

Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost
September 9, 2007

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Emanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA), Dallas, Texas, USA

Scriptures: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 1; Philemon 1;9-10, 12-17; Luke 14:25-33

Well, we shipped the last child off to school earlier this week, and now we have the house to ourselves again. I was re-claiming part of my daughter's room for an office space and re-arranging some furniture a little bit yesterday. I have a free-standing full-length mirror in our bedroom. And I noticed that, in its new spot in a corner, if I stood in just the right place, I could see down the hallway, almost to the other end of the house. Definitely one of those cases in which, where you stand determines what you can see.

Our Gospel text for today is like that. Where you stand affects what you see in this text. We stand in Dallas Texas, USA. We stand under the Bill of Rights, with its guarantee of freedom of religion, albeit in a predominantly Christian nation. That makes it hard for us to hear this text.

What do we make of a text that tells us we need to hate father, mother, spouse and children, brothers and sisters, and to give up all our possessions in order to follow Jesus? We can not imagine having to make a choice between a relationship with family and being a follower of Jesus. We are surrounded by a prosperity gospel that would lead us to believe that following Jesus will get you more stuff, not less. But this is not the case in many parts of the world today.

There is a story told about a pastor from Texas named Jim Denison who served as a summer missionary in East Malaysia when he was in college. While in East Malaysia he attended a small church. At one of the church's worship services, a teenage girl came forward to announce her decision to follow Christ and be baptized.

During the service, Denison noticed some worn-out luggage leaning against the wall of the church building. He asked the pastor about it. The pastor pointed to the girl who had just been baptized and told Denison, "Her father said that if she was baptized as a Christian she could never go home again. So she brought her luggage." Raymond McHenry, *Stories for the Soul* (Hendrickson, 2001), p. 48

This young woman was willing to leave all that she knew and loved, all those who knew and loved her, she left everything but what she could carry in one suitcase – to be a disciple of Jesus. (And my hunch is that if you asked her to, she would have left behind the luggage too.) She would be able to see this text clearly. We, on the other hand, have a hard time relating at all.

It actually reminds me of another quote, this one from a guy by the name of Neil Postman, who said, "I believe I am not mistaken in saying that Christianity is a demanding and serious religion. When it is delivered as easy and amusing, it is another kind of religion altogether."

The simple fact of the matter is that being a Christian ought to put us in opposition to society, and the ways of the world. Being a Christian ought to make us uncomfortable, it ought to make us value something more than the people and the stuff in our lives.

To be sure, Jesus' words about hating your father and mother, and giving up all your possessions are pretty tough stuff. It makes a preacher say, "Is this for real?" Actually, it makes preachers go, "What on earth am I going to preach about this?" The NEDC conference pastor's group got together earlier this week, and we were talking about, what do you do with texts like this? I can't give up my possessions. My family is very important. How can I preach this text when I myself can't do this?

It is a hard word. But I think we can say some pretty basic things. First of all, that being a follower of Jesus is supposed to make a difference in how you live, in how you use your resources, and how you treat other people. And actually, the second lesson, the story of Philemon and Onesimus, is a case study in what difference being a follower of Christ is supposed to make in our lives.

Philemon is a new Christian, probably one converted by Paul. And Onesimus was a slave who was owned by Philemon. Onesimus ran away, and crossed paths with Paul. And now Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon, with the letter which beseeches Philemon to not punish Onesimus, but rather, to set him free.

For Philemon to do that, he would have been going against the society's expectations. He would have been forfeiting the money that a slave represented in that time. And he would be taking the risk that any other slaves he might own would run away too. I imagine that Philemon wrestled over this for a while. And we don't have any record of what he actually did. I imagine the things that are true for us, were true for Philemon: it's hard to give up our stuff. It is hard to give up our creature comforts. It is hard to give up our security.

But that is exactly what Jesus calls us to do. Jesus continues to lay it out for us: This is what I am calling you to, Follow me and not your own agenda. Obey God's way of kindness and generosity and not the world's way of greed and self-preservation. Easy to say. Very, very hard to do.

It is a bit of an irony then, that the Gospel text we are reading today, from Luke 14, is right next to Luke 15. Here Luke has juxtaposed Luke 14, with the directive to "give up everything" together with Luke 15, the stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. As if to say, while it is true that we can't give up our stuff, our comforts, our lives – God can't give up on us.

I don't know what that does for you, but that gives me a lot of peace, knowing that even though I will fall woefully short of what God wants of me, God will love me anyway. God will forgive me again. And God will call me once more, to live the life that helps give Life to all people. And the same is true for each one of you. God will love you, even when you fall short. God will forgive you, yet again. And God will call you to leave behind what the world has to offer, and to take up the cross, and to have Life abundantly. Thanks be to God. Amen.