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Ardmore, Pennsylvania
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 8, 2019

Proper 18, Year C:
Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Psalm 1
Philemon 1-21
Luke 14:25-33

A matter of life and death

It is a truth universally acknowledged, and passed down from generation to generation of clergy as a truism, that no parishioner ever complains about a sermon being too short. There are plenty of comments, certainly, but rarely does someone say, on the way out the door, “Fine message today, Father; I just wish it had been a bit longer.”

So it is with the Bible as well. No one ever criticizes it for being too short. It’s long, and its constituent parts are long, long enough that they can be hard to get a handle on.

This is not the case with today’s epistle reading, however, from St. Paul’s Epistle to Philemon. Philemon is quite short. We heard the entirety of it this morning, save for a couple verses of valediction that close out the letter. In most Bibles the whole thing fits on one page. It is refreshingly brief... unlike many sermons.

In the epistle, St. Paul is writing to a man named Philemon. Philemon is a prominent person in the Colossian church and was converted during Paul’s missionary journey, along with his household. At the time of the writing, Paul is toward the end of his life, imprisoned in Rome. What occasions the letter is that one of Philemon’s converted slaves, Onesimus, has run away from Philemon and fled to be with Paul in Rome. In the letter, Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon.

The Epistle to Philemon is a masterpiece of Pauline rhetoric. The first third of the epistle has Paul flattering Philemon for his faithfulness, for the work that he has done for his church. Then, he appeals to the better angels of Philemon’s nature—not with coercion, but in love (and moral suasion)—to receive Onesimus back, “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.” “In the flesh *and* in the Lord.” In principle ... and also in practice.

Paul is reminding Philemon that in Christ there is neither slave nor free, Jew nor Gentile, male nor female. In Christ, all people are brothers and sisters. Philemon has become “in Christ.” Now it is time for him to live out the Christian life. Philemon is being faced with a choice, and a very public choice at that. Does he believe the gospel, or does he not? Is he a disciple of Jesus, or is he not? The ball is in his court. There is no coercion; he gets to decide.

You can see this motif of the necessity of choosing in the first reading from Deuteronomy as well. Moses is leading the people through the desert, and the Lord has given them the content of the Law. He lays it out for them. It is what will preserve the community through the years to come. It is how they will show their faithfulness to the God who has been faithful to them. But there is no coercion. They get to decide whether to follow the Law or not. And Moses lays out the choice for them in fine homiletical form: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.” Life and death, blessings and curses, prosperity and

adversity. “Choose life,” he says, loving God and obeying God, so that you can live in the land that has been promised. The ball is in their court. There is no coercion; they get to decide. Moses says, “Choose life.”

Jesus knows it’s not an easy decision to be faithful. You cannot be a disciple, he says, unless you value your relationship with Christ over all things, even over all relationships. He says, unless you hate “father and mother,” and family. More sophisticated translators than I am say that the word hate here does not mean abhor or despise; there are other Greek words for those. To hate in this case means to value more than, to be too attached to. And if you are too attached to anything else than Jesus, then you cannot be a disciple.

Not that you *may* not be a disciple; Jesus isn’t prohibiting anything here, as in “I will not let you be a disciple.” He is saying that, simply, one cannot: it is simply not possible, the way that it isn’t possible, when a path diverges in the woods, to take both branches. You can’t walk to the left and to the right at the same time. You have to choose. It isn’t easy. But the promise of the gospel is that the more difficult choice is the one that leads to eternal life. Jesus sets before us today life and death, blessings and curses, prosperity and adversity; he sets before us himself. The ball is in our court. There is no coercion; we get to decide. Jesus says, “Choose life.”

There is something eminently practical about this. We are reminded here that our discipleship isn’t something vague and abstract, but concrete. It manifests itself in particular decisions that have to be made, in more and less dramatic form, each day. Discipleship means something, and it might mean something difficult. I don’t know much about first-century economics, but obviously having Onesimus as a slave gave some kind of benefit to Philemon: financial or social or practical or whatever. And he had to decide whether he would forego that benefit in light of his discipleship. The wandering Hebrews: would they restrict what they did to the guidelines of the Law? Not being bound by the Law gave some kind of benefit (or else the Law wouldn’t be so hard to follow). They had to decide. The Christian: avoiding discipleship will make some things easier. Jesus says that his yoke is easy, and his burden is light: but it’s still a yoke and a burden to value a relationship with Jesus over everything else. We have to decide.

These are not abstract, merely religious platitudes. How one treats others is a matter of choice. Whether it is treating other members of the community or the alien and stranger, these are choices about faithfulness to Jesus. We are starting our stewardship campaign today; you’ll get pledge cards in the mail shortly. And how you fill that out, if you fill that out, is a choice that faces you. I would say it is a choice about life and death, blessings and curses, prosperity and adversity. But the ball is in our court. Choose life.

The nineteenth-century theologian Soren Kierkegaard calls this decision-making process the leap to faith. Not a leap of faith: that would mean that you have faith, and you make some risky decision based on that firm faith you have. The leap to faith is the step before that one. It is the leap that has to be made without knowing for sure what the result will be. Will God be faithful to the Hebrews? They can’t know the future, only that a promise has been made. But will the promise be kept? Will freeing Onesimus bring Philemon closer to Jesus? Will following Jesus as his disciple, to the point of valuing a relationship with him over everything else—prestige, family ties, wealth, the whole nine yards—bring us into the life of God?

Kierkegaard says that you can’t know for sure. You take a leap to faith—or you don’t. Faced with the uncertainty of faith, you either leap or you don’t. Either decision is a choice; not jumping is to make one decision, too. And you might be wrong. It might all be wrong. Choose life.

If this was the sum of the gospel—this emphasis on individual choice—that would be an anemic gospel, though. I would be presenting you with just another law that you should follow (or not), along with all the others that are out there.

The good news, though—and this is the Pauline point—is the good news of God’s grace in Christ. That is, quite before you’ve done anything (or not), without your response, Christ decided first. Faced with the choice of loving the world, or not, with ensuring its access to life, or not, Christ chose the world. Christ chose you. Not because you’re a good guy (or not), not because you’re rich or poor, red, yellow, black or white, not because you make the right choices. Christ chose you because the nature of God is love, even love for you.

He looks at his creation, and he sees each person as being of infinite worth. Not because you’re perfectly faithful. But because God is love, God loves you. And because you’re of infinite worth to him, he is willing to give everything to you, even his own life. It is easy to die for your friends. Dying for your enemies, though: that’s another thing altogether. And Paul says, while we were yet enemies of God, Christ died for us. Father, forgive them.

In this is Paul’s point to Philemon: Philemon can set Onesimus free without fear, because God in Christ has set Philemon free already. Christ chose first: he chose Israel, he chose Philemon, he chooses us. His love for you, his faithfulness to the Father, his death itself, was his own leap to faith. We love God only because God first loved us. And when we entwine our lives with his, we reap the benefits of his faithfulness, not (thank God!) our own.

This is why our sacrifices, our choices, are not the ways in which we buy God’s grace or curry his favor. God’s grace and favor have already been given to us in Christ. All of our choices are free choices—what we do, how we live, what we give—to show our thanksgiving that Christ died for the ungodly, even when we were his enemies.

Life and death were set before Christ. And he chose your life.