

Pentecost 13C (9/8/2019)
 Deuteronomy 30:15-20
 Psalm 1
 Philemon 1-20
Luke 14:25-33

We all need an ultimate concern, a guiding principle to inform our choices. To adhere to that principle is to relativize other priorities, to renounce other possibilities. Choices carry costs. Thus, Jesus urges his would-be followers to estimate the cost of discipleship in advance, to make our commitment to him with eyes wide open. But, where the way of the cross requires sacrifice, it also grants freedom and life.

The cross we bear
 precedes the crown we wear.
 To be a Christian one must take up [one's] cross,
 with all of its difficulties and agonizing
 and tension-packed content
 and carry it until that very cross
 leaves its marks upon us and redeems us
 to that more excellent way which comes
 only through suffering.¹

Do we really believe it? Do we really perceive a “more excellent way” in and through the sacrifices involved in Christian discipleship? Do we believe that our crosses lead to crowns?

The preacher's duty is to shine light on gospel in the sacred texts, to insist on good news to comfort and sustain us amid an unrelenting cascade of bad news. But today's text from Luke itself sounds like bad news:

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. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.... none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., as cited by David J. Garrow in *Bearing the Cross*, introductory pages.

Count the cost before you commit, Jesus warns. *Don't enter into this way of life with me unless you're really up to it*. His language is hyperbolic, nevertheless it's unambiguous. **Discipleship requires an undivided loyalty, even and especially when this loyalty conflicts with other loyalties. As one interpreter puts it, "in Christ we become not just nice people but new creations."**² That is, our identities are completely reconstructed and our priorities redirected in accordance with Jesus' way of faithfulness and sacrificial love.³

Maybe he perceives the fickleness of the crowds that flock to him, and he intends to thin them out. Maybe he understands the value of setting a high bar as a means of inspiring fidelity among his followers. Maybe this is one more way to care for the ones he loves – to be brutally honest about the crises we're bound to face for his sake. In any case, **Jesus makes clear that he doesn't want our leftovers.**⁴ **A commitment first of all to follow in his footsteps will put all our other commitments into perspective, and any cost we incur is a necessary byproduct, a voluntary cross.**

Where's the gospel in that? How is that good news? We prefer to avoid risk and sacrifice, don't we? We'd rather cling to all we have as tightly as we can: our relationships, our attitudes, our status, our acquisitions. The prospect of giving

² R. Alan Culpepper, in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, 293.

³ See Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 565.

⁴ Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, "Choose Life," <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5376>.

any of that up is counterintuitive. **How can it be that loss leads to more abundant life?**

Saint Francis of Assisi is one of the most renowned and dramatic historical examples of Christlike faithfulness. Born to a wealthy merchant family in the late 12th century, as a young man he enjoyed the life of prosperity and revelry, and aspired to a career as a knight. Becoming disillusioned with this life, however, Francis eventually acknowledged a call to discipleship marked by voluntary poverty and radical obedience to the way of Christ. It was a total loss by the world's standards, a renunciation of all the security and standing any medieval man could imagine. What could he have hoped to gain?

Yet, for all he gave up, Francis seems to have had a genuine experience of life's fundamental goodness. He found abiding joy in the cycles of nature, and solidarity with nonhuman life, as beautifully expressed in his famous "Canticle of the Sun":

All praise be yours, my Lord, through all [your creatures],
And first my lord Brother Sun,
Who brings the day; [and you give light through him].⁵

He also found deep purpose in the work he inherited from the one he followed so closely, that is, the work of bearing peace, love, mercy, hope, light, and joy to a world in need of restoration. In short, **Francis discovered that his personal sacrifices allowed him to embrace all of life with greater fullness and sincerity.**

⁵ Adapted from the version in Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries*, 138.

How does your commitment to discipleship sharpen your focus?

Looking first to Christ, how might you learn to look out at the world with his kind of eyes?⁶ And, how might freedom come from letting go?⁷

Dear church, we all need an ultimate concern, a guiding principle to inform our choices. To adhere to that principle is to relativize other priorities, to renounce other possibilities. Choices carry costs. Thus, Jesus urges his would-be followers to estimate the cost of discipleship in advance, to make our commitment to him with eyes wide open. But, he does not ask any commitment of us that he has not made himself. To borrow the words of one interpreter, “God has not entered a redemptive process without being prepared to complete it, and Jesus did not set his face for Jerusalem without being prepared to face the sacrifice that would be required of him there.”⁸ In turn, we take our call to follow with corresponding seriousness.

But, where the way of the cross requires sacrifice, it also grants freedom and life. The cross we bear precedes the crown we wear. And, that’s a truth we discover only by heeding the call.

⁶ See Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ*, 32.

⁷ <https://members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources#resources>.

⁸ Culpepper 292.