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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

**Weekend of Sunday, September 4, 2022**  
**13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 23/Year C**

**First Reading: Deuteronomy 30:15-20**

**Second Reading: Philemon 1-21**

**Gospel Reading: Luke 14:25-33**

**Sermon Title: “Refresh My Heart in Christ”**

## **Theme**

*Called to contemplate the cost of discipleship, we might be helped by translating Paul’s request to Philemon into our prayer of the day: Refresh my heart in Christ. Strengthened by the company and forgiveness of Christ in holy communion and recalling God’s grace in remembrance of baptism, we can be strengthened in this hour to “choose life”—to choose life in God as our own.*

## **Texts:**

### **First Reading: Deuteronomy 30:15-20**

<sup>15</sup>See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, <sup>18</sup>I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. <sup>19</sup>I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, <sup>20</sup>loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

### **Second Reading: Philemon 1-21**

<sup>1</sup>Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, <sup>2</sup>to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

<sup>3</sup>Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>4</sup>When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God <sup>5</sup>because I hear of your

love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. <sup>6</sup>I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. <sup>7</sup>I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

<sup>8</sup>For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, <sup>9</sup>yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. <sup>10</sup>I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. <sup>11</sup>Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. <sup>12</sup>I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. <sup>13</sup>I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; <sup>14</sup>but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. <sup>15</sup>Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, <sup>16</sup>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.

<sup>17</sup>So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. <sup>18</sup>If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. <sup>19</sup>I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. <sup>20</sup>Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. <sup>21</sup>Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

### **Gospel: Luke 14:25-33**

<sup>25</sup>Now large crowds were traveling with [Jesus;] and he turned and said to them, <sup>26</sup>“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. <sup>27</sup>Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. <sup>28</sup>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? <sup>29</sup>Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, <sup>30</sup>saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ <sup>31</sup>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? <sup>32</sup>If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. <sup>33</sup>So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.”

## Sermon

A careful read will indicate that we have started a new episode in Jesus' public ministry. For example, today's Gospel Reading does not take place at the dinner table with the Pharisees from last week's Gospel Reading. It very clearly transitions as follows:

<sup>25</sup>Now large crowds were traveling with [Jesus;] and he turned and said to them, <sup>26</sup>"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."

It seems to me that Jesus just went off on innocent admirers. These "large crowds" contained the folks who were, at the very least, curious and interested in him and his message. But I guarantee that Franklin Graham will not say words like this at his "God Loves You Tour" in Youngstown on September 27<sup>th</sup>. If he does, I predict no one will come to his altar call.

Let's face it, this is probably the hardest saying of Jesus. We don't want it to be true, but there it is in black and white. This will take some unpacking.

Though we likely get hung up on Jesus' directive to "hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters," there is an even more provocative phrase that follows that we overlook because we are aghast at the family stuff and stop there! But the next phrase is "even life itself." When I think about that phrase, "life itself" it is all-inclusive, it is everything we know. Are we supposed to hate everything?

Jesus said that hating family, and even life itself is the requirement of being his disciples. It's obvious Jesus never read Dale Carnegie's book, "How to Win Friends & Influence People." There must be more to this than what smacks us in the face. Why would he say such ugly things? I am so glad you asked.

As we have been making our way through Luke's Gospel, we have noticed that the more Jesus argues with the religious professionals, the more the common lay Jews like him. And that is because they, the religious professionals, were holding the common lay Jews down with their religious practices.

I didn't have time to say it in last week's sermon but when Jesus spoke against the Pharisees on behalf of "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" he did so

because they were the ones that were excluded from fully participating in their own Jewish faith because they were considered unclean, by the Law of Moses. So we can understand why the common lay Jews gravitated toward Jesus.

So I have established why Jesus had large crowds. He was appreciated and admired by common lay Jews. Back to the issue of his scathing words.

First, Jesus is using the literary device of hyperbole. If I say, "I'm so hungry I could eat a horse," I hope no one will take me seriously and cook one up. In another place, Jesus said,

Mark 9:47 If your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell.

Did Jesus really mean that? Of course not. So let's not get derailed by his use of hyperbole. Jesus told his "large crowds," these groupies if you will allow me to use that term, that discipleship in him is and will be costly. They were all infatuated with him at that moment, but he wanted them to be sure they knew what they were getting into. They ought to consider the cost before deciding to join his movement. And the words he chose certainly got their attention, and ours too.

So, the essence of this passage is *not* alienation from one's family but the cost of discipleship, and Jesus wanted his groupies, these people with a superficial belief in him to know that nothing, not even love for father or mother or even one's own life, is to take precedence over loyalty to God and him, God's Messiah. Disciple-wanna-be's must be willing to renounce all possessions and relationships, acknowledging that God in Christ is to be the primary focus of their lives. Possessions and even social relationships, in and of themselves, must be secondary. Again, this is hyperbole.

Or is it? Let us not forget that in the first century to be a follower of Jesus meant that one could no longer be a Jew, and that departure from the faith tradition of one's family of origin might be a family deal breaker.

Think about the Amish tradition. Amish people do not become members of the church unless and until they are baptized. And because the Amish take membership

through baptism very seriously, they provide "rumspringa" a period where young Amish are allowed to run around and act worse than we "English" do. Then, if and when they conclude that the modern world is not better for them than the Amish world they were raised in, they decide to be baptized and become a members of the church. After that, there is no turning back – and if there is a turning back, those who turn back are shunned. It is as if they are dead to the rest of the community. It just may be this teaching that provides the Amish with this strict code.

Now imagine coming from a a first century orthodox Jewish family, and a member of your family wants to turn their back on all that the family of origin holds dear, to follow an itinerant preacher who does not honor the rules and traditions your family espouses and disrespects the religious leaders your family taught to respect. Now, perhaps you can see what Jesus was getting at. Following him will bring discord to the families of his followers.

However, the argument Jesus was making with the use of hyperbole was that followers must compare the relatively small cost of following Jesus with the great and eternal benefit obtained in doing so.

### **Cost of Following Jesus**

Hated by one's family

### **Reward of Following Jesus**

Life eternal with God

Pic of Blaise Pascal

Now buckle up as I wax philosophical.

A famous Christian application of this principle was formulated in the seventeenth century by Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), a founder of mathematical probability theory; it is known as Pascal's Wager.

Pascal's Wager

His idea is that, rationally, whether or not to believe in Jesus's Messiahship should depend on two factors: the value of what I stands to gain or lose by believing or not, and the probability that it is true – which determines the probabilities of my receiving those gains or losses.

The Bible states that if I believe in Jesus as God's Messiah then I will have *some finite costs* (I will have to forego the passing pleasure of sin, and make an effort to strive to do whatever is godly), but I will have eternal life with God, *a benefit of infinite value*.

On the other hand, if I reject Jesus as God's Messiah then I will have *some finite benefits* (I can enjoy the passing pleasure of sin, and I can do whatever I want in this life), but I will go to hell and be separated from God and all goodness forever, *a penalty of infinite cost*.

Suppose there is only one chance in a billion that Jesus is God's Messiah. Then it is still absolutely worthwhile for me to believe in him; because, although I have a very high chance of paying some finite cost for my life of discipleship, (I will have to forego the passing pleasure of sin, and make an effort to strive to do whatever is godly) never the less, a tiny chance at an infinite reward (life eternal with God) still has infinite value – therefore one-billionth chance plus infinity is still infinity plus.

And it is equally un-worthwhile for me to disbelieve that Jesus is God's Messiah, because, although I have a very high chance of some finite amount of benefits (I can enjoy the passing pleasure of sin, and I can do whatever I want in this life), even a one-billionth chance minus infinity has a value of minus infinity, which outweighs all finite benefits.

Only those who are absolutely certain that the Bible is false, who can give an absolute zero probability to its truth, can rationally choose to disbelieve. I have a name for these people and it is "hopeless." For others faced with Pascal's Wager (and that everyone else is), the rational way of counting the cost always leads to belief in Jesus.

So, now that I've cleared this up for you, you might ask, if belief is that logical, why don't the Jews believe?" I am so glad you asked. I have three reasons:

- 1) Most Jews have never heard the Gospel presented in a Jewish way. Jewish theology uses a lot of philosophy. Pascal's Wager might reach them.
- 2) But even if the Gospel is understood as the Good News it is, and not as a Gentile religion or a Christian reworking of Judaism, another reason is that Jews are usually unwilling to pay the cost - which in their case would be

exchanging the honor and privileges given them in the Jewish community for dishonor and shame for the status as an outcast. As I explained, it is difficult to break away from the faith traditions of one's family of origin.

- 3) A third reason is that they do not accurately perceive the benefits. Several years ago Sister Pat and I and a local Rabbi made a presentation to the resident medical students at Northside Hospital on healing and spirituality. I made the point that given that we are all mortal and all of us will eventually die, we need to be attentive to the spirituality of patients so that if the worst comes, we can help them find hope and comfort in the promises of God, (i.e., eternal life). I completed my presentation and sat down, and then the rabbi stood up and began by saying, "I must disagree with my Christian colleague. We Jews don't believe in an afterlife. We live, we die, oi vey!"

So you see, Jesus was offering the Jews something they could not begin to imagine. Even apart from the heaven/hell question that they may or may not believe, few can imagine the rewards of helping shape a new and true Judaism faithful to God, God's Messiah, Jesus, the Jewish people, and the rest of humanity.

One who did catch this vision, and accordingly reevaluated the costs and benefits was the apostle Paul who wrote in Philippians:

<sup>3:7</sup>Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. <sup>8</sup>More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ

Paul counted the cost rationally and correctly. He understood Pascal's Wager a millennium-and-a-half before Pascal formulated it and drew the only conclusion he could – He has faith in Jesus as God's Messiah.

### **Raisin' the Bar Challenge**

Well, as a person trained in the sciences, I found that both interesting and affirming. I hope you did too. But if I totally lost you, I would like to direct your attention to the First Reading from Deuteronomy. Though it was written at a different time and

for a different situation, the message is the same. Inspired by God, Moses gave the Israelites his version of Pascal's Wager. Rather than read the whole passage again, allow me to paraphrase.

Today I am offering you a choice: A life of discipleship in Jesus Christ, God's Messiah, that will lead you to peace and prosperity in this life, and life eternal with God in the life to come.

Or, you can go your own way, seeking the fleeting pleasures of this life, which will lead to adversity and death in this life, and eternal separation from God in the life to come.

Choose life in Christ so that you may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live eternally in that place Jesus, God's Messiah, has gone to prepare for you.

### **Prayer**

Lord God, we know that you and your Messiah, our Lord Jesus, love us, but sometimes his passion for us is overwhelming. Refresh our Hearts in Christ, that we may heed his warnings about the passing pleasures of this world and direct us in all our works so that we may bring you glory and honor. And then Lord God, if it be your will, through the grace won by Christ on the cross, take us to our heavenly home to live eternally with you and all the saints. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen