

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL - 4 September 2022
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year C - Lectionary 23

1st Reading: *Deuteronomy 30:15-20*

Psalm: 1

2nd Reading: *Philemon 1-21*

Gospel: *Luke 14:25-33*

Sermon - *Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø*

In the name of the Father, ✠ and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

About 25 years ago now, we were trying to move to England. This was a step we wanted to make by our own choice - it didn't just land in our laps - and I spent months applying for positions in the hopes one would come through, and it finally did. But throughout this whole process, we kept asking ourselves: Would it be worth it? We would be moving to an entirely different country, and although there was already much that we knew and loved about England, would making it our home live up to our expectations?

We would be leaving so much behind. We would be selling our house and saying goodbye to our friends, and not just our friends. Our two older children would be staying in the States, but they were both already off to college and were no longer living with us. We would only be able to take our younger daughter, Arwen, with us because she was just under the age of 18.

And what would we find when we got there? Taking a vacation to a foreign land is one thing, but living there would be quite different. And the actual work of moving internationally would be difficult and expensive. Coral, who is superb at organisation, is particularly good at packing for a move, but it was very hard work.

But it all worked out in the end, and the three of us found ourselves on an airplane flying to England to live, perhaps for some time, perhaps for the rest of our lives. We had arranged to keep most of our possessions in storage back in the States until we could afford to have them shipped over, which took a couple of years, and in the meantime we each had only 3 suitcases full of clothing and other belongings. And when we saw the home we arranged to rent initially, we were not impressed. That first night Arwen cried herself to sleep. "This is a cell, not a bedroom," she moaned. "It isn't even as big as our bathroom was."

Despite all our efforts to weigh whether this was a good decision or not, we faced some serious disappointments at first. But it did get better. We had many fascinating experiences, lived in some very interesting places, including a haunted 17th century farmhouse, met some good friends, found much that we loved, and much that we didn't love so well, and had some rather unpleasant experiences. On the good side, Arwen earned a PhD, married an English husband, and had three of her children. And we loved the English countryside, the cathedrals and choir boys, and cozy pubs.

Then after 17 years, we decided that it was time to come back to the States, mostly so that we could be closer to our other children and grandchildren, but we again had to weigh all the pros and cons and count all the costs in making this decision.

Jesus, in our Gospel today, makes it clear that anyone who wants to follow him, become his disciple, live according to his teachings, must count the cost of such a decision. He is speaking to people who have made their own decision to follow him - he is not coercing them - and he warns them in no uncertain terms that this decision is not easy and the cost may be very high indeed.

"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." Jesus has a way in his teachings of making his points with extreme examples - remember him talking about having a log in your eye, or about straining out a gnat from a bowl of soup, but accidentally swallowing a camel? Quite startling images. And here he is just as startling - unless you hate your parents, your spouse, and even your own life, you cannot be my disciple. The point, of course, is not that we are really supposed to hate our families, but that no one must be as important to us as God.

And as he says at the end of our reading, quoting here the English Standard Version, my favourite translation: "Any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple." We may not need to give up all our possessions, but we must be willing to do so if that is what we are asked. Nothing of any kind must be as important to us as God.

But the most startling of Jesus' sayings today is that "whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple." To bear your cross does not just mean to put up with something unpleasant, it means that you have already been condemned and are on your way to an excruciatingly painful execution, just as Jesus himself endured. It means being willing to give up everything. In the words of Isaac Watts, in one of his best hymns:

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

So that is the cost of following Jesus, being willing to give up everything, as he did, for the sake of God and for others. And I find it very difficult to talk about the cost of discipleship without thinking of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor, who in 1937, when Hitler was already in power, wrote this book: "The Cost of Discipleship". Let me read this key quote from the back of the book:

"Cheap grace is the grace we bestow upon ourselves, the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship. Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. When Christ calls a man he bids him come and die."

Bonhoeffer was himself willing to count the cost of being a disciple. He was arrested by the Nazis because of this book and his other activities as a pastor; he was imprisoned in a concentration camp; and just before the end of the war - indeed, witnesses said they could hear the gunfire of the American troops advancing toward the camp - he was hanged at the age of 39 for being a Christian.

And was it worth it? Of course! Eternal life awaited Bonhoeffer, and it awaits us. Unlike Coral's and my doubts about whether life in England would be worth the efforts we made to get there (and we discovered that it was), we know that the life everlasting we will affirm in the creed in a few moments is worth everything we now possess and much more.

We do not always know what each of us will be called to endure as we serve God and follow Jesus - it is unlikely that any of us here will endure what Dietrich Bonhoeffer endured - but we do know that the grace that cost Jesus his life on the cross has been given to us, the amazing grace that gives us eternal life. It is indeed worth the cost of everything that we have and are to follow Jesus.

Amen!