



ST. PAUL'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

DELRAY BEACH, FLORIDA

15 Pentecost - Proper 18 - Year C

September 8/9, 2007

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Ps. 1; Philemon 1-20; Luke 14:25-33

Preacher: The Reverend William H. Stokes, Rector

“Hate is not okay, but...”

As Yogi Berra so famously said, “Deja Vu all over again!” Just three weeks ago, the weekend of August 19, we heard a Gospel reading from chapter 12 of Luke in which Jesus declared, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; 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” (Luke 12:49-53).

Today, from Luke 14, Jesus seems to say almost the same thing: “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” (Luke 14:26-27).

I can't help wishing that those who determined the Church's lectionary (and believe me, I didn't pick this text out for today!) might have given us better material to work with since they had to know that many churches are just getting their new Church School years off the ground this weekend and that many fathers and mothers, wives and children, brothers and sisters are going to be in church all across the country. It's common sense marketing. The Gospel seems to be encouraging dysfunctional family interactions!

I can imagine some child saying to his or her parents, “I hate you!” which happens frequently enough, I know from experience! But I can imagine that same child adding on, “And Jesus says it's okay!” Well, it's not okay. It's not okay at all for children to hate parents, and parents to hate children. It's not even okay for brothers and sisters to hate one another!...We need to be a little more sophisticated with this passage and pay careful attention to its context.

The word that is translated as “hate” in today's Gospel reading is the Greek word *MISEI*. It is being used to translate a Hebrew idiom that calls for single-minded loyalty or discipleship to one person or thing. It is exaggerated, idiomatic language used to underscore Jesus' teaching that being his disciple requires a commitment that ultimately trumps all other commitments.

As I stated three weeks ago, when I spoke about the similar passage in Luke 12¹, we must be careful about how we use this kind of language....Misuse of this language can easily lead to perversions and distortions. After all, on Tuesday, we will observe the 6th anniversary of 9/11 when a group of religious fanatics commandeered planes loaded with passengers, and out of their single-minded and perverse commitment to what they believe was God and God's cause, as well as out of their hatred for those who they viewed as opposing them, plowed those planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and attempted to plow another one into the White House and killed nearly 3,000 people.

I must confess that the verse in today's Gospel makes me very uncomfortable, just as the passage three weeks ago made me uncomfortable. Hebrew idiom or not, I do not believe the word "hate," at least with respect to persons, should be in the Christian vocabulary. When the language of hate and concepts of violence are combined with religious beliefs and actions, it is a volatile mix that too often leads to atrocious behaviors and attitudes....We must reject and repudiate these. Nonetheless, today's Gospel reading has something to say to us....Something important. We should not dismiss it out of hand....

In today's Gospel, Jesus is with a crowd that is, in some respects, joining the bandwagon without giving it much thought or consideration²....As I've told you before, chapter 9 verse 51 marks a very specific turning point in Luke's Gospel... it says, "*When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem....*" From that verse on, there is a clear and relentless movement by Jesus in Luke's Gospel to Jerusalem and the cross, where God's drama will reach its definitive climax on Calvary and in the empty tomb....Every verse in Luke's Gospel after chapter 9, verse 51 must be read and interpreted with Jerusalem and the cross in mind, including those we heard this morning.

"*Now large crowds were following him,*" today's Gospel reading begins, "*and he turned and said to them, '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....'*" (Luke 14:25-27).

"If you are going to be my follower," Jesus is saying to that crowd, "it will require commitment, it will be demanding...It may cost you everything... You must be ready to sacrifice all your possessions...You must be ready to lose all, relinquish all relationships with those you love most: fathers and mothers, wife and children, brothers and sisters, even life itself!"

Now perhaps this sounds crazy to us...foreign, radical, extreme. But it's not so foreign, *though it is radical*...On 9/11 how many police officers and firefighters went into the towers of the World Trade Center to save the lives of others just because they had made a commitment to a life of heroic service?

When they took their oaths as police officers and firefighters, it came with demands; demands that would require them to work hours that took them away from their families on holidays and weekends; demands that required them to live on modest pay and in modest circumstances; demands that might, and did cost many of them their lives.....

When those police officers and firefighters entered those towers, they knew it might come at the cost of all of their possessions, at the cost of all their relationships with their fathers and mothers, their wives and husbands, their brothers and sisters, their sons and daughters, but they went into the towers anyway....They went in and many died, because they had made a commitment to a high purpose, a very high purpose...the high purpose of life itself, saving others....

So the concept of demanding, costly commitment to higher purposes and values is not so strange and foreign to us...We have this expectation of our military personnel all the time. It is precisely this kind of life and commitment to higher purpose that Jesus is referring to when he speaks to the crowd in today's Gospel reading...It is this that he

means when he says to them, *“Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple”* (Luke 14:27).

“Cross-bearing”³ is about living a life of service and sacrifice and suffering for the sake and love of others – and not merely our relatives, our fathers and mothers, and husbands and wives, and brothers and sisters, or even our friends – but all others, for the sake of humanity . It is this kind of cross-bearing, this kind of service and sacrifice and suffering and love, that marks Christian discipleship....To use the language made so famous by German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, it’s about “costly discipleship” as opposed to “cheap grace.”

To make sure that his listeners in the crowd get his point, after saying to them, “Whoever does not carry the cross cannot be my disciple,” Jesus tells them two short parables that are essentially about counting the costs before you take something on: a builder who wants to build a tower and a king who wants to go to war (See Luke 14:28-32). Jesus concludes the two parables by stating, “So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions” (Luke 14:33).

“It’s not easy this discipleship, I call you to,” Jesus is saying to them. “Before you get on this bandwagon, understand the demands...count carefully the costs...I’m heading for Jerusalem, Jerusalem and the cross, Do you know what can happen there? Do you know what might happen to you if you stick to your commitment? Do you know what might happen if you are truly one of my disciples.”⁴

Jesus’ own disciples and most particularly his chosen Twelve were in that crowd: Andrew, Peter, James, John and all the rest....They heard these words Jesus was saying to the crowd....These words were addressed to them as well...And we all know that when the moment of decision came in Jerusalem, in the Garden of Gethsemane, they all fled in terror...They all fled for their lives, leaving Jesus standing their alone, alone to face the cross (See Mark 14:50). They failed that first test of faith and discipleship miserably....They had not adequately considered the possible costs of discipleship....

It was only after Easter, after Easter and the empty tomb, it was only after their encounter with the risen Christ that they found their courage, and found true faith that gave them strength to be true disciples and true cross bearers....Then they were able to proclaim the Gospel and by the power of the Holy Spirit, give birth to the church. After that, they would bear their crosses at great cost, even the cost of life itself, many of them realizing martyrdom....

But that was then, what about today? Does any of this have meaning for us anymore? What should be so demanding, so costly about the Christian life for us today? And martyrdom? Let’s face it, that word has come to mean horrific things to us in the light of 9/11.....

Well, let’s say something about “martyrdom.” In Greek the word “martyr” literally means “witness.” In it’s original and literal meaning it referred to a legal witness in court....The word later came to refer to those who witnessed to an act of God...Finally, during the early days of the Church, when the Church was being persecuted, the meaning of the word came to refer to those who witnessed to the faith, to the point of death.

Tragically, in our contemporary world this word has frequently been applied by Islamic extremists to suicide bombers and others who witness to their faith by killing not only themselves but as many others as they can....This is an evil perversion of the word

“martyr.” People who engage in this kind of activity are not *martyrs*, they are *murderers*, and we should note that moderate Muslims agree with that conclusion.

The Christian tradition has pretty uniformly reserved the word “martyr” for those persons who have resolutely, but peacefully and lovingly, stood up for their faith in the face of violence and persecution..... There is, as far as I know, no use of that word being applied to persons who deliberately and violently took the lives of others, a possible exception being the during the Crusades. Civilization today is very critical of the Crusades, viewing them as an ugly and evil mark on the Christianity.

Christian martyrdom is a witness to Christ and the faith, that is made resolutely, but also peacefully and in love...It requires great courage, great strength and enormous grace....It does not take the lives of others....It is the ultimate and purest expression of “cross-bearing” - the life of Christian commitment and costly discipleship....

But there are other examples of Christian witness and cross-bearing that are demanding and costly and grace-filled. The writings of Mother Teresa that have just become public bear testimony to such a life.⁵ While the secular world misunderstands and misinterprets these writings as an absence of belief and consequently question Mother Teresa’s commitment to Christ,⁶ her words in the book *Come Be My Light* are a powerful witness and testimony to cross-bearing and the costly Christian life of discipleship...They should be read by all who would call themselves Christians as an example just how costly and demanding the true life of discipleship can be.....

Though she did not die as a consequence of persecution, in her life and ministry to the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, Mother Teresa was an exemplar of costly discipleship....Her writings show authentic wrestling and struggling with God and profound doubt and despair, that is very much a part of both the biblical tradition and the tradition of the lives of the saints...That she remained steadfast and prayerful in her calling, despite her spiritual struggles and darkness, is the measure of her faith, no matter what she thought or felt.

The Church calendar this week celebrates the lives of other witnesses and exemplars of the faith. September 9th calls for us to remember Constance, who was a nun and also her companions collectively known as the “martyrs of Memphis.” This group of women remained in the city of Memphis during the great Yellow Fever epidemic of the 1880s, ministering to the sick in the cathedral, which had been turned into a temporary hospital because it was in the most infected region of the city. Constance and several of her companions caught yellow fever and died.⁷

On Monday, the Church honors Alexander Crummell, an African-American who was not allowed admission to General Theological Seminary in the 1830's, but who persevered in his studies and was ordained to the priesthood in the Diocese of Massachusetts. Crummell worked between Liberia and the United States to empower African-Americans in the face of racism and tremendous opposition.⁸

On Wednesday, John Henry Hobart is celebrated. He helped heal the church after the American Revolution and became bishop of New York. He was responsible for the church’s expansion into nearly every town in New York State when much of New York was real wilderness. He also opened a mission to the Oneida Indians.⁹

On Thursday the calendar calls us to remember Cyprian of Carthage who was a bishop and an important theologian in the so-called Patristic period. His writings about

the ministry of the Church were especially influential. Cyprian was martyred during the persecution of the Church in the 3rd Century.¹⁰

Just in the space of this week we remember and celebrate these incredible people who lived lives of vibrant witness and costly discipleship. They each played a tremendous role in carrying on the faith and in many and rich ways we have inherited their legacy.

Friday, September 14th is Holy Cross Day, a day when the Church calls for us to lift up that central symbol of the Christian faith and reflect on “cross-bearing” and on Jesus’ words,

“Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” What do they mean? What do they mean for you? What does your life of discipleship look like?

Today is our Parish Ministry Fair....It is an opportunity for you to look at and consider the many opportunities for worship, study and service we make available to you through St. Paul’s Church.....These three – worship, study and service – are essential components of Christian discipleship for everyone...All three, *worship, study and service, for everyone*...Not worship alone...Not study alone...Not service alone, but worship, study and service...

It is my hope and prayer that each of you will look carefully at these opportunities we offer you to live the Christian life.....It is about discipline and commitment...It is about costliness and sacrifice and cross-bearing.

Truthfully it is about life, real life. Not the plastic, cosmetic, commercial, consumerist, salacious pretense that our culture attempts to substitute for genuine life, but rather life with purpose, deep purpose: a life of service and sacrifice and yes, even suffering for the sake of others... It is also resurrection life...life lived in the light of Jesus and so in the very heart and love of God.....Lived here, now, today, which is really what the cross-bearing life is about...

“Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple,” Jesus says.....

Go ahead, consider the cost, make your choice....Be a cross-bearer today..... Lose everything. Gain even more!

1. See “Challenged by *God’s Warriors*” - Sermon preached at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Delray Beach, August 19, 2007.

2. See Fred Craddock. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching - Luke* (Louisville: John Knowx Press, 1990) pp. 181-182.

3. See Craddock, p. 181

4. See Craddock p. 181`

5. See Mother Teresa *Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta* (New York, London etc: Doubleday, 2007, ed. Kolodiejchuk)

6. See Van Bieama, David “The Secret Life of Mother Teresa” in *Time Magazine* - September 3, 2007, pp. 36 ff.

7. See “Constance and companions” in *Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2007* (New York: Church Publishing Inc. 2007) p.

8. See “Alexander Crummel” in *Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2007* (New York: Church Publishing Inc. 2007) p.

9. See “John Henry Hobart” in *Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2007* (New York: Church Publishing Inc. 2007) p.

10. See “Cyprian of Carthage” in *Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2007* (New York: Church Publishing Inc. 2007) p.