

THE CHOICE
Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Luke 14:25-33
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, September 8, 2013

“I call upon heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death... Choose life so you...may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying and holding fast to him.” (Deuteronomy 30:19-20)

“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children...yes and even life itself cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:26-27)

By these sayings both Moses and Jesus draw unmovable red lines in the sand. Unless you choose life and carry the cross you'll never be right with God. It's up to you to decide between the Kingdom and the world, life and death.

For the past two Sundays I've been preaching about recognizing the discrepancy between man-made religion and heaven sent faith. From the beginning of the Old Testament until the end of the New the prophets and apostles called for a radical obedience in God over against subservience to any religion organized around rituals, traditions and teachings that domesticate God and demote him into being a mascot who can root for us but must otherwise leave us alone so we can take care of business as we see fit.

The Apostles who led the first generation of Christians were determined not to let this happen and worked faithfully to keep the Gospel of Christ pure and free from any attempts to dumb it down into a system of traditions and rituals. But because of their obstinacy, Christianity became a persecuted, underground movement primarily because the Christians refused to worship Caesar as a god, which was, to the Romans tantamount to treason. By the fifth century however, Christianity unintentionally but decidedly lost its edge when it was co-opted by the Romans and became the new state religion, the glue holding the empire together. This was a good thing right? Yes and no. “Yes” because Christians were no longer targeted for prison and death but “no” because by becoming the new state religion the Church quickly became institutionalized and then secularized to accommodate the requirements of society. The call to discipleship became the call to citizenship. Loyalty to your country became synonymous to faith in Christ. The boundaries between Church and state blurred and prophets and apostles were replaced by bureaucrats and priests.

This wasn't exactly what Jesus had in mind when he declared after Simon Peter declared, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God,” “You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church.” Instead Jesus' vision of the Church was already clearly outlined in his Sermon on the Mount which lays out, in simple yet radical terms, how

God's people are expected to love, serve and live together in the world as we wait for the coming of God's Kingdom.

However, despite the Church's descent into institutionalized mediocrity with its bureaucracies and political infighting, there always have been pockets of faithful men and women who kept faith alive, simply by choosing to live by the Sermon on the Mount and relying on the grace of God. Some, like St. Augustine and Pope Gregory the Great held high Church office. Others like St. Francis of Assisi, and St. John of the Cross didn't hold high office but formed faith communities determined to follow Christ's call to discipleship. These are the true saints who carried the cross and kept true to Christ and his teachings through word and deed. As St. Francis famously put it, "Always be ready to preach the Gospel, if necessary, use words."

In today's reading from Luke's Gospel, Jesus taught if you really want to be Christian, it will cost you something. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, "When Christ calls you he beckons you to come with him to die." Not all of us will be literally called to die for Christ, but none of us is exempt from making the necessary sacrifices to give up our lives to Christ. What sacrifices? Listen hard to what Jesus taught.

"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." (Luke 14:26)

Both Bible and Church history have shown that being in lock step with rituals and traditions doesn't necessarily make a Christian. In fact, rituals and traditions have a way of making you self-satisfied. "Look here, I've given to the poor, I visited my sick friend on Tuesday, I said my prayers on Friday and Sunday I went to church. Doesn't that count for something?" Not when you realize all your deeds of kindness and acts of charity put together could never equal Christ's passion and death for our salvation. That's why Christ bids you to come to the cross and die, so you can live.

So when Jesus declares you can't follow him if you don't love him more than your family, and even life itself, he really means it. Of course Jesus didn't mean that he expects you to literally hate your family. That would undermine his Law of Love. But he said this harsh thing primarily to grab our attention so we'd get the message: sometimes, in some situations you must choose between your family and Christ himself.

This modern day illustration should make his point:

A young man comes home late one night frantic. It's obvious he's been drinking. He pleads with his father to provide an alibi because while driving home he plowed into a parked car and left the scene. He asks his father to bring the car to a family friend who can quickly repair the damage no questions asked and if ever questioned by the police to lie and say his son was home all evening.

You know that some fathers would agree right away to the cover-up in order to protect their sons from facing the consequences but other fathers would deny their sons and say, "Look son, what you're asking me to do is just wrong. You have to face the music and I'll do all I can to help you. Let's do the right thing and call the police."

In this modern day scenario, the father's allegiance is up for grabs. How he responds will test his character, and if he's a man of faith, his trust in God.

But Jesus' teaching goes beyond doing the right thing when facing an ethical dilemma. Jesus is actually warning that the time will come when you may need to choose Jesus over your family. Keep in mind Jesus was preaching to Jews who practiced the organized religion of their time and place. If anyone in the crowd went back home and declared to his or her parents, "I'm not keeping the law according to the Pharisees any more, from now on I'm following Jesus," it could cause the parents to shun their child for not practicing their religion. So Jesus was just being honest, warning would be followers the cost of discipleship.

But the shunning wouldn't just come from the family. Friends and neighbors will turn against you too. Your house of worship might excommunicate you. You could even be thrown into prison, with the blessings of the religious establishment.

This has happened and is still happening even as I speak. In Communist countries, in Iraq and Egypt and many other countries Christians must choose, every day, between renouncing or keeping their faith. Count your blessings, you and I live in a free country.

But just because we're blessed to live in a free country doesn't mean we're off the hook. Maybe our choices aren't a matter of life and death, but then again, ours is a choice between the life and death, the life or death of our souls. Will we choose to follow Christ and become fully alive and fully human or will we hide behind our rituals and traditions and suffer the consequences?

Jesus concluded his teaching by warning against being a good starter but a bad sticker. He talked about the man who should've counted the cost of building a tower before laying the foundation or the King who should've counted the cost of waging war before committing his army to battle.

Likewise, before telling yourself, "I'm a Christian because I believe Jesus died for my sins," we should first count the cost Jesus paid because if you really are saved, you'll have to accept the cost of discipleship: dying with Jesus by letting anything in you keeping you from Christ be crucified and die so he can keep you.

When the Christian religion is organized around the full Gospel, with Christ at the center all is as it should be but whenever Christ is marginalized, the Church forgets its mission we become irrelevant.

Here's a modern day parable to illustrate this:

There was a dangerous sea coast where shipwrecks were common. Volunteers tended a small lighthouse and life saving station. The station was just a hut with one boat and a small but dedicated crew who kept constant watch over the sea. Ignoring their own comfort and safety they'd go out day or night to rescue the perishing.

Because the crew was so dedicated and saved so many people it became famous. What's more many of those who were saved and others in the area wanted to get involved in the station. They gladly gave their time and treasure to support its work. They bought new boats and trained new volunteers to crew them.

But some of the station members suddenly became dissatisfied with the station's crude hut. So they raised the money to enlarge and refurbish the building with a state of the art kitchen and a grand multipurpose room.

Soon the new multipurpose hall became a gathering place for banquets and dances. By this time only a few of the members still went out on lifesaving missions. Even so, all the members relished the station's history and traditions and enjoyed socializing with each other.

Then one night a large ship was wrecked off the coast. The few crew members who still went to sea brought in boat loads of cold, wet, half drowned people. Many of those saved had dark skins, funny names and didn't speak English. By the time they left the grand multipurpose room was considerably messed up.

At the next membership meeting there was a big argument. Most members wanted to stop all lifesaving activities because it interrupted their social calendar and worst of all brought non members into the club house.

Other members insisted they keep faith with their original mission to save lives, but they were voted down.

So the few left and founded another lifesaving station down the coast.

But it too grew and over the years lost its mission to save lives.

So, a faithful few left again and started a new lifesaving station.

That is why along that seacoast today there are many exclusive clubs that were once lifesaving stations.

Their lighthouses don't shine anymore. Ships still founder of course, only now most of the people drown.

Moses said, "I call upon heaven and earth to witness against you...that I have set before you life and death. Choose life so you may live, loving the Lord your God and holding fast to him."

Jesus said, "...whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."

What do you say in return?
It's your choice.