

Sermon for Sept. 8, 2019

Rev. James A. Wetzstein

Chapel of the Resurrection

Readings:

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Philemon 1-21

Luke 14:25-33

NOTE: The text of this sermon is drawn from an audio recording of the sermon given Oct. 13, 2019.

The Holy Gospel according to Luke:

Now large crowds were traveling with [Jesus;] 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. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, that was the entire book of Philemon this morning. And it's arguably a really fine example of persuasive writing. Though, when he gets to the end there, and writes things like "I say nothing about your owing me, even your own self." Tracey and I were talking about this yesterday, and she was of the opinion that that was kind of passive aggressive. And I think I think I agree with her. But that's not what we're talking about this morning. I encourage you, if you don't know anything about the story of Onesimus, Philemon and their relationship of slave and owner, that you take a look at that reading and do some study.

What I'd like to talk more about this morning is the Gospel according to St. Luke, the 14th chapter. And I'd like to begin with just a little bit of a game and that is this by show of hands -- students especially -- how many of you check in not by text, but like in a phone conversation or some kind of Skype interaction with your parents at least once a month? All right. About once a week? All right, more than once a week? Okay. All right. So we've got a relationship there that is honored by our communication, maybe even a relationship that you would describe as one of love, certainly one of respect.

In light of that, verse 26, this morning is difficult, problematic. Jesus says, "Whoever does not come to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yet even life itself cannot be my disciple." This is a verse that we perhaps would rather avoid, or at least try to paper over in some way.

And let me assure you, you don't know the half of it. Because this declaration from Jesus, for his first hearers would have been beyond your own experience, as you hear Jesus saying these words. For Jesus first hearers, your family, your people that equals your identity in a deep and abiding and non viable way. It's just the way it is. It's who you are. It's your people and your people is you and you are your people.

You might get a window into the dynamics of that if you watch some film, like we watched Friday night, when we watched "Bend It Like Beckham. This is a film from 2002 so maybe you haven't seen it. I encourage you to see it. It's set in England. It's an Indian, Sikh Indian family who have the parents have immigrated to England and Jess is their daughter. Jess plays soccer without her mother knowing it, and wants to play soccer more than anything else in the world. Her room -- on the wall are photograph after photograph after photograph of David Beckham. And she too, can bend it, just like he can. She plays pickup games in the park with the boys when she can, but one day, someone else, another young woman soccer player happens to see her playing in the park and invites her to join their club team. And it's from that point on that the problem ensues. Her mother is scandalized that she would be out there running around in shorts. But Jess just wants to find her people and the fact that we watched that film and know immediately which side we're on, that Jess ought to be free to find her people. I mean, that shows me any way that we are clearly out of step with Jesus first hearers. We watched the movie the other night, in part to introduce Gabe to the film because I think it's a really great film. But the other reason is that the director of that film, Gurinder Chadha, has a new movie out called "Blinded by the Light," which is essentially the same story only soccer is replaced with the music of Bruce Springsteen. And everybody knows that the only thing better than Bruce Springsteen music is Bruce Springsteen and a Bollywood kind of film. I'm looking forward to seeing it. But we watched this movie, and we knew immediately that we were on Jess' side, because Jess should be free to find her people in the same way that you find your people.

See, it's not that you don't need your people. It's just that your people are your free choice in this world. And so we associate ourselves voluntarily. So maybe it's not father, a mother in the immediate and profound way that would have been for Jesus first hearers, maybe instead, it's the Packer nation.

How do you describe yourself? What is your identity? Maybe you're a musician. Or you love research. Or it's the writing that really has you going. Maybe it's your sorority that has given you a place and a sense of who you are, or your fraternity or the circle of friends that you have come to know here at Valpo. I am becoming more and more convinced -- and Ray is here from Admissions -- I think that a big part of what it is that you're choosing when you choose a college is not just the class experience or the extracurriculars, it's your people that you're choosing. The question is, are these going to be your people?

Because having a people is critically important. It's one of the ways we know who we are, and how we fit in and what our places in this world. For us family's a part of it. But there are so many other voluntary associations and our own achievements that we go after.

Why is Jesus so hard on this? Is he just trying to be a spoilsport? Is he trying to rain on your identity parade? The answer to that question of why Jesus is so hard on this comes from another Jesus. It's the Jesus of the first reading. That was Joshua, who was saying those things to the children of Israel when he said, "Choose this day," (Jesus and Joshua, it's the same name), "choose this day life, or death."

Because the reality is that our families and the identities that we choose for ourselves and our associations and the other ways that we define ourselves, they are somewhat and sometimes not up to the task. Maybe you're having a bad morning, this morning, or it's been a bad week or a bad month or a bad year. And so when I asked the question, Who are you, what is your identity? Maybe the first thing that came to your mind is I'm a failure. Or I'm ugly. Or I'm sick, or I'm depressed. Or I don't measure up or I'll never amount to anything, or I don't think I can do this. But even when we take hold of the things that are joy-giving and life-bringing, the good things of this world, we still run into situations and circumstances in which they stop measuring up. So you said to me one day, I've never been in a room with so many other smart people, and I don't know who I am anymore. You said to me, what if they find out that I'm just a fraud, and I really can't do this. And I'm not as smart as everyone says. You said, what will happen to me? And who will I be if I tear my ACL and can't play anymore? You said, what will become of me if I succumb to dementia the way my grandfather did, he doesn't even know who he is. And my whole life is in my mind.

Last week, a man in the Bahamas, pulled his five-year-old son out of the surf and placed him on a roof for his safety. And before he could jump up there with him, the storm surge swept the boy away. The man's testimony was that the last words he heard were the words "Daddy, daddy." What kind of father will that man be now that his son is gone?

So my friend Les who has spent a career working with churches and other organizations helping them find their mission -- because mission and identity are nearly the same thing -- says "I want a personal mission that I can fulfill from a jail cell." I want a personal mission that I can fulfill from a jail cell. Les is not in any immediate danger of being arrested for much of anything. But the metaphorical jail cell for him is who he is when everything is taken. And nothing is left. I want to be that durable. I want you to be that eternal.

So Jesus says here's a cross -- not here's a cross, here's THE cross. The cross which is Jesus' own righteousness, because of his own obedience, the cross by which he walks right into death, in order to bring life, the cross into which you are dying, and by which you are born into the body of Christ. Sisters and brothers, this day, that is who you are at the core of your being, you are part of the body of Christ. You have been made so by One who offers his body in perfect obedience, the obedience that he took upon himself when he took up the cross. And now he offers that obedience to you. And for you. The most important words that you will hear this morning and maybe even all week are the words that I will say to you when I say "this is the body of Christ given for you." It's an identity that has been fully forged. Before you even start working. It is an identity which is now your own and binding you to an eternal people of every time and place. So I say to you, love your mothers, love her as one who knows that they are a child of God and a member of the body of Christ. In the name of Jesus. Amen.