

## EXTREME DISCIPLESHIP

### Pentecost 16 – Cycle C: Jeremiah 18:1-11; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33

I remember only too well the feeling of dread I had at the beginning of each year at seminary when our professors would place before us detailed sheets of the course requirements for the year – a long reading list, two or three 25-page essays per term, one or two seminars per term, and often a final exam and a journal which was to be turned in and marked. The feeling of dread did not descend all at once on the first day of term: it descended upon me gradually during the first week as I realized that each professor had developed his or her curriculum independent of the rest. There was no faculty meeting concerning what might be a reasonable workload. They had no idea the cumulative effect their requirements would have on the students. In an unguarded moment, I accused one of our professors of turning us into workaholics. He allowed that that was a fair comment.

By the grace of God, a few extensions on deadlines, and more than a few all-nighters, I and most of my classmates survived. I'll never forget Neil Alexander's counsel when I was railing against the system in the privacy of his office one day. "James," he said in his Tennessee drawl, "I know exactly where you're comin' from. It's no different from when I was in seminary. But the best advice I can give you is *cooperate and graduate*." I lived by that motto for four long years, and more than a few of our field placement students over the past nineteen years have heard those words pass my lips.

I must admit to the same feeling of dread whenever I read the passage that forms this morning's Gospel. In this case, Jesus lists the course requirements for consecrated discipleship; and it appears to be every bit as impossible as all those papers, seminars, reports, journals, and exams did every September during my seminary years.

It is, of course, easy to get stuck on the illustrations Jesus uses – as easy as it was for me to be overwhelmed by the two- or three-page single-spaced prospectus that my professors handed out each September. What Jesus is describing through the shocking images and examples in Luke 14 is single-mindedness when it comes to proclaiming the good news of God's love, God's justice, and God's peace. Jesus is saying that there are many places of comfort in our lives to which we can retreat: the warm company of family and friends, and the many temptations to self-indulgence – what he refers to as "loving life". There is nothing inherently comfortable about discipleship, though, he says to us. It is as challenging as any academic study, as rigorous as learning any discipline, really – and then some, because as long as we live, there really is no graduation day. It is a lifelong calling he describes, and the real question he poses through these rather startling examples, images, and parables is "how deep is your call?" "Can you love sacrificially? Can you be people for others? Can you live with the inevitable conflict that arises when gospel values confront the way of the world? Can you be poor for the sake of another's wellbeing? Can you take a stand for justice when injustice is staring you in the face? Can you insist on the way of peace in a world that seems increasingly committed to punishing by violence?"

Last Sunday, Paula and I were Mennonites for the day. As we do once every year or two, we attended worship at Erb Street Mennonite Church. The Erb Street congregation is not a particularly conservative expression of Mennonite Christianity, and for both Paula and me it is easy to imagine that we are actually worshipping with Lutherans. There are no theological red flags. We also have several friends in the congregation, including the pastor, Eleanor Epp-Stobbe.

We were shocked back to reality, however, when, at the end of the service, the worship leader referred to a pacifist statement from the Mennonite Central Committee concerning the sabre-rattling President Obama was doing concerning the chemical weapons attack on Syria's citizens. MCC called upon the leaders of the world to recognize "that two wrongs do not make a right" – the first wrong being the chemical attack, and the second being the proposed attack by the United States on specific Syrian targets. Of course, I thought to myself, this will be the Mennonite stand: Mennonites are renowned for being pacifists. At the same time, I realized that it was not Menno Simons who had a hold on the Mennonite Central Committee; rather it was the gospel of Jesus Christ. Retaliation and punishment are *not-gospel*. God's way with us, Jesus revealed in his life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection, is to love us into salvation; not beat us into submission. We are to take up our cross, in this case the cross of patience and forbearance and diplomacy, and follow Jesus.

I was heartened to read the next day that the Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Mark Hanson, along with several other mainline church leaders in the United States, echoed the Mennonite Central Committee's response. Our political leaders may not live by the word of God in everything they do, and they need to hear from Jesus' disciples that treating violence with violence is not the way to justice and peace. What rankles so many of us who have one foot in the world and the other in the kingdom of God is how impractical God's way seems; how much it requires of us; how much energy it takes to love our enemies; how much patience it takes to wait for the grace of God to heal and restore and transform people and governments and systems.

Jesus could have said in today's Gospel, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate bombings and killing and military solutions cannot be my disciple." That is today's context.

I must tell you that I was inspired by all of our readings this morning. They all model the radical involvement Jesus calls for in the Gospel. Jeremiah's image of the potter and the clay and the psalmist's image of a Creator who is intimately connected to the minutiae of creation and life give us a vision of a God who is anything but a distant and benign force. God is present and involved in the world these two passages tell us.

Paul's letter to Philemon is remarkable in that Paul risks himself with Philemon over this nobody, Onesimus. We cannot say for certain how Onesimus fell from grace with his master Philemon, or whether in fact he did. He may have run away from Philemon; he may have stolen some money from his master and left – Paul offers to repay Philemon anything Onesimus owes him. It may be, however, that Philemon sent Onesimus to Paul to serve his needs while Paul was in prison. Whatever the situation, Paul advocates for Onesimus. In their time together, Onesimus has changed, we learn. He has become a true follower of Jesus, and may even be worthy as a teacher for the house church Philemon leads. Paul writes to Philemon, "Don't think of him as a slave anymore, but rather a beloved brother and partner" – presumably a partner in ministry. The gospel has power, Paul tells us in so many words, to change people, to transform people, to move us from being those whose highest call is comfort to those whose deepest call is gospel love, gospel justice, and gospel peace.

As a church, we pray such transformation for ourselves. It is so important that we continue to find ways to bless the world around us with the love, care, service, and welcome of Jesus. It is easy to love the beauty of our building and grounds, it is easy to take comfort in our rituals and liturgy, it is easy to love the familiar. We are a family as much as we are a congregation. But, Jesus says to us, rise beyond comfort and pride and familiarity to the next level: be single-minded about taking Christ Lutheran Church to the streets, about being people for others.

Last May, our Church Council had a vision for our congregation as more connected, more relevant to the world around us. And it may take us several tries before we get it right – our September 12 barbecue is a conspicuous effort at reaching out to the community around us – but we can't stop. The call to discipleship is extreme: it means always looking for new and different ways to be involved in healing and helping the life of the community around us. It means allowing compassion to lead us to the side of those who are hurting and in need. It means recognizing what the cross looks like in our time and context, grabbing on and lifting it high. It means listening closely to Jesus' call to discipleship, counting the cost, and then saying – in spite of our feeling of dread, in spite of our misgivings and second-guessing, to walk in faith knowing that Jesus himself walks with us. It is extreme, it is costly, but it is very, very good. And, Jeremiah reminds us, God needs us; the world needs us; because we have received these precious words that are nothing less than life itself – words which must be proclaimed!