

“The Cost of Discipleship”

Rev. Dr. David Holyan
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, September 4, 2016
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Readings from Scripture: Jeremiah 18:1-11 and Luke 14:25-33

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: “Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.” So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

Then the word of the Lord came to me: Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the Lord. Just like the clay in the potter’s hand so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. Now therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the Lord; Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.

Jeremiah 18:1-11

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.

Luke 14:25-33

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open ourselves to the power of your Spirit and to the proclamation of your word. We pray that the words that we’ve heard from the prophet Jeremiah and from the Gospel of Luke, the words that we have offered in song and in prayer, those that we carry within and those that you have laid upon my heart this morning to share would be transformed into the living word, the word of Jesus Christ our Lord. We pray that that word would do its work within us, among us and through us out into a hurting and broken world that desperately needs the embodiment of good news. May we be that embodiment. May we be that word. We pray in Christ’s name. Amen.

I want to apologize to all of you. Listed in your bulletin, I think, is the title of this sermon--something about the cost of discipleship. If you could all take out your pens and just cross that out and put “Stewardship 2017: A Prelude”. Because the word of the Lord says sell all your possessions if you want to be a disciple of Jesus. Are you ready to sell all of your possessions and give it to the church? Everybody raise your hand. Everybody is ready. I got one. Leah, welcome into the kingdom of God. May you enter

freely. Isn't it crazy? You gotta hate everybody in your family. You gotta carry the cross and follow Jesus, which means you gotta be willing to die. And then you've gotta give up all your possessions. Not some of your possessions, but all of your possessions in order to become a disciple. Now, I don't know about you, but I thank God I am of a tradition that does not take the Bible literally. Do you think Jesus, maybe here, is trying to make a point to all of us. Jesus may not be saying you need to hate your parents and your siblings and your children and everybody else including your own life. He may not be saying you need to die and he may not, maybe, although it's almost stewardship time, he maybe isn't telling us to give up everything. Instead he might be using hyperbole and emphasis to get us to think about those things which we hold dear to us--like loving our family, our mother, our father, our children, our brothers, our sisters, our lives. Maybe some of us hold our possessions dear and near to our hearts, our retirement plan, our cars, our homes, the color of the grass in the front yard. I don't know what it is that you hold dear. But I think Jesus is trying to get us to realize that sometimes the things that we hang onto are actually hanging onto us. The things that we collect around us for status and privilege and prestige and security, in fact, get in the way.

Anybody ever worry if you're going to have enough money to live on for the rest of your life? Anybody ever worry about the well-being of your parents or a spouse? Anybody ever worry about your children and whether they are going to be okay, what job they might get, what college they may go to if they go to one, what they're going to do with their lives, who they are going to marry, are they going to be happy and oh my lord, are they going to move back in? (I can say that because my wife's not here today.) That's just the stuff in our lives that we worry about. Then there's the news. Water, storm, hurricane, beaches, rip tide, terror, warfare and those beloved politicians who are nothing but angels of peace, mercy and grace! I think Jesus is trying to get us to realize that every now and then, we need to let go of things. We need to realize that all of that stuff that we have, all of the worries that we carry, all of the frustrations within us, everything that has hands that reach out and cling to our souls and everything that clings to our souls is weighty and heavy and just tries to shut us down. That's not the God that we worship, a God who wants us to shut ourselves down. Our God wants us to be larger than life and to have flames or circles around our heads.

I work with a gentleman who is on sabbatical, who typically is sitting over there, who plays the organ and who likes to plan out well in advance. Karen's chuckling because well in advance usually means about a year ahead. And so it was probably a year ago that I sat down with the four texts that we could choose from today, and chose Jeremiah because I love that image of God reworking the clay into goodness, and then I chose Luke because I thought, well, it's almost going to be stewardship time, why not zing 'em with give up all your possessions. But to prove that there is still a Holy Spirit at work in the world, to prove that God has a royal sense of humor, on the day that I stand before you and read, "so therefore none of you can become my disciples if you do not give up all your possessions", there was a man in Rome named Francis who created a saint name Teresa, who gave up all her possessions in order to become a disciple of Jesus Christ. Sister Teresa becomes Mother Teresa becomes now Saint Teresa.

Born in 1910, 12 years later as a young girl named Agnes, she had a deep sense of God calling her to do something special for him. And so six years later at the age of 18, she left Albania to join the Sisters of Loretto in Ireland so that she could learn English in order to go to India to teach school children. She left home at 18 and never saw her family again. She was in Ireland for a year and then after learning English, she entered into the formal process of becoming a nun and was placed in a convent in Darjeeling, near the Himalayan Mountains. Two years later she took her first religious vows and her name, Agnes, was taken from her and she claimed the name Teresa. Because there was already a nun named Theresa in the convent, she took the Spanish spelling without the "H". In 1937 she took her final vows while working at the convent school in Calcutta where she had committed 20 years of her life as a teacher, eventually becoming the head mistress. At 12 years old, God called her. At 18, she left home and everything that she knew and for 20 years was a teacher and head mistress in a school. As one of her prescribed tasks each year, she had to make a pilgrimage back to the Convent of Loretto in Darjeeling where she would take an annual retreat.

On the 10th of September in 1946 while she was on a train, she said that she experienced what she described as the “call within the call”. God spoke to her. She said that she was to leave the convent and help the poor while living among them, rather than just serving them. It was an order. To fail would have been to break the faith. One author observed much later, “No one knew it at the time, but Sister Teresa on that train just became Mother Teresa.” In 1950 at the age of 40, she received permission from the authorities in Rome to begin the Missionaries of Charity. Its mission was to care for, in her own words, “the hungry, the naked, the homeless, the crippled, the blind, the lepers--all those people who feel unwanted, unloved, uncared for throughout society, people that have become a burden to society and are shunned by everyone.”

Two years later in 1952 she opened the first home for the dying in an abandoned Hindu temple. It was a free hospice for the poor. She said that those who were brought there were to receive medical attention and to be afforded the opportunity to die with dignity according to the rituals of their own faith. The Muslims who were brought there were read the Koran. The Hindus received holy water from the Ganges. And Catholics received the last rites. She said, “A beautiful death is for people who live like animals to die like angels, loved and wanted.” The Missionaries of Charity continue to provide care for those who include refugees, prostitutes, the mentally ill, sick children, abandoned children, lepers, people with AIDS, the aged and the convalescent. They have schools run by volunteers to educate street children and soup kitchens and now they have 600 different mission outposts in 127 countries. One 12 year old and a call from the Lord.

In 1979 then-Mother Teresa won the Nobel Peace Prize. She was asked, “What can we do, ordinary people, to promote world peace?” She answered clearly and succinctly, “Go home and love your family.” And then building on that theme in her Nobel Lecture, she said that “around the world not only in the poor countries has she found poverty, but also in the West where there is so much wealth and success. It is more difficult to remove there. When I pick up a person from the street where I live who is hungry, I give him a plate of rice or a piece of bread and I have satisfied him. I have removed that hunger. But a person that is shut out and feels unwanted, unloved, terrified, the person that has been thrown out from society, that poverty is so hurtful and so much more, I find that very difficult to heal.” Today, in Rome, Mother Teresa becomes Saint Teresa. And now when you see images of her, there will be that orb around her head.

Until my time in Baltimore a couple of weeks ago, I always thought that a halo was the official imprimatur of the Roman Catholic tradition, saying to the world, “This person is holy.” I have since learned that halos are not exclusive to the Roman Catholic Church. They appear in ancient Greece and Rome, in Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and even other branches of Christianity, as well as Asian art throughout the ages. Anytime a person was deemed to have a radiant sense about them or had done something really good for humankind, a halo was affixed to their image. I now come to believe that halos in pictures are not an official stamp of authority over someone’s head, but instead capture the glow of God’s radiance coming forth from that person, something that we often don’t see in each other, unfortunately. If we could get rid of our worries, those things that possess us, the concerns about loved ones, our children, our own self, maybe, oh maybe, oh maybe, we might be given the eyes of faith to see the glory of God shining through each of us. I find it tremendously affirming and humorous that on this day when I read this passage, this woman is being sainted. And I realize that by lifting her up, I may seem to be setting the bar of a faithful life too high, because I do not expect any of us to hear God’s call to sell everything and go serve the poor and the homeless, but there is always hope.

Instead I ask each of you to consider what is it in your life that possesses you? What is it in your life that gets in the way and makes you not want to be that radiant presence? What is it in you that doesn’t allow you to see that radiant glory in the person you are sitting next to or behind? What Jesus is inviting us to do in the Gospel of Luke is to breathe deep and to trust, not in the things of the world but in the things of the Gospel, to trust in the promises of God, to be open to that small whisper of the Spirit and most importantly to love our neighbors as ourselves, to see that halo in them, around their heads as we bow to

serve their needs in prayer or with food or with a kind word. So you have homework this week. The homework that I give to you is to try with every person you see to find the halo. Amen.