

“SETTING THINGS RIGHT”

a sermon on Jeremiah 18:1-11, Psalm 139, Philemon, and Luke 14:25-33
September 4, 2016, by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
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Over the years, I’ve seen many lists with titles such as “the hard sayings of Jesus,” “Things I wish Jesus hadn’t said,” or the like. There are books by those names. There are sermons, and sets of sermons.

And this morning’s reading from Luke’s Gospel is *always* on those lists. I mean, let’s just be honest here. It’s bad enough that actually trying to live out this thing called the “Christian faith” might result in being “hated” by others. But *now* Jesus says, *we* also have to hate! And not just our enemies. In fact, in another place, he said just the *opposite*. No, we have to hate our own *families*. Really? *That’s* not “good news.” *That’s* not good at all!

So to begin with, I want to go back to my last sermon, and remind you of the major themes of Luke’s Gospel. The first – which clearly *is* Good News – is that Christ came for *all* people, not just a select few. Jesus’ teaching is that a crippled, destitute old woman is *just* as precious in God’s sight and important in God’s plan as a King on his throne in all his royal splendor.

But another theme in Luke is that the greatest obstacle to our “participation” in what I called in that sermon our “participation in the drama” is *fear*. Largely, fear of the *consequences* of our participation. And by “the drama,” I mean the drama of *ushering in* the Good News of God’s care and concern for all people.

In a recent sermon on this morning’s text from Luke, Wil Willimon reflects on some of the “nice” and “welcoming” church advertisements he has seen around Birmingham, Alabama, where he lives:

Do you have doubts? Come to a safe place to share your doubts, and have your questions respected. Anxious? Fearful of the Future? Come here, for the six week sermon series by our Pastor on healing your anxiety. Lonely? You’ll find that we are the friendliest church in town. Abused by the church? Our church believes and practices “Open Hearts. Open Minds. Open Doors.”

He goes on to note that while there is *some* truth in such sayings, they don’t really paint the *full* picture of the Christian life – which is a life that does, or at least *can* have real consequences, that can in fact *put us* in jeopardy with respect to some of our existing relationships, and in which there *are* some answers that are

firm, and not necessarily what we “want” to hear, and in which sometimes our “fellow Christians” do not always live up to our idealistic expectations of them – being, themselves, just people on their own life journeys.

All of which is to say that *our* biggest problem when it comes to the Christian life, in my humble opinion, is that too often, we approach it completely backwards – *starting* with what it is we want from it, hope to gain by it, instead of what it means to be participants in what we call the “*missio dei*,” God’s mission in the world.

And that mission is crystal clear. It is *restoration*. Setting things right. Healing the brokenness. It is people in right relationship with God – *all* people – and through God, people in right relationship with each other. Like it was between God, and Adam and Eve, back in the garden, before the fall. Sometimes, participating in God’s mission is *easy*. But at other times, it is not. Sometimes, our participation calls us to speak a prophetic word that is not welcomed, or take a risk. Sometimes it calls us to leave our “comfort zone.”

You might recall that in my last sermon the reading from Jeremiah was his “call narrative,” in which he voiced his fears and hesitance to follow God’s voice. And his fears were not unwarranted. At one point in his ministry, the “powers that be” were so angry with him that they threw him into an empty cistern and left him for dead (he was rescued, in the end).

And today’s reading, which is one of the prophet’s best known sayings and one that I quote often, is one of the ones that got him into such trouble. It is his analogy of God as a potter, sitting at his wheel, who discerns that the piece he is working on isn’t turning out the way he intended, and so he “re-works” it into another piece . . . from scratch.

It took *courage* for Jeremiah to say all that – to proclaim that Israel was the clay on that wheel, and that if they didn’t repent, God could smash that pot, and start all over again. And there *were* consequences. Later, he took an even greater risk by filling in the details, and being among the very first to predict that Jerusalem would actually fall to its enemies. Jeremiah had fears. But he was prepared to do what was right, for the sake of God’s mission in the world.

And that is really Luke’s point. The *rest* of our text for the morning is about what we might call “counting the cost.” You certainly wouldn’t begin to construct a building before you had taken the time to estimate what it was going to cost to complete it, Jesus said. That would be foolish. What if you got part way done, and didn’t have the resources to finish the job? And if you were the King, it would be pure folly to lead your forces into battle without first assessing your enemy’s

strength, wouldn't it? You wouldn't do that. If you didn't have the numbers to take them on, you try to negotiate – or as one of our political candidates likes to say, “do a deal.”

So although Jesus' words about “hating” our families may sound shocking, what he is *really* saying, it seems to me, is that if we are going to live the way God really intended, we have to have our eyes wide open. And we can't even let our “family ties” keep us from seeing the truth, and working to set things right. Living with integrity and purpose is the thing, and it costs what it costs. If we aren't willing to pay the cost, then there's really no reason to set out on the journey.

Case in point is the Apostle Paul in a curious little New Testament book we call *Philemon*. Its characters are otherwise unknown to us in history, so we have to figure it all out just from what we have – twenty-five verses written, so the Apostle says, in his own hand.

The general consensus is that Onesimus, the object of the letter and its carrier, was once Philemon's slave. In all likelihood, he somehow escaped. But clearly, Philemon had not simply “set him free.” He still “belonged” to Philemon, in other words.

And somehow, Onesimus ended up in Paul's service. Clearly, Paul cared deeply for him. And clearly, too, Paul believed that Onesimus was participating in God's mission by caring for his needs during his imprisonment.

But at the same time, there was something *wrong* with this picture. It hadn't happened the right way. Onesimus hadn't come to Paul in a way that fostered and honored right relationship between all people.

And so Paul determined that he had to send him back to Philemon so that Philemon could choose to do the right thing. For Onesimus in particular, that was risky. Philemon may even have had the opportunity to have Onesimus punished or killed for leaving. An *easier* route would have been to simply “buy” his freedom. But that didn't fully honor Paul's relationship with Philemon either. And Paul determined that the only *really* proper course was to put it all back in Philemon's hands.

Here is your servant, Philemon, back in your hands. Whatever you are owed for his disobedience, I will pay. And so now it's *your* turn. I pray you will receive him as a brother and friend, as he is to me, instead of as a slave.

Let's do this the *right* way, in other words. We are willing to take the risk, for the sake of the Gospel. We are willing to live in the light, to walk with integrity. And so now the fate of Onesimus is in your hands.

I love that story. It is about taking *responsibility*, which I think is something our generation in particular needs to hear. Paul – and apparently Onesimus – weren't satisfied with just living in God's grace and forgiveness. They needed to "set things right" between Onesimus and his former master, and they were willing to put what they *had* at risk, in order to do the right thing.

That's an important lesson about the Gospel – and one that ties in beautifully with our other readings for the day. We don't *know* what God might require of us in order to do what is right, participate in His mission of setting the world right. But if we aren't willing take the risk, we will *never* know, and God's mission will make little progress . . . at least, through us.

The *Good News* is that God can and *will* work through us, if we honestly and fully seek to live with integrity. And living that way is *deeply* satisfying and rewarding.

We don't know the outcome of Onesimus' and Philemon's relationship. But then, I think it is probably fair to say that if it hadn't turned out well, the letter would probably have been torn to shreds, burned or otherwise disposed of unceremoniously. Instead, it became a beloved and cherished little story around the church, of what it means to *actually* live the Christian life with integrity and purpose.

There are a thousand such stories ahead for us, as the Church, if we are willing to face them, and live them. And in so doing, God's kingdom and reign will be further established here, as it is in heaven.

To God be the glory.