

Proper 18, Year C

- First Sunday of the program year, time when we look around and see everyone who's been traveling over the summer, everyone who's been away, and we joyfully welcome each other back with the heartwarming words of our savior Jesus Christ:
- "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."
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- The Lectionary occasionally gives us some tough pills to swallow, but not many are tougher than hearing this particular reading on the Sunday when we're starting things back up, the Sunday that where I come from in the south might even be called a "homecoming Sunday" – this isn't the kind of message anyone wants to come home to
- That's without even getting to the part where Jesus says, "none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."
- So what do we do with readings like this, with pieces of Scripture like this?
- Especially since it's Jesus saying it, right? It isn't even one of Paul's letters which might have some context behind it that makes it less applicable to our own. This is Jesus talking about what it takes to be a disciple of his.
- And that's what we're after, right? Becoming Christ's disciples? That's why we show up here on Sundays, isn't it?
- So we'd better reckon with this, then. Not just leave it lying out there, haunting us.
- So we know we have to deal with it. How do we do that?
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- You may or may not know this, but our lectionary in worship, the readings that we have assigned week after week, are not a random assortment of scriptural passages. They were debated upon and chosen by an ecumenical group of scholars and liturgists and religious people, and each week the readings are meant to speak to and through each other.
- It isn't just a Bible study we have, in other words, but voices from the Bible speaking in a sort of conversation across our worship.
- Which is really helpful, I find, because when we hear something particularly difficult on Sunday morning, it's really useful to realize that there are some other voices speaking that morning to help us through it.
- So this morning, for example, we don't **just** hear Jesus telling us to hate our families and sell our possessions.

- We also have Moses, speaking the word of God to God's chosen people Israel: "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess."
- Moses, just like Jesus, is saying that there is a choice before us; a choice between life and prosperity, and death and adversity
- The choice of life, we're told, means loving God, walking in God's ways, following God's commandments
- One of those commandments, of course, being "honor your father and your mother"
- That's a commandment important enough to make the top ten list
- So it's clear that family does matter to God
- And, of course, Moses goes on: "Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him..."
- So it would seem that Jesus isn't advocating a whole new law, isn't saying that families should all be dissolved – then what?
- There's another voice speaking to us this morning – that of Paul in his letter to Philemon
- Paul writes to Philemon about a man named Onesimus, who was Philemon's slave – Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon
- And in doing so, he says, "Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother-- especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me."
- Paul writes to Philemon that a former slave of his is now, in Christ, meant to be a companion as welcome and important as Paul himself would be – even more, Paul says – **a beloved brother**
- In Christ, Paul says, a new family is made, one that ignores the old boundaries, ignores the rules of the world, and is established instead according to the law and commandments of God
- And in this family, those who were cast down are raised up – and those who were slaves are free – and those who were last are first
- Because it's only when we turn to God, only when we orient ourselves to Christ, that we're

all facing the same way, all seeing things the same

- And there are so many things that distract us from God, that threaten to turn us away from Christ – we think that’s a new phenomenon, but it’s not – it’s right there in the Gospel, in the reality that Jesus was speaking these words to
- “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.”
- “None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.”
- Jesus knows how easily our lives can distract us from discipleship – he gives two of the more common examples, at least at the time – the demands of our family and of keeping up our possessions – and he says that to truly be disciples, we have to be willing to give them up for God – have to value our allegiance to them less than we do our allegiance to Christ our Savior
- Because if we are not committed first and foremost to following Jesus Christ, our Lord who was crucified and is risen for the sake of the world, then all else is for naught – our families and our possessions are not and cannot be more important than following Jesus
- If we are not committed first and foremost to following Jesus Christ, then we have forsaken our truest family, the one made up of all the adopted and beloved children of God, for a smaller one that is bound to be imperfect and without Christ cannot be redeemed
- If we are not committed first and foremost to following Jesus Christ, then our love of possessions is nothing more than a doomed attachment to impermanence and the always fleeting happiness that they seem to promise, rather than the permanence that can only come from the eternity of God
- If we are not committed first and foremost to following Jesus Christ, then there is no comfort or solace to be found on this earth, no matter where we seek it – not in families or possessions or employment or nations or friends
- So, Jesus says, go on and follow me – but there is a cost
- It is not easy to be a disciple – it is not simple to follow the Savior of the world
- It may cost us things that we hold dear, it may even cost us everything
- But all the same, it’s an easy choice: choose life.