

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 1;
Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Upon the receipt of my first paycheck from my first job after college, I began to indulge in things like records and books. The sales pitch for the RCA Record Club said "get ten albums for a dollar". As you can see, I'm kind of dated here – albums, record albums. You know, those big round things that you put on a record player and it spins and the needle . . . well, okay. We got a CD player last year, so I'm really up with technology now. But back then, way back then, the sales pitch went like this – "Get any ten albums for one dollar, buy four more at regular club prices, then cancel your membership at any time." The Literary Guild, which was offering books, made much the same offer – "Buy six books and you never" – this was better! – "have to buy anything else." These were tempting offers, because basically their promise, set out in bold print, said, "Join us so you can quit". I know their hope was that, having joined, you would feel compelled to purchase additional books and records at regular club prices. But their advertisements helped you understand that membership was much more casual, that you could get out of membership. I grant you that's a strange motivation for anyone to join anything, but apparently it worked. It worked for me. I promptly joined the Literary Guild, the Musical Heritage Society, the RCA Record Club and when I received my "free" record albums and books and when I had paid for the few at regular club prices, I promptly canceled my memberships. And I did so without any real regret or a longing to rejoin, with little monetary investment, and with virtually no energy or time wasted.

Maybe that would be an effective type of sales pitch to do some quick evangelizing, to get a few new members in the church. Or maybe that sales pitch is somewhat already present in the institution of the church. It seems after all, that it doesn't really take much to become a member of the Church of Jesus Christ, to be on the roll, to be listed in the parish register – for most churches like ours, be baptized, be washed in the welcoming word of God. And if that has happened and you come from a different denomination than ours, then come and enroll in the new members classes and affirm your baptism in worship. And then there is the literal, constitutional definition of an active, voting member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The constitution defines an active and voting member of a congregation to be a person who communes at least once and contributes financially of record during the current and preceding year. It doesn't take much to be considered a member of the Church.

And then once listed, it's very easy for a Christian brother or sister to just fade out of that active life in the church. You've seen it in others; perhaps you've experienced it yourself. You know, regularly attending worship, getting involved in some of the service opportunities, perhaps in a Bible study or a Sunday school class . . . and then you become inactive for a variety of reasons. It doesn't fit into your schedule. You get out of the habit. The stresses of life take their toll. Whatever. Sometimes we church leaders unintentionally foster a kind of casual Christian membership with our words as we try to help people get involved in volunteer opportunities. Sometimes we say things like (having recognized the busy-ness of peoples' lives), "You'll only have to do it once a month" or "It's not going to take a lot of time for you to be involved in this". It's a rare situation where the Church makes demands on our attendance and participation, so when we do make demands, they sound harsh.

It's not just the casual membership that ought to be our concern. It's also the fact that sometimes our Christian brothers and sisters pretty much up and leave a congregation; they just cancel their membership, if you will. Sometimes they walk out of a faith community with very little regret, without a desire to attend and be part of some other faith community, without much time or energy or investment, having been used up in the life of this one. I think it's sad, but it appears that being a Christian is sometimes like joining the Book of the Month Club.

Not so for Jesus Christ. Not according to the one who is the head of the church. Jesus never said that following him was like joining the Book of the Month Club. There was no glitzy advertising campaign which stated in bright words on glossy paper, "Follow Christ for just three months and then you can quit anytime." When Jesus talked about discipleship, when he met up with the tax collector and said, "Follow me", and when he saw some fishermen by the sea and said much the same thing, he did not mention vacation days available, or the taking of sick days and personal days. No contract was produced where the fine print said how one could terminate membership if one so desired. No partial commitment was acceptable to Him. So by the time you get to the fourteenth chapter of our Gospel today, Jesus is not only saying, "Follow me", but now he's describing the fullness of that kind of following. He doesn't speak about a casual Christianity. He doesn't speak about a casual discipleship. His words do not belie the importance of following him. Rather, Jesus makes demands on the people who will follow him. Unlike the RCA Record Club which made membership sound so easy, Jesus warns the crowd in advance that, frankly, following him will not be easy.

For instance, Jesus says, that unless a person hates their family, he or she cannot be his disciple. Now that's a harsh statement. Those sound like harsh words. But I think we need to consider why Jesus would say that. We're familiar with what Jesus says about love and the law he gives. He says the two greatest commandments are that you love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and that you love your neighbor as yourself. And when we hear that we are to hate our family, it sounds as though he's made a contradiction now. It contradicts his laws of love. Well, for one thing, Jesus may have been using a literary device that was well-known in the time of Jesus' earthly ministry. It was literary technique that was exaggeration, and certainly those who were Jews would understand it and would have been familiar with it. This literary technique of exaggeration was to show the overriding importance of loving God, of placing God first as the most important relationship we could have in our lives. And so in effect, Jesus is saying, "Love God so much that by comparison, it is as if you are hating your family."

But I would be remiss if I ended up softening the word "hate". While the word "hate" suggests some kind of evil violent anger and emotion, we still need to reckon with the word "hate" and live with the tension of it. When Jesus says to hate those things, and to love God above all else, what He's saying is that by loving God above everything else, it may very well put us into conflict with everything else. There is tension and conflict in being a disciple. Look at Paul. Our second lesson is a prime example of living in dissension. He is dealing with a situation of a slave named Onesimus. Apparently Onesimus has been converted to Christianity by Paul himself and has been very helpful to Paul in his ministry. Now Onesimus is still technically a slave. In the economic social system of the Roman Empire, he's still a slave, and he's owned by a person named Philemon, who happens to be a friend and acquaintance of Paul. Yet even though Onesimus is still a slave, Paul considers him no longer a slave. Paul considers him to be his fellow worker in the ministry. He understands Onesimus to be a child of God because he has been baptized into that family. I know Paul does not try to overthrow the entire institution of slavery in this brief letter. He does not try to wipe out the entire Roman empire's economic system of slavery, but he does take one little corner of the world, and he embraces the conflict that there truly is between the Gospel message and the institution of slavery. And he brings it

into this one person's life. He embraces that conflict and he appeals to Philemon to embrace the conflict as well. Loving God above everything else will put you into conflict with everything else. And Paul knows that. He dares to suggest to Philemon that Onesimus is more beneficial to Philemon as a fellow worker in the kingdom of God than he ever was as a slave. Paul doesn't demand, but he does appeal to Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother. And then he very subtly encourages Philemon to send Onesimus back, treat him not just as a brother, but free him from his slavery and send him back to Paul so he can continue to be a fellow worker in the kingdom of God.

Like Paul, faithfully following our Lord Jesus may move us into conflict with those persons we know well and love dearly, some of our most important relationships. And it may move us into conflict with those things we know well and love dearly, like our possessions. For the love of God, both the love that God has for us and the love we have for him, changes our lives, it changes our perspective; it realigns our priorities on how we spend our time, how we spend our money, how we relate to others. That undergoes radical change through the power of the Holy Spirit. And in that reprioritizing, conflict is inevitable.

Today Danielle's parents have made a promise – that they're going to bring her to worship and share with her the tremendous good news that Jesus Christ has given her life. But there are going to be times when fulfilling that promise is difficult. It's inevitable that there will be times as Danielle grows that there will be conflicts in the ways that you will try to fulfill that promise. As your brothers and sisters, we're here to support you so you can fulfill that promise, even in difficult times. And as the brothers and sisters of Danielle, today we welcome her the way Paul welcomed Onesimus, she's a fellow worker in the kingdom of God.

Discipleship is not so simple as to join without risk, without investment. There is potential cost involved, and Jesus was clear that we need to be prepared about that. Hence the stories Jesus tells here, the parables. He describes a man who wants to build a tower and how he doesn't have the resources to complete it. The foundation is built but the rest of it is not finished. He will be humiliated because he didn't count the cost. Or the king who is about to go to war. He really needs to sit down and meet with his military advisers and find out if he has the ammunition and if he has the troops, because you don't want to go into battle not being prepared. Because once you go into battle, there's no turning back. Jesus is saying here, "I'm not the Book of the Month Club. I offer no glitzy come-on and an easy way to cut out when times get tough. I'm telling you up front what being my disciple requires." So, count the cost before you follow. The cost of following our Lord Jesus will be paid in different kinds of currency, and some of you know what it is to pay that cost. Maybe for some of you here today it meant having to say, "How about we schedule that for the afternoon, because this morning I'm going to worship?" Or maybe next week it's going to mean how you redirect some of your time and energy from something that serves yourself to something that serves others. And the week after that it may mean loving and forgiving someone who really hurt us. And the week after that . . . who knows! But we do know this, each of us will find ourselves, day in and day out, in situations where we must choose whether to follow Christ, or to quote Robert Frost, it may well be the road less traveled, but it will make all the difference.

Our Lord asks no more of us than he asks of himself. The life and death of our Lord Jesus and the life He continues to share with us, is based on his solid, full, ongoing commitment to his heavenly Father. He didn't go halfway to the cross and say, "Whoa. I think I'll turn around. I've changed my mind. Cancel my membership." He counted the cost of his journey to Jerusalem and he decided that giving you and me new life was worth the cost. Amen.

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