

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 4, 2022

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Philemon 1-21

Luke 14:25-35

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

Anyone who can attract the positive attention of Augustine, Jerome, Machiavelli, Erasmus, Luther, and John Locke is worth taking seriously. Cicero was a Roman political leader who wrote extensively on politics, ethics, philosophy, and law. One of his most well-known statements is as true today as it was over two thousand years ago when he said it: Money is the sinews of war. Though some of the greatest political and war theorists have taken issue with this statement, including Machiavelli, there is no question that war requires funding, even if it is not the thing that holds a cause together. It is incredibly foolish to get yourself into a mess without an appreciation for what the cost of extrication from that mess would be. War is a question of means and ends. A ruler who lacks the resources for victory would be irresponsible if appeals to patriotism, duty, and honor were used as calls to war when a negative outcome is certain. It may be far better for the king to give up all that he has in order to achieve peace for his people.

Cicero was writing about two thousand years ago, but his teachings were not all that different from what men of rank had to say. Jesus, however, is different. If the world as it is today were to encounter the teaching of Jesus for the first time, without the historical development of the Church over the last two thousand years, how do you think people would react? It is a difficult thought experiment, but imagine what it would be like to have an original encounter with Jesus, not shaped by the theological development, the tradition, and the political or historical material we find connected to the Christianity of today. How would people react? People are well equipped to ask the question that Jesus advocates here: what is this going to cost me? Once Jesus articulated the real cost of following Him, I think many people would be forced to reconsider their commitment to His cause. What Jesus proposes is a threat to the familial, communal, and ethnic ties that anyone might have. His kingdom demands and brings about new loyalties and reorients man's entire existence. Every priority must be recast in the light of the incarnation and the call of Christ to follow Him. For the ancient world, the expectations of Jesus would have challenged the status quo for Jews and Gentiles alike. For modern man in the West, the demands of Jesus are not taken seriously because, for many people, their connections to family, community, and nationality are not all that deep. Though it was radical at the time, what Jesus is asking for doesn't seem all that radical in a world where many are bereft of such ties. Perhaps this helps explain why much of Western Christianity seems tepid and unsure of itself.

If we can understand what Jesus was saying to His original hearers, then we can apply His words to ourselves with more clarity, even if our contemporary context is different in critical ways. Many people misread what Jesus is declaring when He says that a follower must hate his own father and mother, wife and children, and brothers and sisters. What Jesus is really advocating may be even more offensive to our sensibilities than hatred. Just before his death, Moses pronounced a series of blessings on the tribes of Israel. In blessing the tribe of Levi, Moses said, "[Levi] said of his father and mother, 'I have no regard for them.' He did not recognize his brothers or

acknowledge his own children, but he watched over your word and guarded your covenant.”¹ The Levites were the first tribe to respond to Moses’ call to punish those who had defiled themselves by worshipping the golden calf in the wilderness. Three thousand of their own they killed that day, and Moses said, “You have been set apart to the Lord today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and He has blessed you this day.”² What Jesus is saying here is not that one must hate their own friends and family, but that they must be imitators of that first priestly people. Fortunately, how this should be lived out among His disciples today will look very different.

The disciples of Jesus must know the cost of following Him. It is a bad project manager who begins a project without first determining what the cost will be and if he has the necessary resources for completion. The tallest building in North Korea, topping out at 1080 feet, is a hotel, a triangular structure that towers over Pyongyang. Began in 1987, construction on the project has been halted and started again several times. It remains incomplete to this day, having never hosted a single guest. It has earned the nickname, the Hotel of Doom. The failed eyesore stands as a testament to three generations of grandiose dictators who failed to finish the task that was supposed to bring prestige to their concrete paradise. Worthy of ridicule, indeed. A useless waste of resources can be seen from miles away, dominating the skyline of North Korea’s capitol city, only to be used for fancy propagandistic light shows. Jesus discourages the same sort of spiritual hubris that Christians are guilty of at times. Filled with prideful overconfidence in ourselves, we say that we will pay any price for Christ, that is until we are called upon to sacrifice or endure. Our faith in Christ is not to be regarded so cheaply and so readily given up to trendy, kitsch expressions. We must ask ourselves what the cost of this endeavor really is and if we are willing to pay it, or if we are just playing at Christianity. “Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” We ought to pray that God does not lead us to the test, lest we be exposed as foolish builders.

Jesus’ last example in these verses is that of a king who is confronted with an aggressive foe. The righteous king is the one who is willing to give up all that he has in order to preserve his people, even if that means allowing himself to fall into the bloodthirsty hands of his enemies. What Jesus asks of His disciples is nothing more than what He was willing to do Himself. For He is the One who gave up heaven itself to secure an ongoing Kingdom for us. Christ came into the world to fight a war unlike any we have known. Money was not the necessary currency to achieve victory. Money was not the sinews of His war. No. His very body became the sinews of war. His pierced flesh and poured out blood paid for victory, paid for our irresponsible failed projects. The incarnation is a remarkable enterprise, and it reorients our day to day lives. “Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.” The call of Christ into discipleship is a call into the royal priesthood, like that of the ancient Levites. We are those who follow Christ, but the incarnation places different demands on us than that priesthood of ages past. Our situation, formed by His incarnation, does not demand killing primitive idolaters.

How are we to live out our call into Christ and His Kingdom? The incarnation shapes our understanding. There is something paradoxical in Christ entering creation because He inevitably causes division while also setting the stage for unity, for reconciliation. The incarnation is the

¹ Deuteronomy 33:9

² Exodus 32:29

affirmation of humanity, all of it, in one remarkable Son of Man. God affirms humanity by taking it on, but He did not cause man to stop being man. We are to see ourselves as part of the unified creation, restored to God in Christ. This means we are to be the salt of the earth. We have to be in the world, engaged with our neighbors, if we hope to change the current flavor. We do not possess the salt of the earth; we *are* the salt of the earth. Not the salt of heaven, not the salt of some far-off spiritual realm – we are the salt of the earth. We are of no use to anyone if we hunker down behind our walls, taking issue with the world, failing to see that it has been redeemed by Christ. The world is not lost; Christ has won it. In the Church, we are to live our lives in our families, our communities, our congregations, and our various nations as those who are aware of a unity which exists in reality, even as many rage against the very idea of it. We live in the world that has been redeemed. We ought to be visible within it as Christ was. “To flee into invisibility is to deny the call.”³

After considering what it would cost Him, Christ paid for the building of His Church with His own life. He did so by entering into the world, becoming a part of humanity, identifying fully with those He came to save, and living, breathing, loving, suffering, and even dying for all of us. He left His Father in heaven to become our Levitical Priest and sacrificial lamb, so great was His devotion to us. One role of the priest was to serve as an intercessor in addition to being a judge. Christ serves this role, standing in the chasm between God and man, and between us and our fellow man. This reality shapes our relationships and reorients our perspective in this life. No longer do we seek to stand in judgment of our family, our community, and our polis, not with Christ standing in the breach. Christ stands in the middle, giving us direction for our friendships, our marriages, our sibling rivalries, our neighborly squabbles, our driving habits, and our prudent observation of the laws. With Christ in the center, we view all things in light of Him and His world redeeming work. Taking up our cross means walking in the way Christ has travelled before us. It means putting others above ourselves and seeking the lost souls who are unaware of their reconciliation with Christ. That is Christ’s way toward you and me and all the world.

To desire a different way is to miscalculate the cost of heeding the call of Christ. To stand in judgment is to make yourself expert in the law and will of God. Is that a boast you are willing to make while Christ stands before you and before your neighbor? For what more are we than those who were lost in our sins, those whom He sought in His mercy. What more are we than those whom He counted as worthy of sacrificing so much for. What more are we than poor beggars, desperately in need of forgiveness, redemption, comfort, and salvation. We are nothing more, but He is all we need and more. “Carry your cross and follow me,” beckons the Lord of all. Let us go where He leads in humility, being the salt of the earth, knowing that His is the path of everlasting life for us all.

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

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 81.