

Hard Choices

September 5, 2010 Ord 23C
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church
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Scriptures: Deuteronomy 30:15-20

15 See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.

16 If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.

17 But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them,

18 I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

19 I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live,

20 loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Luke 14:25-33

25 Now large crowds were traveling with him (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.

27 Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

28 For 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?

29 Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, "This fellow began to build and was not able to finish."

30 Or 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?

31 If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace.

33 So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

Proclamation of the Word

We are people who know about choice. We are either Mac or PC people. You can choose an iPhone, BlackBerry or Droid. You either drive a foreign or domestic car. You can be a fair trade or a free trade supporter. You may choose Nike or New Balance. You might use Amex, FedEx, or Xbox. We know about making choices especially since we are a consumer society.

This hit home to me when I spent a month in Seminary in Jamaica- my first trip to a Third world country. I remember going into a grocery store the size of the narthex in Kingston, Jamaica and seeing the choices. In terms of cereal, you could choose Corn Flakes or Rice Krispies. There was one brand of sugar, one kind of flour, and none of the processed convenience foods which stock our stores. Incidentally, there were no super-sized Jamaicans either. When I returned home I was overwhelmed at the energy it took to make all those choices and decisions again. It frankly made me weary just to go to the grocery store!

While these are simply the choices we make as consumers, we have plenty of other choices to make. Which major will I pursue? Which route will I drive to avoid traffic today? Where will I raise my family? How will I care for my health? Where will I go to church? In whom will I choose to invest my time, energy and love?

There are things about which we have no choice. The old saying goes, "You can't choose your family" which is mostly true. Phillip Gulley, who is a Quaker pastor in Indiana, writes Lake Wobegonesque stories based on true experiences of being a Midwestern pastor. He always ties the story back to Scripture and faith. In one of his *Front Porch Tales*, Gulley describes his family reunion. He describes the relatives who were smart enough to stay home. He notes that his grandmother who was about to meet her Maker got to be there for the event. She was a dignified English tea-drinking with her pinky out kind of grandmother who was not soothed or impressed by the third cousins who could play "Dueling Banjos" with their armpits. Gulley describes the event with humor. He goes on to write,

"I don't know if Jesus attended a family reunion. The Bible mentions that he once went to a wedding. His mother was there, too, so it was probably a family affair. They ran out of drinks during the reception, so Jesus took some water and turned it into wine. Except in the Baptist Bible, where he turned it into grape juice.

Jesus said some confusing things about family life. On the one hand, he told us to love one another. But another time, at least in Luke, Jesus said no one could be his disciple unless he hated his family. Perhaps that was Jesus' way of saying that we're supposed to put him before everyone else. Or maybe he had just heard his third cousin play "Dueling Banjos" with his armpit and he meant it literally.

Who knows what Jesus meant by that? I do know this, though. The more I work on loving Jesus, the easier it becomes to love my family. Maybe it's a matter of putting first things first. We're then sufficiently equipped to love our families, even third cousins with talents galore." 1

In our gospel lesson today, Jesus names three choices we need to make in order to be able to be a disciple. We must be able to hate our family, to carry a cross and follow, and to give up all our possessions. Wow! That is no small order. Are you able to do that?

I personally have been struggling all week with this passage of scripture. It does not rank up there with most beloved passages of the Bible. I kept humming that hymn- "Tell me the stories of Jesus I long to hear." And this is not one of the stories of Jesus that I long to hear. In fact, I don't remember ever hearing this passage in Sunday School where we typically don't want to promote hate and try to not scare small children. So where is the good news?

I found the Greek words to be helpful. For instance, the word ***hate*** sounds harsh, but it does not mean vengeful malevolence as we hear it. It means being detached from and loving less than. Commitment to God is a disciple's first priority when having to make a choice of allegiance even if it puts one at odds with one's family members.

In another word which help makes sense out of this passage is the Greek word for cannot as in "You **cannot** be my disciple unless you hate family, take up cross and give up all possessions. When Jesus tells us we are not able or cannot do these things, he is right. We cannot do these things by ourselves.

This word "cannot" is a derivative of *dynatos* is the same word translated "possible." But remember early in the gospel of Luke it is also impossible (*dynatos*) for a virgin to give birth to God's son and for an old couple to become parents, but according to Luke "Nothing is impossible for God."

Disciples, then, are only able through the power of God to follow Christ especially when the choices are hard.

Consider the challenge to give up all possessions. How many of us are prepared to do that for the sake of the Gospel? Later, in Luke, after Jesus makes impossible demands on a wealthy ruler to sell all he owns and come and follow Jesus. "Who can (*dynamai*) be saved?" In other words, who can do that, the disciples ask. Jesus answers, "What is impossible (*adynatos*) for mortals is possible (*dynatos*) for God" (Luke 18:26-27).

Then Peter said, "Look, we have left our homes and followed you." And he said to them, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age and in the age to come eternal life." (Luke 18:28-30)

Even with that promise of reward, how many of us are prepared for such hard choices and that kind of allegiance to Christ?

Count the Cost

Now, remember that Jesus is talking to a whole crowd who has been following him. He is gaining a popular following, groupies perhaps. But Jesus states the cost of becoming a disciple. Few will choose to follow that closely. All Jewish boys were expected to learn the *Torah* from the rabbi. Most had a Bar Mitzvah at age 13 having memorized the law, *Torah*, the first five books of the Scripture. Others went on for further more serious study under the tutelage of a rabbi. Even fewer still were selected to be a rabbi's disciple. And Jesus is simply

saying count the cost of becoming one of my disciples. Following Jesus and placing him first can eventually lead to some very hard choices. And we know of martyrs, people of deep faith who have ended up making such choices whose faith is, in my opinion, only possible through the able power and grace of Almighty God.

The first person who comes to mind, of course, is Dietrich Bonhoeffer who wrote the book *the Cost of Discipleship* and is oft quoted, "When Jesus bids a man to follow, he bids him come and die," which Bonhoeffer and many others did for speaking out against Hitler and the Third Reich during World War II Germany as a matter of faithful Christian conscience. It is worth noting that Bonhoeffer did not do this alone. He had been formed over the years by the power of God's Spirit and the companionship of many others seeking to be disciples. The Christian Community seeks to form habits of discipleship together and to encourage one another in that endeavor. Many gave their lives to stand up to Hitler.

Our *Book of Confessions* includes a powerful confession of faith, *the Barmen Declaration*, written by German Christians at the time. To sum it up it says, "Jesus is LORD and not Hitler." No allegiance is more important, not family, not country, not even life itself, if it costs being unfaithful to the Lordship of Jesus Christ or the call to obey God.

Disciples are prepared

Finally, we are people, who according to our vision statement, seek to be disciples. And sometimes we will have to make hard choices where our commitment to Christ is concerned. I pray for the able strength of God when you and I are faced with such choices. But the lesson for us today is that disciples are those who prepare. When the hard choices come, we must draw upon the strength and ability that only God provides- strength from God who makes the impossible, possible. I think it is those everyday practices of faith that prepare us. Jesus mentions the builder who planned his building project and counted the cost before he started the foundation and building of the tower. We are to prepare for the work of following Jesus.

Discipleship is not just a one-time decision. It is a daily decision, sometimes small daily choices. Discipleship is a way of life. Practices do not make us earn God's grace or favor, or turn us into Super-Christians. They are simply the habits of the soul which shape and form us into who God hopes us to become together. These are ways that we choose to make God a first priority in our lives.

What are the marks of discipleship and habits of the soul that form faith?

1. daily prayer
2. weekly worship
3. Bible reading and study
4. service in and beyond the congregation
5. spiritual friendships
6. giving time, talents, and resources, or as we call it "stewardship" ²

So there you have it. Disciples are students, and students develop habits which prepare them. When the hard choices of faith and commitment come, may God Almighty find us prepared for costly discipleship.

So go home. Enjoy the Labor Day holiday, consider how you are preparing to be Jesus' disciple. Pick one of the 6 marks of discipleship this week to work on until it becomes a habit, then add another and another until discipleship is a way of life. And the next time you are in the grocery store, the dinner table, the polling booth, the meeting room, ask this question, "How are my choices to follow Christ reflected in my choice here?"

Phillip Gulley may be onto something when he writes, "The more I work on loving Jesus, the easier it becomes to love my family. Maybe it's a matter of putting first things first. We're then sufficiently equipped to love our families, even third cousins..."³ and I would add, when we put first things first, we are sufficiently equipped to make all the choices which come our way.

1 Phillip Gulley, *Front Porch Tales*, (Multnomah, Sisters, OR) 1997, 106-107.

2 Mark Foss, *Power Surge*, the 6 marks of discipleship for his church members.

3 Gulley, 107.