

Sermon Proper 18C 2016

Jeremiah 18:1-11

Psalms 139:1-5, 13-17

Philemon 1-21

Luke 14:25-33

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This morning's lessons with their captivating images are favorites of mine. I am engaged by the descriptive imagery of the potter and the clay in the Prophet Jeremiah's exhortation. Or the imagery from the psalm or the persuasive letter written to Philemon. I want to touch on all of them and there simply isn't time.

Everyone has their favorite psalm but Psalm 139 is dear to me. It speaks of the divine love and of God's intimate connection with us from the point of conception. "My body was not hidden from you, while I was being made in secret... Your eyes beheld my limbs, yet unfinished in the womb;" And that connection continues throughout our lives. "Lord, you have searched me out and known me; you know my sitting down and my rising up;... You trace my journeys and my resting-places and are acquainted with all my ways." I treasure this psalm describing our ongoing connection with the divine. The psalmist assures us we are never far from God.

In the gospel lesson, still in the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Luke's gospel, the setting has shifted abruptly. We had been in the home of a Pharisee on the Sabbath, but now Jesus and the disciples were back on the road again. Jesus has set his face to Jerusalem.

Jesus and his disciples were quite magnetic as they travelled. Consequently, large crowds pursued Jesus wherever he went. The sense of inclusion and welcome encouraged many to join. The attraction was the miracles of healing and feeding as well as the insightful teaching along the way. The scene must have resembled a parade of sorts. The spirited group was cause for Jesus to address them. Jesus knew more than they did and he did not want them deceived.

As Jesus clarifies the true cost of discipleship, there are real choices to be made. This was not some grand festival with joy at the parade's destination. No,

there was anguish ahead and real commitment and cost. To follow Jesus was not for the faint of heart, not for the superficially converted. To become a follower of Jesus, to stay with him to the end would require dedication and focus.

That is the setting for Jesus to open with those attention grabbing lines. “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot become my disciple.” The translation is certainly shocking and off-putting and the danger is that we may fail to understand the language.

When Jesus says, “hate,” Jesus is using a Semitic expression which means “to detach from.” The words sound harsh, but we must understand how Jews of Jesus’ day used the term “hate.” Hate meant to turn away from, or separate oneself from. He is not using the word hate in an emotional sense as a word of deep disgust or repugnance. Without being clear about the setting, we may miss his point.

Becoming a disciple of Jesus may call us to refocus our loyalties even with members of our family. Now I don’t think for a minute that Jesus was encouraging any sort of family dysfunction. So we have to ask ourselves, what did Jesus mean? I think Jesus is calling us to look closely at our attachments, our priorities. Our relationship with God in Christ is to be our anchor. This is not a negative reflection upon the other loves and commitments of our lives. Marriage, children, job, school, hobbies, etc. But Jesus calls us to an ordering of these relationships. The divine love grounds us, centers us, focuses us, molds us to use the imagery of the earlier lessons. If our relationships, even family relationships draw us from the love of God, from following Jesus, then we must reexamine them, refocus them. We may have to reorient our relationships with those closest to us, if they stand in the way of following the call of Jesus. Discipleship requires that we be open and malleable. Putty in God’s hands, no less.

The decision to follow Jesus is a decision to let go of lots of things that attract us, captivate us. Let go of what has the power to possess us in order to allow ourselves to be molded anew. A tough concept, because we are all about control in every aspect of our lives. We don’t want someone making unscheduled demands on our lives. Life is complicated enough. We are paddling upstream as hard as we can. The thought of letting go, of traveling down the stream not under

our control is not how we have been raised. We want to make the choices. We get to decide. To borrow the language from the Prophet Jeremiah, we want to be the potter, we don't have any desire to be the clay.

Discipleship is not for the faint of heart. Then again, nothing about living in our world is for the faint of heart. The lessons and the teaching of Jesus emphasize the importance of our being able to detach ourselves from much that attracts or captivates us. We have to give up some of our control so that we can be molded, transformed into disciples of Jesus.

My time of study at seminary drew me into relationship with some amazing disciples of Jesus. Especially students who became friends who were from Africa during seminary and later as well.

Today in our Sunday Tidings, we are praying for the Archbishop of the Province of Tanzania, Jacob Chimeledya. Jacob was a classmate in seminary. In order to study theology he left his wife and family and came to the US to do graduate work at VTS. Two years away from his wife and children prepared him to return to Tanzania as a leader in the Anglican Church. First as bishop and now as Archbishop of the Anglican Church in Tanzania. For two years, Jacob felt called to detach from his primary relationships with family to engage in graduate study. This study prepared him for the roles that would open to him over time. Archbishop is the head of the church in Tanzania, equivalent to our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry.

After seminary through a companion diocese relationship between the Diocese of Kentucky and the Anglican Church in Rwanda, I got to know Onesphore Rwaje. Onesphore, like Jacob, faced a call that required detachment. The choice he faced occurred during the Rwandan Genocide in 1994. At the time Onesphore was a parish priest. In the midst of the genocide he felt called to pastor his people. But the situation was fraught with danger. He managed to get his wife and children to safety in Kenya. But he remained in Rwanda. When most other clergy fled, Onesphore chose to stay behind. The situation was incredibly dangerous. He could not communicate with his family. When the genocide finally came to an end his wife had no idea if he had survived. Watching a news report she spotted her husband and knew he had survived. Later the family was reunited. Now Onesphore is the Primate of the Province of Rwanda. His election had a lot

to do with the fact that he alone of the other candidates had remained in Rwanda with his people through the crisis.

Jacob and Onesphore share stories of detachment. Not hate as we use the word, but hate as Jesus is using the term in our gospel today. To place one love above others. The love of God and God's people above other loves in our lives.

What might that look like? Sometimes the calls require incredible commitment as they did for Jacob and Onesphore. At other times the call is not so dramatic. We may not be facing genocide, but when God speaks to us in that still small voice, the request is no less demanding.

Yet, Jesus is calling us to discipleship, to connect with and be open to God's call. To borrow a theme from our upcoming stewardship campaign; we ask ourselves, am I willing... to be "all in?" Am I being called to detach from something in order to be open to another opportunity. Perhaps we are being nudged to check on our neighbor whose health is failing. Whom, we have not seen for a day or two. Perhaps we are to call a friend or relative we haven't heard from in some time. Or we may be experiencing a call to teach or to lead. Or to mentor children and youth in the parish perhaps? To serve on vestry? Maybe to participate in an outreach project? Maybe to get to know those who are new to St. John's by working hard to learn the names of the children around us? These are just a few of the opportunities that present themselves. They come as the Spirit breaks into our lives, whispering, wooing, calling, encouraging, etc.

God is at work in your life and in my life, molding us, calling us. As disciples, Jesus lays claim to us. That may call us to redefine the many loyalties of our lives. We may have some things to let go of or at least to hold more lightly if we are to allow ourselves to putty in the hands of God, to be molded by God. Discipleship may call us to let go of some things in order to embrace the hope to which God calls us, if we are to be "all in" with Jesus.