

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 13th Sunday after Pentecost, September 8, 2019.

Our lessons today are heavy-duty.

First we have a crystal clear lesson from Deuteronomy (**Deuteronomy 30:15-20**). The word “Deuteronomy” means “reading of the law.” So, you know we are engaged with something heavy: the law. “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.” A clear-cut choice. No fooling around. Either you love the Lord your God, walk in his ways, and observe his commandments, or you don’t.

Next we have **Psalms 1**. It’s a bit softer version of the same choice. “For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked is doomed.” Righteousness vs. wickedness. “Planted by streams of water, bearing fruit” or “like chaff which the wind blows away.” Take your pick. It’s your choice.

Then there is the long passage from the Letter to Philemon (**Philemon 1-21**) about a servant named Onesimus. With Philemon’s permission, Onesimus had been helping Paul during Paul’s imprisonment. Now Paul is suggesting that Onesimus return to Philemon. “I wanted to keep Onesimus with me,” Paul writes, “but now I would like him to return to you so that he might be ... no longer a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother.” Think of a person in your life whose friendship and service you would never like to lose. Then think of encouraging that person to leave. It would be a tough decision, wouldn’t it?

Then we have perhaps the heaviest of the lessons, the passage from Luke’s gospel (**Luke 14:25-33**). This is a version of “If you’re not for me, you’re against me.” “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.”

Does Jesus really mean this? Or is he simply trying to make a point, a point that we cannot forget? I hope it’s the latter, because I don’t hate all these people and I don’t hate life itself. And I am sure you feel likewise. So, let’s give Jesus some slack here.

The point he makes, though, is important. Discipleship is a commitment, a commitment that is grounded in sacrifice. No pain, no gain. Jesus was

underscoring that crucifixion of some sort is part of being a disciple. By saying yes to Jesus, we are saying no to some things that the world values very highly. And, of course, we do too. That's why this lesson is so tough.

Yes, these lessons are heavy. But would we want them any other way? Would we sacrifice for someone who didn't expect us to stretch, particularly when he was stretched on a cross? We respond to modeling. Jesus modeled sacrifice. He was not Jesus-lite. And he expects those who claim to be his disciples to be models of sacrifice as well.

Chances are that we would never sacrifice for Jesus, even a little bit, if Jesus had not sacrificed for us. Our celebration of Easter is directly proportional to our remembrance of Good Friday. That correlation is not an accident. It's intentional.

But, there is more to our faith than "I will do this if you will do that." Jesus didn't put a condition on his sacrifice. And neither should we, though we tend to do just that/ We know better. Think about two acts of generosity on your part. The first act of generosity was in response to the generosity of someone else. The second act of generosity was not in return, but simply because it seemed the right thing to do. Of which act are you most proud? It's the unconditional act, isn't it.

Sometimes we give our children or grandchildren things to do. Here's an exchange:

"Johnny, I need you to take out the garbage for me."

"What do I get, Grandpa?"

"Excuse me."

"Well, I'm already taking out the garbage once a day. Why do I have to do it twice a day, without an increase in my allowance?"

Grandpa's response might well be, "Because I asked you to do it. And if that's not a good enough answer for you, try this one: I told you to do it. And if that's not a good enough answer either, try this one: You'll feel better."

"But Grandpa."

"No 'buts.' Just do it."

This is a tough lesson of Johnny. And it is a tough lesson for Grandpa. But it is an important lesson, particularly as applied to our religious Faith. And the more we

can just “do it,” the more satisfying “doing it” will become.

Faith is a gift, and we should treat it as a gift. We should embrace the responsibilities that go with a belief in Jesus as Savior. His death was a bitter pill. No mistake about that. Heavy-duty. But his new life is not bitter. His new life is a joy. A joy for us, and a joy for those with whom we share the Good News. And a big component of this joy is sacrificing when we don't have to sacrifice.

“Grandpa. What are you talking about? Are you okay?”

“No, Johnny, I'm fine. I tell you what. Let's take the garbage out together.”

“No extra allowance?”

“That's right. No extra allowance. Just time together. It's better than an allowance.”

“Okay, Grandpa. I guess.”

Silly? Perhaps. Heavy-duty? Perhaps. “Heavy duty in a manner we can handle?” Yes, heavy duty in a manner we can handle. Which is precisely what Jesus is all about. Or, more to the point, Who Jesus is all about.

You and I cannot fathom the Creator of the Universe. Every time we think we've discovered the Truth, we quickly realize that there is more Truth to discover. This unpeeling never stops. But neither does our curiosity. We keep seeking, and, as we do so, we keep getting surprised. And so we seek some more. We are a bunch of seekers. And it's fun. Faith is hard-work, to be sure. It is heavy-duty. But faith is also a joy.

If Faith was simply hard-work, we probably wouldn't sustain our Faith. But Faith is more than hard work. It's amazing what taking out the garbage can reveal.

Remember these words from Paul to Philemon: “Perhaps this is the reason he, Onesimus, was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother.”

You and I are beloved in the Lord. That's our Faith, and that's our joy. And if it means doing something good for people without any assurance of being thanked, so be it. It's in the doing, not in the immediate return, that we are blessed. Of course, the promise of being with our Lord forever doesn't hurt. Amen.