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Weekend of Sunday, September 8, 2019
13th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 23/Proper 18/Year C
Primary Text: Luke 14:25-33
Sermon Title: “*Life and Prosperity or Death and Adversity*”

Theme

Jesus speaks frankly about the fearsome costs of discipleship. Those who follow him should know from the outset that completing the course of discipleship will finally mean renouncing all other allegiances.

Text

²⁵Now large crowds were traveling with [Jesus;] and he turned and said to them,
²⁶“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. ²⁷Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. ²⁸For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, ³⁰saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ ³¹Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³²If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. ³³So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.”

Sermon

A few words of context about the First Reading will make it easier to understand. God heard the cries of his people while they were enslaved to the Egyptians and so God called Moses to lead his people out of Egypt. This took some doing but was all part of God's plan to bring glory to himself so that the Israelites would begin to trust him. But as mighty as the signs and miracles were that God used to free the Israelites, no sooner were they free and travelling through the desert that they began to murmur against God and whine that God had abandoned them. God heard their murmuring and their whining and responded in two ways – 1) God reminded them that he knew their needs and, 2) told them that they should trust him to supply them.

The Israelites went on their way to the Promised Land and when they arrived they sent in scouts to see what it was like on the other side of the Jordan River. When the scouts came back they said, 'There are grapes the size of basketballs and rivers flowing with milk and honey. But there is a big problems – there are also giants living in the land and we are nothing against them.'

And so the people decided on their own that this whole idea of leaving Egypt was a bad idea and once again there was murmuring and whining that Moses' God had led them out into the desert to abandon them and let them die.

They shouldn't have done that because apparently even God, full of grace and mercy, can be pushed too far and they, the Israelites, had crossed the line. This time punishment was in order and so God said, 'You didn't trust me to lead you into the land I told you I had turned over to you, so now you will walk, and walk, and walk. You will wander in this stinking desert until you die. You will not enter the land that I promised you. Instead I will turn it over to your descendants.'

And true to his word, it would be another forty years before God would lead them to the Promised Land again. And as promised, none of them who had received the promise from God lived to see the day except for two, Joshua, Moses' successor, and Caleb. But before Moses died he was used by God to make this address that is the First Reading. The sermon title is a summary of the choices God gave in that address: they were asked to choose between "*Life and Prosperity or Death and Adversity.*"

When people ask about my career before pastoral ministry I mention working for Parker Hannifin for nine years and working for their competitor, Vickers, for another 3 years. But I don't often mention the ten months between when I worked for Baker Material Handling Company. But there was that gig I did for less than a year. I was hired to manage a manufacturing and assembly plant near Charleston SC.

One of the first things I noticed was that there was a complete breakdown in discipline among the workforce. People were coming in whenever they felt like it and although in most jobs it really didn't matter, we did have a few lines that required everyone to be there or we simply couldn't begin. Well, I quickly jumped all over that problem and within a matter of one month there was no longer a problem.

I simply communicated how important it was for all to begin on time and then set up a disciplinary program to make sure that happened. I didn't make it personal. I did listen to a lot of stories about blocked train-crossings and childcare issues, but I simply re-iterated the importance for their timely attendance and encouraged them to work their problems out.

After the third warning, I met them at the door with a hand shake, thanked them for their service and told them they were no longer needed. I'll bet I fired seven people that first month and remained on friendly terms with them all. I presented them with a simple conditional statement. *'If you do this...your behavior will be rewarded in this way.... But if you do otherwise, know that that behavior will be punished in this way'*. Those of you who are parents have done this with your kids. You teachers have done it with your students. We have all had it done to us at one point in our lives or another.

This is what God was doing in this text. God was simply presenting his people with a conditional statement. *'If you do this...your behavior will be rewarded in this way.... But if you do otherwise, know that that behavior will be punished in this way.'*

All analogies breakdown at some point. And where my analogy breaks down is that God does take disobedience personally and there is simply nowhere to go when the decision is made to disobey God.

In this text God was mercifully trying to coax his people back into obedience. He was willing to give them chance after another chance even though he already knew and even predicted to Moses that the Israelites would turn from him again. The fact is that the whole Egypt to Promised Land saga was one disappointment after another for God. Yet God was constantly giving them another chance. That's how God has revealed God's self in this text.

I think it would be helpful to have a little contextual understanding to get a fuller appreciation for the Second Reading also, which is nearly the whole letter of Paul to his friend, Philemon. Paul wrote this letter from a prison in perhaps Rome or Ephesus. The location from which Paul wrote is not really important. But the fact that he was in prison is important. Paul was imprisoned for spreading the Gospel. He was a prisoner for the Lord. He wrote this letter to Philemon, an apparently wealthier friend of Paul's, and a fellow member of the church and believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is a *personal* letter from Paul to Philemon. It is unclear just how well Paul and Philemon knew each other – and I don't think it really matters. I don't think it would have really mattered if Paul had never met Philemon – the letter might have still been written much the same way.

The issue was that Paul was using his authority as the pre-eminent leader of the Gentile church to accomplish something. And that something was to get Onesimus freedom from slavery. But I want you to notice that Paul did not address slavery as a moral issue. The issue for Paul was that Onesimus had converted to Christianity. He was now a brother in the Lord, a fellow member of the church himself. And with Paul in prison along with others, the important work of the Gospel was itself being enslaved. And so Paul was appealing to Philemon to set brother Onesimus free – for the sake of the Gospel!

The reason I am mentioning this reading at all is because, just as I did with the First Reading, I want to lift up for you the methodology that Paul used to accomplish his mission.

He told Philemon that though he himself was imprisoned for his work of spreading the Gospel, he, Paul, was praying for Philemon and the rest in Philemon's community of faith.

He told Philemon that, as the leader of the Gentile church, he had the authority to command him to set Onesimus free, but he preferred that Philemon take that action himself – that he grow in his discipleship to see that that was the right action to take. And while he reminded Philemon that he owed Paul everything because it was through him that Philemon heard the Gospel in the first place, he let it be Philemon's opportunity to do the right thing.

I think some of the more interesting issues for us that come out of this letter are issues such as:

- When it comes to the Gospel, what will it take to motivate us to do the right thing?
- What are we willing to give up personally for the sake of the Gospel?
- Do we owe anyone, namely God the Father revealed in Jesus Christ, anything as a result of what has been given us through his life-giving death on the cross, which gives us freedom from the guilt of our sin, which reconciles us with our Creator God, which then gives us the opportunity to have eternal life in paradise – Do we owe anyone anything for that?

These are similar to the rhetorical expressions that Paul used in dealing with Philemon. And they are good questions for us to wrestle with as well.

Let's move on to the Gospel Reading shall we. This is another one of those hard teachings of Jesus. I want you to know that Jesus was not anti-family. He was simply trying to illustrate how difficult it might be for some to follow him – to break away from the status quo – to go in a new and different way.

Remember that at this particular time, Jesus' ministry was centered on the Jews. So those who were traveling with him were undoubtedly Jews; people who had some familiarity with Old Testament scripture through Temple and synagogue worship and who had some familiarity with the commandments, decrees and ordinances that were given by God through Moses, referred to in the First Reading.

Jesus was telling them that they were wrong. They had misunderstood. Their understanding of his Father as a malevolent spy-god looking down, watching and waiting to catch someone in the sinful breaking of nitpicky rules and laws was all

wrong. Though he didn't go into the whole deal in this passage, you all have been around here enough to know the essence of it.

In some ways Jesus said none of that stuff mattered because all those laws were given to show God's people that righteousness is impossible without the grace of God. And when they admitted they couldn't do it without God's grace, grace would be there by the basketful to restore them.

But in another way, Jesus told them that the nitpicky stuff that they were doing, as acts of faith was not near enough. In words that surely confused his listeners, he said, 'You must be willing to go this far. You must be willing to turn away from your family, its history, and its traditions to be my disciples.'

If you have ever had a family member or know of a family where someone married outside the Christian faith then you know the kind of heartache that can bring. In the Amish tradition for example, if one is baptized into the Amish church but then later on decides to leave the church to enter the modern world as let's say a Lutheran, well that person will be shunned. They might as well be dead. That was what Jesus' listeners had to face if they turned their backs on their ancestral faith and practices.

He went on to say something about carrying one's cross. And while they probably didn't understand that either, they knew that a cross was an instrument of death so that couldn't possibly be a good thing.

And then Jesus gave them some logical advice. He said, 'The smart person will think about all that I have said, because much is being asked of you and I want you to be fully informed. Being my disciple may cost you everything. And you should not make the decision to come and follow me without first weighing the cost of discipleship. As my followers, much will be demanded of you. You will be asked to give, and give, and give. It will not seem fair. It will cause you discomfort. You will hurt. It will cost you dearly – in fact it might cost you everything you have – even your life. So think about what you are signing up for.'

Why would Jesus say such horrible things to a group of potential followers? He obviously knows nothing about the modern recruiting technique of deceiving people to get them to sign up for something.

Because he knew that being called to follow him by reaching out to the community to share the truth about God's love and grace would be counter-cultural. God's mission, Paul's mission, Jesus' mission, the mission of the larger church and the mission of Zion Lutheran Church is counter cultural.

But notice one thing, all three readings were spoken to or written for *believers*. I suspect that just as it was in their day, it is the same in our day. The readings are intended to *remind us* that the mission of the church and its believers *is still* counter-cultural.

Oh yes, our mission is counter-cultural to those outside the church. They see us out doing something goofy like sweeping the sidewalks and gutters in Cornersburg and some thank us, but more of them just scratch their heads and say, "There goes those Christians doing goofy stuff again."

But back to us, the readings remind us that when we become Christian, disciples of Christ, we give up much of our own will and take on his – we give up our own mission and take on his.

The folks Jesus was speaking to in the Gospel Reading likely really did have to choose between him and their own families. Most of us come from Christian families so that won't be a problem, but give up a tradition like Sunday afternoon football to sweep streets – now *too much* has been asked!

We should have known better. We were fully informed that it would be tough in here and yet we cling to things that don't matter and lose sight of the main thing, the only thing that matters, our relationship with God revealed in Jesus Christ.

In the announcements this day, this unofficial first day of the program year, I laid out many of the discipleship opportunities that have been prepared for all people. No one will be required to do any of them. In our day it is highly unlikely that any of our calls to discipleship will cause much pain even to the most devoted disciple. No one can get anymore from you than you are willing to give.

But the Holy Spirit will use all the tools in its arsenal to make us want to get with the program. The Holy Spirit will coax us with God's *conditional* statements about God's *unconditional* love. The Holy Spirit will even try to guilt and coerce us to

get us to change our ways. And the Holy Spirit will remind us of the ultimate price that God was willing to pay to win back our hearts and our attentions. I hope all of us will make changes this year that will bring us closer to the relationship God wants with us.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

So where is the pep talk for a great new program year? Here it comes. While we were yet unworthy, Christ died in our place, so that we might be given another chance, a new hope at life here and now, and in the hereafter. And God is so loving and graceful that we get that gift today. And not just today, but every day. And for that, it is our honor and opportunity to pick up our crosses and suffer a little inconvenience for the sake of the Gospel. We *get to* do this!

Prayer

Extravagant God, you pour out blessings upon us and lead us on the path of true life. Help us to choose your way again and again, that we might revel in your love and reflect it to all we meet. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen