



“The Choice That Comes with a Cost”
Scripture – Matthew 10:24-39
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, June 28, 2020

A professor recalls a seminar he taught at Princeton Seminary. The dozen students sat in a circle. The professor knew most of them, but there was one he barely recognized – a man from North Korea who appeared to be in his late sixties. As they went around the circle sharing their names and a bit of their identities, this man had little to say. His English was halting and he seemed shy, so the others did not push him for more information. But over the weeks, the class began to develop a sense of trust, so one day the professor turned to the man and said, “We don’t know you very well. Would be willing to tell us something of your story?”

The man began to open up. He revealed that he had been a professor of Old Testament at a seminary. Due to his deep concern for justice as proclaimed by the prophets and demonstrated in the life of Jesus, he became active in politics. As a result of his commitment to biblical justice, which was being trampled by the government, he was arrested and imprisoned. Cut off from family and friends and cut off from the seminary, his imprisonment began to take its toll on him. He said that after many months, he quit reading the Bible. It wasn’t long before he quit praying regularly. He fell into despair and his faith became shaky. His jailers sensed that he had weakened, so, they entered his cell and said, “We’re taking you before the judge. If you renounce your political positions” – which was tantamount to renouncing his faith – “things will go better for you.”

As the man shared his story to his classmates, he said, “To be honest, I was ready to do it. On the appointed day, they took me into a courtroom to stand before the judge. As they brought me through the door, I noticed my wife and a few members of our church who had slipped into the back of the courtroom. When the judge gave me the opportunity to recant my beliefs, before I could say a word, my wife cried out, “God is alive!” That was all she said before they grabbed her and dragged her out of the courtroom. But it was enough. I stood firm in my faith.”¹

Could it have been today’s passage from the Gospel of Matthew that inspired such courage and faithfulness? The disciples have been traveling with Jesus as he trekked from town to village to countryside, sharing his spiritual wisdom and healing those who suffered. In today’s passage, Jesus takes a pause, and says, “Now, it’s your turn. Fan out and spread my message of justice and mercy.”

Jesus commissions his disciples to carry out God’s work. They are raring to go, but not without a healthy dose of apprehension. They do not feel adequately prepared and they question how they will be received, so Jesus gathers them for one last session of coaching.

He seeks to inspire them to carry out their work in all faithfulness, but he also delivers a dire warning. He says, “If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!”

In other words, “There are many out there who will not receive you favorably. If they call me Beelzebul” – another word for Satan or Devil – imagine how antagonistic they will be toward you who follow me!”

The disciples had discovered meaning, purpose and joy in following Jesus. Their lives had been transformed and renewed. They had witnessed suffering people made whole and watched despairing people given hope. They knew in their souls the profound power of following Jesus.

But there was another side. They also witnessed Jesus confront authority figures. They saw him expose those who benefited from injustice. Jesus sought to spread God’s kingdom in the world, but those who profited from the current system did not welcome his alternative. Jesus reminded his followers that persecution is inevitable. “But,” Jesus says, “Be courageous in the face of opposition and speak the truth. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.”

Jesus was honest with his disciples. Following his way of truth and demanding fair treatment for all can land you in trouble. “You are bound to encounter opposition and perhaps persecution. Those in power may be capable of destroying your physical body, but they cannot extinguish your spirit. There is an everlasting reward for those who remain faithful.”

Following Christ can make your life rich and fulfilling, but remaining faithful in the face of hostility requires an intrepid spirit. If you take your task seriously to care for God’s creation, you will meet opposition. If you speak out against racism, you could face severe criticism. If you raise concerns about income inequality, those who profit from the current system will not take kindly to your cause. Jesus calls on us to stand for what is right and true and just. Sometimes that’s not difficult; other times it requires fearless determination.

You may have heard about the mother who was tucking her five-year-old daughter into bed during a window-rattling thunderstorm. The little girl said, “I’m scared of the thunder and lightning. Mommy, will you please sleep with me tonight?” The mother kindly but firmly refused the little girl’s request. With tears swelling up in her eyes, the little girl said, “Why won’t you sleep with me?” And the mother replied, “Because Daddy wants me to sleep with him.” The little girl shook her head in disgust and muttered, “That big chicken!”²

None of us want to be a big chicken, but courage does not come easily. All of us can name things that frighten us: facing a regimen of cancer treatment, confronting a wayward child, receiving a phone call at 2:00 a.m. It requires fierce determination to face the dangers that heighten our anxiety and spawn feelings of panic.

At a younger age, I thought that people who are brave have no fear. But when I eventually matured, I realized that courage is the strength you summon in the face of fear. Eddie Rickenbacker, the dauntless fighter pilot of World War I said, “Courage is doing what you’re afraid to do. There can be no courage unless you are scared.” In a similar vein, a stouthearted cowboy said: “Courage is being scared to death – but saddling up anyway.”³

That’s the challenge Jesus placed on his disciples. Despite fears and threats, they were to carry out their mission come what may. And to reinforce how formidable their task, Jesus added these words that we find so troubling. He said, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother...and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.”

I cannot begin to fathom the barriers those first disciples faced. They were to tell their fellow Jews that their religious leaders had misled them, that the Messiah had come, and that they were to embark on a new path. Following the death of Jesus, their task became even more arduous. It is no wonder that Jesus warned them that believing in him would become divisive. Families would be split apart as some would follow the way of Jesus while others clung to the faith of their tradition. Following the path of Jesus could set a son against his father and

a daughter against her mother. Becoming a committed follower of Christ was the best decision they could ever make. However, as Jesus emphasized: “Do not imagine that making such a choice comes without a cost. Those who find their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Jesus calls for self-sacrifice and ultimate commitment. Two things that could hardly be more out of step with our current culture, where self-focus is the norm and commitments are rare.

Today, many imagine that their religious life comprises only one segment of their lives. They have a work life, a family life, a social life and a religious life. They would be unnerved to discover that Christ never envisioned part-time discipleship. There is to be no division between sacred and secular. God expects us to live a Christ-centered existence at work, at play, at school; in relationships, on vacation, and when we make decisions.

Admittedly, none of us is perfect and we often fall short of becoming the person God creates us to be. However, everything we think, say, and do reflect our devotion to Christ so why not ratchet up our degree of commitment?

If Jesus only gave us goals that were easily achievable, our devotion would be tepid, boredom would set in, and we would scour the landscape for someone else to follow. If Jesus did not make extraordinary demands, we could never accomplish extraordinary things.

NOTES

1. A story told by Tom Long.
2. H. Michael Brewer, “Only One Thing to Fear,” in *Lectionary Homiletics*, June-July, 2008, p.37.
3. Quote attributed to John Wayne.

Prayers of the People ~ Carol Hogue

Dear loving and gracious God,

There are too many days recently when we ask the question... Where do we even begin?

How do we understand the depth of hurt racism has caused each of our sisters and brothers of color? Protests and civil unrest are rising because we have not looked closely at our part in systemic racism in our neighborhoods, our cities, or our country.

The work we are willing to do is paramount to devouring the evil injustice that has occupied our nation for far too long. Sustain us and encourage us to forge new paths of action and support others who do the work.

The global Covid-19 pandemic looms like cloud cover AND social distancing and masks and what activities to do with whom and where are constant questions.

We thank you for our health – sustained or recovering – and may we continue to take seriously the evidence that our social distancing and wearing of masks is vital to stemming the tide of Covid-19’s pandemic. We are aching to be together – and the leaders of this – your Church – are defining the path toward that end. Support them in all their discerning during this time of re-opening – how and when.

Strengthen our resolve and ... our patience while we continue to work from home – sometimes with our children underfoot. While grandparents are separated from grandchildren. Family members separated from family and friends.

Be with those who suffer from loneliness or illness or grief. May they feel your love wrap around them. Be with those for whom work and child care and care-giving for a loved one has been interrupted and now interpreted in different ways or no ways. Help us to navigate all the misgivings and misunderstandings that our world poses at this moment so we will not be pulled in its undercurrent.

May we be inspired to live in bold and generous ways – bringing meaning to our lives and showing the compassion we are capable of commanding.

May we invite new information and different perspectives to challenge our narrow minds.

May we show up for our family and friends and neighbors, even those we don't know, to share our bounty of resources.

May we be challenged to look at our attention and intentions and understand where we put our focus for the blessing of each day determines the joy we experience.

We offer our sincere gratitude to You – our life's companion and guide – for entering our lives so that we may feel the peace of your love and the hope of your light. That we may hold your light and love so that we may share it with others.

Gracious God, We know there are opportunities and blessings all around us – may we be able to notice and embrace them... maybe the startling blossom we pass by on a walk or the laugh of a friend or a quiet moment when we are not engaged in the news or worry or anticipation or assumptions. Maybe we listen to the invitation from a friend to become active in social justice or saving items for our Syrian sisters and brothers or making a decision to offer an Echo gift...

Most importantly, remind us of Your everlasting love – that we have what we need to follow in the path Jesus walked and that you will always sustain us in our journey.

You have... given us this day... This day to live abundantly. May it be so...

Jesus gave us the following words to pray...

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.