

Sunday, September 8, 2019
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 18 (Year C)
Deuteronomy 30.15-20; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14.25-33
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Choices. We always have choices. But sometimes those choices aren't always so easy. Or are they?

I recall a conversation I had with my boss—no, not the Bishop, and not God. This was my boss in my “previous life” when I informed him that I would be leaving LSA, the environmental consulting firm we worked for, to go to seminary to become a priest. Lloyd knew I had been in the discernment process, so it did not come as a complete surprise. He knew it was not an easy decision for me. He knew that I loved my job at LSA and that there was a part of me that wanted to continue my work as a transportation planner. But he also knew that I felt I was being called to the priesthood—a call that had reached the point that I could no longer deny it. After I told him that I had made it through “the process” and had been cleared to go to seminary, Lloyd said to me: “It’s not very often in this life that we have a choice between two truly good things.” What Lloyd was getting at was that he understood the difficulty in making my choice between two things I loved. And affirming that ultimately, where I would find true life, true fulfillment, would be not as a transportation planner but as a priest.

All our readings for today are about choice. About our choice to follow God. Not all of them are couched in terms of choices between two good things. Such as our Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy. In this reading, the Israelites are poised to enter the Promised Land. Finally, after 40 years in the wilderness. They are about to enter, but Moses will not be joining them. But he does give them a pep talk, summarizing what they have been through and what they have learned over the last 40 years. Conveying a message from God, Moses tells them, “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity” (Deut 30.15). Not exactly a choice between two good things. But what Moses is warning them about is the dangers they will face of being tempted to bow down to other gods—the gods of the people in the land they will soon inhabit. That these foreign gods will seem new and exciting. That they will seem to offer a better way of life. He is warning the people that they will need to be very careful in their discernment of the truth. And that the only real choice lies with the living God who has led them to freedom and will continue to be with them.

We are not generally tempted to bow down and worship foreign gods. But we are faced with other things that can take the place or get in the way of our relationship with God. And these other things are often good things, or seem to be. Jesus makes this abundantly clear in our Gospel reading. Or should I say, painfully clear? Just look at what 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” (Lk 14.26). This is far more troubling to us than the warning about foreign gods that Moses gave to the Israelites. We need to hate our family in order to follow Jesus? We need to hate our very lives in order to follow Jesus? What about that whole “loving others as ourselves” thing? And then he says, “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple” (Lk 14.27). Meaning that we may need to suffer and die

for the sake of the Gospel. And then he says, “none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions” (Lk 14.33). Self-explanatory.

So, in order to follow Jesus, we need to hate our family, face potential suffering and even death, and give away all our possessions. Why on earth would we want to do that? What kind of choice is that?

Jesus’ primary point is that our commitment to follow him is to be complete. We are to give up all those things that stand between us and complete commitment to him. That we are to die to those things that distract us and get in the way of making a complete commitment to following him.

The first thing he specifically calls out is family—a denial of close family ties. Is Jesus saying we need to actually hate our family members and that we should completely abandon our families? Not likely. After all, we see in the Gospels how close he is with his own family, particularly his mother. He is not advocating the literal abandonment of one’s family—of abandoning spouse and children, of hating parents and siblings. But his words here are meant to emphasize that even our deepest, closest relationships must be reexamined in the light of discipleship. That we cannot allow those closest to us to deter us from seeking to follow Christ. That we cannot allow our families to get in the way of us truly living the Gospel. Jesus also notes that the same applies to our own lives. That we cannot be so enamored with our own lives, or our perception of our lives, that we are deluded into thinking we can do it all on our own. There just may be something more that can be obtained by following Christ.

The second thing that Jesus points out about commitment to following him is that to do so, we must be willing to “carry the cross.” This is shorthand that is perhaps more applicable to Jesus’ own day than our own. That true discipleship may require suffering and death. Thankfully, in our own time, it is rare that following Christ means that we are likely to suffer physically or face death. At least not in our own country. But that does not mean that there may not be some suffering, even some metaphorical death involved. In some circles, choosing to follow Christ can bring ridicule, even ostracism—bringing with it emotional suffering. But the unwritten message—the message that is borne out by the Gospel narrative—is that ultimately, the cross which Jesus bore, the cross on which he died, transforms and redeems the pain of the world and leads to new life for all who follow him.

As to giving up material possessions, this is not a particularly new thing for Jesus. He is pretty clear throughout the Gospels that obsession with material possessions and concern for the security such things presumably provide are very appealing, even seductive. Jesus is just reiterating that excessive concern with material possessions can become an obstacle to faithful discipleship and to being able to freely following him.

As one commentator notes, “Although Jesus’ statements may seem hyperbolic, the point is that followers of Jesus must agree to renounce anything that stands in the way of *a full commitment to discipleship*. Its demands call for radical changes in our lives, along with a willingness to be transformed. But the promises are likewise great, and the blessings eternal. It all comes to the same point—it is *all or nothing* for the sake of the Kingdom.” (*Synthesis*, Proper 18, 9/8/19).

Jesus wants us to know that the decision to follow him is absolute. There is no room for competing loyalties.

The parables Jesus tells about careful planning before building a tower or going to war against another army are meant to illustrate that one must wisely consider all the options before acting. Those who would choose to follow Jesus must consider the costs and consequences of their decision. Because the consequences are so demanding, becoming a follower of Jesus requires careful discernment.

Perhaps an example will help. Paul's letter to Philemon, which we heard read this morning, provides an example of the choices and changes to be made in one's life for the sake of following Christ and living the Gospel. Paul is writing to his friend Philemon, a wealthy man who has become a leader of the Church in Colossae. Like all rich and powerful men of his time, Philemon owns slaves. One of his slaves, Onesimus, has somehow wronged his master and has run away. Onesimus makes his way to Rome where Paul is imprisoned. He proves to be of great help to Paul and under his tutelage, converts to Christianity. While Paul would like to keep Onesimus around to help him while he is in prison, he resolves to send him back to Philemon. If Onesimus returns to Philemon, it would be well within his rights as a slave-owner to punish Onesimus for his offenses, to have him thrown in prison, to sell him to someone else, or worst-case, to kill him. Aware of all these possibilities, Paul writes to his friend and implores him to welcome Onesimus back. Not as a slave, but as a free man. Even more, Paul asks that Philemon consider his calling as a follower of Jesus and to welcome Onesimus back as a brother in Christ. As one who is equal to him in the Body of Christ. As a sign of his faith in Onesimus' conversion, Paul even offers to personally reimburse Philemon for anything owed to him as a result of Onesimus' offenses. Of course, Paul does make a backhanded comment: "I say nothing about you owing me even your own self" (Phn 19b). A reminder that it was because of Paul that Philemon became a Christian, thereby gaining new and eternal life. With the unwritten message that what Philemon has gained far outweighs any material loss he might experience because of having one less slave.

What Paul asks of Philemon is that he put aside the social conventions of his time and culture, that he put aside his rights as a slave-owner, and choose to truly follow the Gospel. That he choose to truly live the Gospel. The Gospel in which Paul had previously written to the Church in Colossae, "there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!" (Col 3.11). Even if it meant financial loss. Even if it meant criticism by secular society. Even if it meant tension within Philemon's own family. Because the benefits ultimately outweigh the potential costs.

We don't know what happened to Onesimus upon his return to Philemon, bearing Paul's letter imploring Philemon to make a difficult choice. But I like to think Philemon was true to his calling and his choice to become a follower of Jesus in the first place and embraced Onesimus as his brother in Christ. I like to think that Onesimus took his place alongside Philemon as leaders of the Church in Colossae, serving as a living example of what it means to make the hard choices between society's ways and God's ways. Of what it means to make the hard choices that ultimately lead to new life.

Our readings for today raise questions as to the choices—sometimes difficult ones—that we are called to make as we strive to become faithful followers of Jesus Christ. Perhaps the best summary for all our readings, and for our own discernment, comes from Moses: “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Chose life” (Deut 30.19).