

Proper 18, Year C, 2022

Luke 14:25-33

It's back to school time. Just last Wednesday saw Charlie Brown trundling down the path to school with books tucked under his arm. His sister Sally walks alongside trying to decide what subjects she wants to study this year. She says, "I'm going to try to sign up for a course in theology. I want to learn all about religion. I want to learn about Moses and St. Paul and Minneapolis." Charlie is confused: "Minneapolis?" Hello, Charlie. Every heard of the Twin Cities, Minneapolis/St. Paul? Thursday Sally tackles Church History, beginning in 1930. But Friday Sally speaks directly to our dilemma: "My topic today is the purpose of theology. When discussing theology, we must always keep our purpose in mind...Our purpose as students is understandably selfish. There is nothing better than being in a class where no one knows the answer." I don't know about Sally Brown, but it seems possible that there are more aspects to purposeful theological discussion than any one of us can know completely.

How do you and I learn about religious faith and its ramifications? How do we interpret biblical and theological resources? How do we decide what's consistent and what's inconsistent with scripture? Philosophers Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur, with varying emphases, have argued convincingly that what each individual brings to a text or to a conversation ---religious or otherwise---determines what he or she discovers, that interpretation involves a fusion of horizons predetermined by the method used. Put more simply, there's a different sermon preached in every pew because each individual brings his or her own experience to the event of faithful conversation.

So we approach an interpretation of this morning's Gospel with awe, knowing that no one of us can determine all of this text's meanings. One could say that the Bible is the script of a play that is being written but is not yet complete. In God's active self-disclosure all things are being made new, and in the Bible we see revealed a kingdom which is hoped for and trusted but not yet fully in hand.

Reading the Bible can be an unsettling business and should be. The Bible, as Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann reminds us, must not be thinned so that we can control its message nor trivialized in order to evade its ambiguity. The Bible is rich with density of meaning, dangerous with urgent and immense demands. For the Bible is the live word of a living God, a God with the voice of thunder as we heard in Jeremiah, a God who is active now, a God whose communication with us is not closed.

The larger context of this morning's reading is a challenge to lawyers and Pharisees, the purported leaders of the people and their subsequent rejection of an invitation into the kingdom. They say, in effect, "no thanks." Then come today's verses: Jesus turns to his followers to describe conditions of discipleship for those who *will* lead the way into that kingdom. Using Hebraism for emphasis, he proclaims, "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." He's talking about the claims of parents relative to those of Christ. We've heard these words of detachment before: Just three weeks ago we read, "In one household they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law." Why is he repeating this threat?

The words of the Bible are nuanced with layers of meaning. They point to a realm that is both present and coming. We are meant to read these words and ponder soberly. The message Jesus is proclaiming is that the kingdom of God has come near with both promise and cost. The promise is His presence with us, then and now. The cost is opening our minds and hearts to the "hidden dimension of

our ordinary life---God's dimension."<sup>1</sup> For God has come into our midst and remains present, active, and disturbing, communicating with us on the horizon of meaning.

The grace of God is being manifested in the ministry of Jesus. But that grace has two sides and both involve change. Seeing only what you and I are accustomed to see, judging our reality by categories taught us by our culture, ordering our lives by economic, class, and denominational divisions, we find change costly on many levels. We take comfort in the physical, mental, and spiritual status quo. But Jesus' concern is not in maintaining the status quo. He is not so much interested in what people ARE as in what they can become. He accepts them with all their faults and sets before us the hope of making our lives more than merely adequate, transforming us from sinners into saints. Jesus is telling us that change is required, change that will be both uncomfortable and blessed; for we will see a new reality. Jesus is not just traveling from town to town on an outward journey. He is traversing an inner landscape as well, crossing boundaries of every kind then and now. In His company we can repent of old attitudes of despair and find grace in our lives. A new creation has been decisively launched, and those who follow Jesus will be commissioned and equipped to lead others to that new world.

The language we read in Luke is confrontational and has been ever since the episode of the transfiguration. But Jesus is not talking about emotions. No, he means modes of action, specifically the action of self-sacrifice. In order to be my disciple, he says, you must carry the cross. In another translation, "lift up the cross." "Sit down" he says twice, "and count the cost." This is dying and rising language. Do not start something, he says, if you are not willing to expend all, including life itself, to enter God's kingdom. In other words, if you can't afford to lose, don't lead.

The cross, the symbol of losing. Lost, alone, helpless, vulnerable. We read the words, but we no longer have the capacity to be shocked. We've made the gospel soothing therapy or, as William Willimon says, we're about "helping people adjust to the dilemmas of affluence."<sup>2</sup> The only thing we have truly lost is the facility to be astonished at just how lost we are. And without that depth of understanding, without the recognition in our bones of the profundity of our sin, the gospel we proclaim is superficial and the significance of Jesus is lost to us.

A story is told of a little girl who wandered away from her mother in a department store. She finally got to the toy department and was happily examining and trying out the toys. A clerk came up to her with a smile and asked, "Little girl, are you lost?" The child replied, "No, I'm just fine right here. My mother is lost somewhere."

Some of the lost are fine right where they are. They, or should I say "we," are content among our toys. We may laugh scornfully at the bumper sticker that proclaims, "He who dies with the most toys wins"; but we live as if we believe that phrase. We steward much of our time and energy and resources toward the achievement of what the world calls success: the best education money can buy, an important position in a prestigious institution, a gracious home, a late-model car, perhaps membership in clubs that will give us contacts that will help grow the church. The list goes on and on. In every sense, we're fine right where we are, where we can be in control. Even to the point of saying, "This is what the Bible says. It means nothing more." And God is lost to us.

How is it that we have become so focused on ourselves? True, objectivity has lost its luster in interpretive circles, but I doubt that we have consciously applied reader-response criticism to evaluate all our actions on the basis of the effect they have on us. Yet in good conscience one must ask, where is the

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008) 19.

<sup>2</sup> William H. Willimon, "Formed by the saints," *Christian Century* (Feb. 7-14, 1996) 137.

line to be drawn between objective truth and subjective truth? Just how subjective can we be without losing hold of the center of faith? How can we know when we are lost?

There is ample evidence that we have accepted the postmodern predilection for questioning the nature of meaning to the point of nihilism. You and I know that pluralism of worship is accepted in American society, but confusion of claims about God necessitates clarity on the part of Christians. Often we hear Jewish, Christian, and Islamic faiths identified as the Abrahamic traditions. While it is possible to agree that whenever people speak of God, they are referring to the One true God, only Christians worship a Triune God. In other words, the Christian faith differs from other Abrahamic traditions by definition: Christianity stands or falls on the identity of Jesus and His salvific work on His holy cross; and the price the Church pays for not taking a stand on this basic principle is heavy and cumulative.

The Pacific Northwest is the most un-churched area of the United States, and church membership in all mainline denominations is declining, declining at a time when more than a million people have moved into this part of the country. Some might say that this Diocese in which some congregations substitute ee cummings poetry for the creeds and others remove the name of Jesus from their healing services so as not to offend the Buddhists who take communion with them is lost. Lost, and we do not know that we are lost.

“If salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?” asks Jesus in the verses immediately following today’s passage. “It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; they throw it away. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” And listen the tax collectors and sinners did, for they knew they were lost.

Has the Church lost its salt? Have we become bogged down in a quagmire over the meaning of meaning when what we need to be about is proclaiming Jesus Christ and Him crucified, dying and rising?

Christ is the protagonist, the one lost to death and found in resurrection. But He is also the actor who seeks out the lost in order to bring them home. By him grace is ever in motion, ever creating all that is, seen and unseen. Christ searches for us to complete the revelation of God’s being. Christ searches for us to participate in God’s future. Christ’s seeking is not brought about by our circumstance, our worthiness, our sufficient understanding. Rather, His seeking derives from the anguish of God, God’s longing for the work of God’s hands. He will never cease searching for us until He finds us; but He will not force us. With the restraint that comes from strength, He probes our struggle against self-will. With love He makes available the gift of repentance. Though even repentance is a gift of grace from God, we know that grace without cost is a shallow invention. The fire of repentance requires dying before rising.

The Christian comes from God, lives in God, and ultimately will return to God. But for now and for the future, for each day of this life, we read the world around us through the lens of cross and resurrection, knowing that when our circuit is run, we are brought home again by the crucified and living God.

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