

Sunday, September 4, 2022

Grace and Peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

What a gospel text before us this morning. This is certainly not a passage of scripture we want to memorize or even visit often. It seems contrary to what Jesus is all about. It seems downright un-Christian.

And therein lies the challenge for us all today, namely, to take the words of Jesus seriously without taking them literally.

As we read and listen to the words of the gospel, we find that the charge to hate everyone and even life itself stands next to the call to love one another. Despite the command to the call to give up all possessions, Luke in the book of Acts, lauds wealthy Christians for their support of the community.

Does Jesus really want you to hate your family? Of course not. This is what is known as hyperbole. And the point Jesus is making. Jesus is teaching that where there is “hate” there are no “ties that bind.”

We must, however, remember that in this passage Jesus is teaching about the cost of discipleship. And it is easy for us to understand that God wills abundant life for humankind but living into the future God intends for us is most certainly a challenge.

We must also realize that living into the future requires sacrifice and vigilance by each of us in the face of unholy forces that would sow division and discord.

Our first lesson today has Moses speaking to his fellow Israelites – a rebellious and stiff-necked people who have repeatedly turned to idols, forgetting the promises of God. Faithfulness, it turns out, is difficult and requires total commitment. Moses presents the decision before them in stark, simple terms: “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.”

And we hear a similarly direct message in our Psalm: “Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked.... Their delight is in the law of the Lord.” The law is intended as a gift. Do these things, Moses seems to say, and life will be good; life will be hard if you don’t. The natural result of unfaithfulness is unnecessary turmoil and distress. God stands ready to shape a new future for us if only we choose the path of obedience.

Our second lesson, Paul’s letter to Philemon makes its only appearance in our lectionary this week. And here we find Paul appealing to Philemon to take back the escaped slave Onesimus without penalty – instead, to receive his as a brother in Christ. Paul actually pleads with Philemon to forgo any punishment that might be within his right to inflict and instead to welcome the returned slave as he would welcome Paul himself. Life in Christian community sometimes calls us to surrender what is rightfully ours for the sake of our neighbor. For us, a major challenge with this text is that it assumes the legitimacy of slavery. But Paul’s primary

focus is not on the institution of slavery but on the power of the gospel to transform human relationships and bring about reconciliation.

And like Philemon, our gospel text describes the sacrifice required of those who follow the way of Jesus. Discipleship demands nothing less than all we have. Period. The examples of a tower builder and a king going to war highlight the foolishness of undertaking a major endeavor without first considering the costs, so everyone who would follow Jesus consider the cost of discipleship.

The demand to hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself presents a great difficulty. The Greek word for hate does not necessarily refer to anger or hostility, rather, in some cases it sets up a contrast and clarifies a choice. In our gospel text today, it indicates that if there is a conflict, one's response to the demands of discipleship must take precedence over even the most sacred of human relationships.

And what does Jesus value? The answer to that important question is: finding every lost one; making a true brother or sister of every starving pauper, outsider, or penitent prodigal; treating one who is enslaved like a sibling, even if it means trading places according to Paul.

We might add - standing publicly in solidarity with those whose lives are treated as if they don't matter. With his dying breaths, Jesus makes one more unlikely friend. And that, Luke reminds us, is loving God and walking in God's ways.

From this relatively short gospel text today we find very important concepts for us to tackle now and always. What cost do we pay on a day-to-day basis as we strive to be true disciples? As we who profess to be Christians continue to see our numbers become less and less each year, the costs may become more evident than ever before. So, a question that naturally arises is - are we ready and willing to pay the cost?

It is important for us as we live with the question of the cost of discipleship to realize that Jesus is ultimately calling people to a relational priority not limited to blood relationships. Instead, Jesus is calling for a broader understanding of family, rooted in the common humanity of all people.

And in today's world we are right to bring into question the whole notion of common humanity. We are definitely living in a strange new world that seems not to seek a common humanity.

We also find that Jesus teaches the disciples that while salvation is solely a gift from God, the life of a disciple is filled with sacrifice. I would urge everyone to give a bit of time this coming week seriously contemplating what sacrifices Jesus is asking of each of us.

Jesus teaches that like the hyperbole of hating family members, the disciples need be released from any attachment in order to have the freedom to live out the new reality of discipleship. So, that begs the question - in our consumer culture that holds tightly to possessions, what do Jesus' words say to us about our modern possession-focused world?

The cost of discipleship described in our gospel text extends to the mundane, everyday things of life. We find that Jesus' teaching on counting the cost, is the beginning of the life of discipleship.

I find it rather amazing that the few verses of Luke's gospel today cause us to go back, in a sense, to take a fundamental and critical look at ourselves, specifically asking ourselves how are we doing as today's disciples?

I began today by putting forth the challenge for each of us to take today's texts, specifically the gospel text seriously but not literally. And then to look at them under the microscope of discipleship.

It is my hope that we are all driven to examine what it truly means to be a Christian, a disciple of Christ, each day of our lives.

Thanks be to God. Amen