t “Am I a Christian?”; but rather, “Am I a disciple of Jesus?”

Jesus’ words remind us how much we have softened his words, rather than struggling with ultimate words leading to life. Jesus speaks of three costs of discipleship – three conditions of becoming a disciple to him: family, self-denial, and possessions. Each of these are ways we struggle with Jesus’ life-giving call to follow him.

The first cost of discipleship about family is harsh sounding – so harsh, it’s hard to believe anyone would follow him at all. 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.*”

Jesus' words remind us that even the closest bonds of love for family and relatives are never above our love for God. Jesus calls us to a discipleship that gives meaning to our love for family, relatives, and friends. God is love and because God first loved us – we love those closest to us.

The second cost of discipleship is self-denial, a forsaking of the self. Speaking of hating “*even life itself*,” Jesus is referencing his words in Luke 9:23, “*If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.*” Self-denial is one of the hardest things in life; it is the ultimate crossroad between ourselves and God, always asking, “Am I seeking my will or God’s will in my life?” Whose love and compassion are at the center of your life?

The third cost of discipleship is a renunciation of material possessions. Jesus says, “*So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.*” In a world dominated by the idea that “more is better,” these words are brutal. From the time we are young, the world tells us that possessions give us worth and value. In English we even refer to ourselves as “broke” when we have no money or possessions – as if more money and possessions will fix our brokenness. We express personal value by saying someone “is worth x amount of dollars.” Yet our worth, and the worth of others, is found not in possessions, but in the love of Jesus. In following him we experience a love that values family, friends, ourselves, and the material things of this world by opening our arms and hands to share with others. We love because God first loved us.

And so, we arrive at today’s reading from Philemon. Philemon was a baptized disciple of Jesus and a very wealthy man – wealthy enough to own slaves and to have a house large enough to be a church. In this letter, we learn that Philemon had a slave named Onesimus who had runaway, possibly for theft, and come to Paul, who was imprisoned for his faith. We don’t know how Onesimus found Paul, but Paul tells us that Onesimus has become a disciple, a baptized believer.

Paul encourages Philemon to welcome Onesimus back, “*no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother...*” Philemon is no longer to view Onesimus as a possession but as a human being who is valued equally along with him in Christ. Paul is gently helping Philemon to experience a self-denial of letting go of his old view of Onesimus so that he might see both himself and Onesimus in a new way. Paul’s words to Philemon are a pastoral example of what unity in Christ (Galatians 3:27-28) looks like: “*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*” As a disciple, Philemon must view his relationship with Onesimus in a new way – as a brother in Christ who is now free and a fellow member of the household of God.

Like the parable of someone planning to build a tower in which Jesus said, “*For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost...*” Paul is essentially, asking Philemon – and us – to sit down and count the cost of being a disciple. Like Philemon, we are to welcome others – all people – as if we are welcoming Jesus Christ. Following Jesus as his disciples,

we discover a new family of sister and brothers, the household and family of God.

There are many names in the Bible about which we know next to nothing, yet Onesimus is mentioned again in Paul's Letter to the Colossians as a coworker (Col. 3:9), and again in Ignatius of Antioch's Letter to the Ephesians as the Bishop of Ephesus (Eph. 1, 2, 6). It is quite possible that this runaway slave named Onesimus was freed by Philemon, and in turn, became a co-worker in Christ, eventually becoming the Bishop of Ephesus. The tradition of the church is that Onesimus was martyred at the end of the apostolic age, around 97-117 AD, during the reign of Emperor Trajan. Onesimus would have possibly been in his early 80s. Freed by Christ in baptism and freed by his slave owner, Onesimus experienced the value God's love, following Jesus all his life.

This story of discipleship reminds us of countless faithful disciples who followed Jesus on the way of the cross. Like them, if you were to sit down and count the cost of discipleship, is there someone who welcomed you back? Is there someone who freed you with forgiveness at a moment when you felt unforgivable? Is there someone who lifted you when you were at your lowest, giving you a new start and a new self-identity?

In a world of self-centeredness, Jesus is the path to life. Jesus is the path to a selfless love for others – for family, friends, and strangers, loving each as Jesus himself.

Walk in this world as his disciple, carrying his cross of love as you forgive and suffer with others. Follow him daily, and he will lead you again from death to life. Amen.