



SAINT PETER'S CHURCH

Holy Hating

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field
The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost ~ September 8, 2019*

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Today I have set before you life and success, or death and disaster. For today I command you to love YHWH, your God, to follow God's ways and keep the commandments, the laws and the customs. If you do, you will live and increase, and YHWH, your God, will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your hearts stray and you do not listen to me, if you let yourself be drawn into the worship of other gods, and serve them, I tell you today, you will not survive. You will not live long in the land which you are now crossing the Jordan to enter and occupy. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today: I set before you life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life, then, so that you and your descendants may live, by loving YHWH, your God, by obeying God's voice and by clinging to YHWH. For that will mean life for you, a long life in the land which God swore to give to your descendants Sarah and Abraham, Rebecca and Isaac, and Leah and Rachel and Jacob.

Psalm 1

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| 1 Happy are they who have not walked
in the counsel of the wicked, *
nor lingered in the way of sinners,
nor sat in the seats of the scornful! | 4 It is not so with the wicked; *
they are like chaff which the wind blows away. |
| 2 Their delight is in the law of the Holy One, *
and they meditate on that law day and night. | 5 Therefore the wicked shall not stand upright
when judgment comes, *
nor the sinner in the council of the righteous; |
| 3 They are like trees planted by streams of water,
bearing fruit in due season,
with leaves that do not wither; *
everything they do shall prosper. | 6 For the Holy One knows the way of the righteous, *
but the way of the wicked is doomed. |

Philemon 1-21

FROM PAUL, A PRISONER FOR CHRIST JESUS, and Timothy, our brother, To Philemon, our dear friend and coworker, to Apphia, our sister, to Archippus, our companion in the struggle, and to the church that meets in your house: Grace and peace from Abba God and Our Savior Jesus Christ. I always mention you in my prayers and thank God for you because I hear of the love and faith you have for our Savior Jesus and for all the saints. I pray that you'll be active in sharing your faith, so that you'll fully understand all the good things we're able to do for the sake of Christ. I find great joy and comfort in your love, because through you the hearts of the holy ones have been refreshed. Therefore, though I feel I have every right in Christ to command you to do what ought to be done, I prefer to appeal in the name of love. Yes, I, Paul, an ambassador and now a prisoner for Christ, appeal to you for my child, of whom I have become the parent during my imprisonment. He has truly become Onesimus—"Useful"—for he who was formerly useless to you is now useful indeed both to you and to me. It is he that I am sending to you—and that means I'm sending my heart! I had wanted to keep him with me, that he might help me in your place while I'm in prison for the Good News; but I didn't want to do anything without your consent, so that kindness might not be forced on you, but be freely bestowed. Perhaps he was separated from you for a while for this reason—that you might have him back forever, no longer as a subordinate, but as more—a beloved brother, especially dear to me. And how much dearer he'll be to you, since now you'll know him both in the flesh and in Christ! If you regard me as a partner, then, welcome Onesimus as you would me. If he has done you any injury or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, write this in my own hand: I agree to pay. And I won't even mention that you owe me your very self! You see, my friend, I want to make you "useful" to me in Christ. Refresh this heart of mine in Christ. I write with complete confidence in your obedience, since I am sure you will do even more than I ask.

Luke 14:25-33

Large crowds followed Jesus. He turned to them and said, “If any of you come to me without turning your back on your mother and your father, your loved ones, your sisters and brothers, indeed your very self, you can’t be my follower. Anyone who doesn’t take up the cross and follow me can’t be my disciple. “If one of you were going to build a tower, wouldn’t you first sit down and calculate the outlay to see if you have enough money to complete the project? You’d do that for fear of laying the foundation and then not being able to complete the work—because anyone who saw it would jeer at you and say, ‘You started a building and couldn’t finish it.’ Or if the leaders of one country were going to declare war on another country, wouldn’t they first sit down and consider whether, with an army of ten thousand, they could win against an enemy coming against them with twenty thousand? If they couldn’t, they’d send a delegation while the enemy is still at a distance, asking for terms of peace. “So count the cost. You can’t be my disciple if you don’t say goodbye to all of your possessions.

Whew. What a Gospel passage. Hard to get up here on a Sunday when many of us are coming back to church from time away, the first Sunday of the choir season, a pre-welcome back Sunday, only to hear Jesus going on about turning your back on pretty much everyone and everything you love, even life itself. When you get right down to it, Jesus would not have been a good parish priest. If you talk to church growth experts, they will tell you a parish priest needs to make church a place where everyone feels welcome—a safe, warm, inviting environment in which peoples' concerns will be heard and needs will be met. All of this, of course, to make sure they don't leave at the end of the service and head to the church on the next block. This effort to please folks doesn't end there. A good parish priest will make sure worship is beautiful, engaging, and satisfying—for everyone. That Christian Ed is stimulating and appealing. That all sorts of opportunities for fellowship and service are in the bulletin every Sunday. Will make sure that the church is a pleasant place where everyone behaves politely and always feels comfortable.

Now, there is nothing bad about a safe, warm environment. Nor is there anything bad about being polite and kind. But that is not what Jesus was all about, not the vision Jesus has for his disciples. He says we cannot be disciples unless we carry our cross, turn away from our family, and give up all our possessions.

Realistically, if that is the basis for discipleship we probably should all just leave the building empty and go to brunch because none of us is living that way. So, if Jesus were the Rector of St. Peter's there would be about 4 people here and each of them would be engaging in some self deception. Jesus would be at the door shaking hands, greeting newcomers, and saying, "Are you really sure you want to come in here—follow this way of life? It will cost you everything. It has to come before everything else that matters to you. Lots of people have started out and turned back, because it is hard. Oh, and, if you really do follow me—if you succeed, there is a good chance you will get killed. Maybe you should go and think it over awhile?" Jesus does not seem to be at all interested in making it easy or palatable for people to follow him.

The crowd he is talking to in this morning's Gospel is a bunch of newcomers. They have heard of this Jesus and show up to see him for themselves, filled with enthusiasm, ready to sign up. But Jesus doesn't roll out the welcome mat. Instead he tells them to calm down a bit, not get their hopes up, because it is likely they cannot afford what they came to get, what they want. Which is not exactly what people were expecting. They all want to go with him. They want to be part of hanging out with him and hearing all he has to say firsthand, changing the world with him, They want the thrill of being near that divine energy—but they don't have the first idea what it will cost. Jesus is actually being kind spelling it all out for them, because he does not want to mislead them at all—have them believe they can go running off with him into fields of flowers and puppies when in fact they are heading into battle unarmed.

Even so, though, why all the talk about turning away from, hating, in some translations, parents, spouses, children? It is entirely possible he was using a figure of speech, one which was known in his culture but not in ours. The sort of figure of speech where you say, I love the beach but I HATE the mountains. This does not mean you are hostile to the mountains or on a mission to destroy them, in fact, it has nothing to do with emotions at all. It just means they are not your first choice.

That may or may not help your wrestling with this passage, but it does seem that the gist of what Jesus is trying to talk about is, choices, priorities. At this point in the story he is on his way to Jerusalem and he knows it will not go well for him there. And Luke, from his vantage point of writing some 40 or more years after the events he describes, certainly knows it. In Luke's world, Christians were being persecuted for following Jesus—not all of them, but many. To have a Christian in the family was dangerous for everyone—and the Romans would arrest everyone in a household if there was one Christian in the lot. So being Christian really could mean turning away from your family. Once you had decided to follow Jesus—once that was your priority—everything else was left behind, intentionally or not. Not because God likes punishing Christians, but because it was, is, the way the world works. As long as the world opposes those who work to transform it, the transformers will pay a very high price. Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr., or the many women who were beaten and jailed working to get the right to vote could attest to this truth. No one tangles with the power of the world and walks away unscathed. We all know this, take it into account when choosing how to act and what to do. I, for one, am really good at talking about committing to something really hard, something risky that will change the world. Like prison reform, anti-gun violence, working with refugees. But when it comes to actually putting my body on the line I am skilled at finding a long list of reasons why today just isn't a good day for me to do that. Maybe tomorrow. Or maybe some time when I won't have to give anything up—whether that is an afternoon of my time or my life. Some time when I can do it without paying the price.

What Jesus is trying to tell us is that there is no time where there won't be a price. He is not issuing threats, rather, he is lovingly telling us the truth. He wants to be clear so that no one follows him under false pretenses. He doesn't want us to get halfway through building a tower and have to abandon it or go into battle without having what we need. And if that sounds pretty dramatic, well, it is—and if it shocks us perhaps that means we have lost track of what following him is all about. Is it about being good citizens, polite church members, or is it about changing the world? Is it about creating a safe, caring environment where everyone's needs will be met or is it about living so differently, so counter-culturally that those in power get mad enough to kill us?

So, no, Jesus would not have made a good parish priest, but he made and makes an excellent Savior. And his work isn't yet done. In coming together as church, we gain strength from and encounter him in each other. He offers himself to us in bread and wine, becoming our food for the journey. And he offers us the cross—lets us get underneath it with him. Not because he wants us to suffer but because he knows that there is no way to live God's justice, compassion, and love without some suffering. Knows how alive you can feel under even that great a weight and how it can take your breath away to hold onto your one true necessity. How even suffering pales next to what God is doing through it, through you, because you are willing to put yourself in the way.

It is surely not for everyone. He is crystal clear about that. There are not a lot of people who have what it means to shoulder the cross. But I don't think that means the rest of us are lost, are unloved. It is for the rest of us, that he carries the weight. If we cannot help him carry it, he will carry us too. I think he just doesn't want us to take it for granted. He wants us to know what it costs.

With thanks to Barbara Brown Taylor whose thoughts and writings influenced this sermon.