

“In Process but not Complete; On the Way but not yet There”

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Proper 18C

Jeremiah 18: 1-11 - Psalm 139 - Philemon 1:1-21 - Luke 14:25-35

This morning’s gospel lesson is challenging for both the preacher and the listener. In short, it reminds us that God’s call takes precedence over not simply our worst, but also our best, intentions and agendas.

This morning we hear Jesus’ response to the enthusiastic and growing crowds of followers who, though well intended, seem totally unaware that Jesus is going to face his death in Jerusalem. The tide has turned. No longer is Jesus trying to convince people of the validity of his mission and ministry. His preaching, teaching, and healing have spoken volumes, and now the crowds of would-be followers are growing day-by-day.

Though well intended, the crowd seems to be naive and oblivious to any conflict, any price to pay, or any cross to bear. The crowd swells because the journey to Jerusalem has become a rag tag parade, and as we all know, “everybody loves a parade.”

So Jesus stops and asks the obvious but neglected question. Do you know where I’m going? Do you know where you’re going if you follow me? Are you really willing to stay with me all the way? Think about what you are doing, really think about it, and then decide if you want to continue on this path.

Jesus is talking about qualitative discipleship: alert, aware, singled-minded, focused devotion to serving the presence of God’s sovereign power. Since traveling with Jesus under the sign of the cross would be demanding. He is trying to weed out the large crowds into a totally committed band of followers.

Through direct remarks and parables, Jesus is in essence saying: Don’t start this difficult work of discipleship unless you intend and are able to complete what you start. Discipleship means being willing to relativize all other relationships and concerns that inform your life in relation to future expectations (i.e., the cross). For Jesus, the cross is not a metaphor – it is a future reality: it is the end of the journey to Jerusalem, the finish line of this marathon.

Jesus uses extremely strong language and vivid images to get his point across to those who have ears to hear. He wants to make certain that those walking along the parade route really know what they are in for. This is not Jesus, the politician, trying to get elected. Rather, this is Jesus, the leader of a great expedition, trying to ensure that his team is up for the trials and hardships they will face.

As I consider this passage:

I imagine Ernest Shackleton interviewing those who applied for the expedition to the South Pole, or Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry speaking to his crew on the USS Niagara before the 1812 Battle of Lake Erie as he raised the flag with the words “Don’t Give Up the Ship.”

I can see Emmeline Pankhurst warning her British suffragettes of the risk they would face if they stood up for their right to vote.

I can hear the psychologist examining those who wish to serve as astronauts or participate in dangerous rescue missions.

I can recall as a tenant organizer cautioning a group of tenants about the potential costs of a rent strike.

I can remember this question being asked of me by the commission on ministry. I hope this is what wise advisors say to those who seek leadership of any sort – especially election to public office.

Such expeditions, projects, positions and efforts will have grave consequences; there can be no half-hearted members of the leader or the crew.

In short, being a disciple of Jesus was and is risky business. So, he said: If there is anything – possessions, family, life itself – anything that is more important than following me, now’s the time to get off the road.

In his call to “cross bearing,” Jesus asks three basic questions.

First, are you willing to subordinate family responsibilities to the all-consuming claim of Christ?

Second, are you willing to radically refocus away from self-service in favor of unqualified commitment to the service of Christ?

Third, are you willing to renounce reliance on what you have or control, in order to rely totally on the resources and the control of God?

These are the questions that probably should not only be asked of those seeking ordination, but probably should be asked at baptism. For this is what it means to really follow Christ.

And just in case his listeners didn’t have ears to hear, Jesus made the questions even clearer with two parables: one addressed to his rural peasant followers, and the second addressed to his more privileged would-be disciples. Are you sure you’re willing to follow me, asked the Lord. Is the price more than you’re willing to pay? Consider it this way:

No farmer builds a watchtower to protect his crops and flocks from fire or theft without making sure he has enough money to finish the job. Otherwise, he would be considered foolhardy. Do you remember the real estate crash and foreclosure crisis of 2008?

No king would go to war with an enemy unless he was certain that he had enough troops to win the battle. Otherwise, he would jeopardize his kingdom. Do you recall the beginning of the War in Afghanistan or Iraq?

Jesus is simply asking those in the parade: Do you really know what you are doing? Do you realize what it really means? Do you still want to follow me? If so, come along for the time of your life. If not, go home – take care of your family and live a good life. But don't keep walking this road with me!

According to the Gospel of Luke, what is demanded of Jesus' disciple is that the claim of Christ takes precedence over all the many loyalties that form the tapestry of our lives. And not only that, but the claim of Christ redefines those other loyalties. Thus, those who choose to follow Jesus to Calvary are required to hate, which actually means detach or possibly turn away from, even closest family and friends. Thus, those who choose to follow Jesus to Calvary are required to relinquish, let go of, all of possessions so not to carry any extra baggage on the journey. Perhaps that's why many are called and few are chosen.

That's what this gospel text is all about, and that's why I am tempted to avoid it, to soften it, or sidestep it. Instead, I stand here today, grateful for the grace of God that recognizes our limits, understands our weaknesses, and forgives our failings.

As the psalmist reminds us:

I am grateful for a God
Who has searched us out and known us;
Who can discern our thoughts from afar;
Who can trace our journeys and our resting places;

I am utterly dependent on a God
Who is acquainted with all our ways –
Sometimes courageous and faithful,
Other times fearful and fallen,
And who continues to press upon us behind and before.

I am in awe of a God
Who created our inmost parts –
Those we like and those we dislike,
Those of which we are ashamed, and
Those that we don't even know.

I, like you, am but one vessel of a God
Who knit us together in the womb,
And who in spite of the fact that we're all damaged goods
Truly believes that we are marvelously made!

I thank God that we are works in process –
Unfinished pieces of clay on the potter's wheel
Still being molded – day by day.

Truth be told, most of us are “On the way, but not yet fully committed.”

This morning's Gospel lesson, though challenging, provocative and “in your face,” Is a gracious invitation to step back and reflect honestly about our own discipleship in process, and our own relationship with Christ. How appropriate it is for us on Labor Day Weekend – a holiday when we are called to honor workers and those who advocate on their behalf that we are invited to take stock of our work in God's vineyard.

So I ask you this morning:

Does the invitation of Christ have priority not simply over your worst but also your best agendas?

Does the claim of Christ redefine the network of the many loyalties in your life?

Are you willing to surrender all that you possess, all that you love, and all that you are to the call of Christ?

If so, pray – that you and I might continue on the way, thankful for the gracious, patient and forgiving love of God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.