

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
September 8, 2013  
Pentecost 16  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Deuteronomy 30:15-20  
Psalm 1  
Philemon 1-20  
Luke 14:25-33

In this fast-paced, competitive culture in which we live, one does not need to look far to be able to observe the principle of sacrifice at work.

People all around us are sacrificing. Some of us may know parents who are giving up nearly every weekend for their kids' traveling sports team.

You may know someone today whose life is all about the career. A person who works ridiculously long hours at work. In some cases, that person is simply trying to make ends meet. But in many cases, that person is spinning on that treadmill to pay for that outlandish mortgage, or store up money for retirement than they could possibly need.

Nearly all of us who are parents sacrifice a great deal in order to make sure our kids are dressed well and have good educational opportunities.

I would not necessarily criticize any of these choices, especially without knowing the people involved. But I do wonder: *Why do we make the sacrifices that we make?*

I believe that we make these choices *based on what is important to us*. You sacrifice according to your priorities in life.

The issue in today's world isn't whether or not people are making sacrifices in their lives. The question is: *What is the source and the motivation of those sacrifices?*

In our Gospel lesson this morning, this man who has set his face like a flint toward Jerusalem, and whose every step brings him closer to arriving there, confronts us once again. And this is what he says: "if you would follow me you must love me above even your mom and dad, brothers and sisters, and your own interests."

Other translations read, "If anyone comes to me and does not *hate* his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple." (NKJV)

I remember reading and hearing these words for the first time when I was a young Christian, and I remember being very upset. I couldn't imagine hating my parents and my siblings, and frankly, I was appalled that Jesus would ask me to do so.

As I grew in my faith, I learned that Jesus' language of "hate" here is not to be understood in the sense we ordinarily use it. The Semitic flavor of the term has to do with *detachment*, with the ability to turn away from something or someone. Jesus is using hyperbole in order to make a point.

Jesus expects – actually demands -- from us our undivided loyalty. We are to count the cost of following him because the Christian life is *expensive*. It demands our wholehearted commitment in terms of our time, our attention, our money. Of the many sacrifices we make in life, our commitment to Jesus should not be just one among the many. Our commitment to Jesus should be the core commitment around which all of life is centered.

Just to be clear, please understand that I am not talking here about our *salvation*. I'm not saying that we earn our salvation through our works or our acts of sacrifice or commitment. Grace, salvation, right relationship with God – these are all gifts beyond our ability to comprehend. We are saved by God's grace alone, not our works, lest any man or woman should boast.

But once you are saved, then what? Some folks believe that the assurance of salvation is all there is to the Christian life. They have their ticket to heaven, and that's that.

I'm not talking here about the cost of our salvation. I'm talking about the cost of *discipleship*, about what is involved after you encounter Jesus in a saving way. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. We know what that means for *him*. I'm not entirely sure that we know what that means for *us*.

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said that “when Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” And we’ve grown fond of repeating that through the years. It’s a pithy and provocative statement.

But as I read Jesus’ words again this week, it occurred to me that although I’ve been a Christian now for more than 35 years, *I’m not sure I fully understand what Jesus is saying here. I’m not sure I fully comprehend what Jesus is demanding of me.*

Jesus’ language may be hyperbolic, but that doesn’t drain his claims of their life blood. This man is going to Jerusalem where he will suffer, bleed, and die to put the world right with God. He invites us to go along with him. And we should not make this decision lightly or flippantly. We should do our due diligence. We should kick the tires a little bit. We should spend a few sleepless nights tossing and turning in the bed. We should have our eyes wide open, and know what awaits us.

For to choose Jesus is to place him on the throne of our lives, above all other dreams, goals, hopes and aspirations. Choosing to walk with Jesus means surrendering your self-sovereignty. It involves praying daily, “not my will, but your will, be done.” Following Jesus is less about a growth process and more about a *death struggle*. So, take my advice (actually Jesus’ advice): think it over.

I started thinking this week (after reflecting on Jesus' words) about how we preachers and others try to convince people to become Christians. By and large, it often goes something like this. We say: "come to Christ -- he will give you peace, or give your life meaning, or heal your damaged relationships. Come to Christ, he will fix what is broken with your life. Come to Christ – he will make you happier, healthier, and well-adjusted."

And I don't deny any of this for a moment.

But how often do we say to seekers: "Come to Christ – and by the way, bring everything you have because he will demand your life, your soul, your all."

How often do we say, "If you're thinking about becoming a Christian, we advise you to reconsider. For your decision will have a profound impact on your life, on your relationships with those you love."

Too often the church of today seeks to make it easy for people to become believers in Jesus. And in so doing, we make it very difficult for persons to become *disciples and followers* of Jesus. There is a difference.

Life is about choice. All our Scripture lessons this morning remind us of this. And the truth of the matter is that the price of choosing to obey God's will for your life can be high.

But what a wonderful thing it can be in our spiritual walk when we find ourselves obeying God because we *want* to, and not because we *have* to. What a

wonderful thing when we choose to obey Christ because it is our *joy*, and not our *duty*. How wonderful it is when choosing Christ's way is a *privilege*, and not an *obligation*.

When we find ourselves at this place in our journey, we not only count the cost of following Christ ourselves; we can also encourage others to count the cost, and to pay it gladly.

To live is to choose. As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, let us come as those who have counted the cost, and who choose to pay it gladly. In doing so, we receive a strength that is greater than we are, and grace to help us each step of the way – even when those steps lead us to Jerusalem.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.