

Pentecost 16C: A study in the true cost of discipleship

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Rev Ken Wratten at St Stephen's, San Jose

Jeremiah 18:1-11 We belong to the Lord and are shaped by his presence in our lives.

Philemon 1-21 Paul offers Philemon a chance for choice and change for the sake of the Gospel.

Luke 14:25-33 Do not just believe, but follow = be a disciple, but do not think there will not be a cost.
But the cost will bring reward (Luke 18:29-30)

Jesus said that we cannot be true disciples of his unless we give up all of our possessions. That certainly is a radical statement. I don't think I could decide to choose homelessness, to intentionally turn to begging to get my next meal, to willfully face living on the fringes of society. But there is another meaning to this language of possessions. After all, wealth of itself is not the problem, but how we use our wealth. From this parish, we plan carefully and prayerfully, working to accomplish good things with the money we manage from the treasury here. The annual offerings are expected to do a lot more than keep the lights on and the lawn watered. They are expected to do nothing less than change lives while they carry the message of God's love.

So the language of giving away possessions may well be about attitudes as much as it is about material possessions. Jesus wants vulnerable people, ready to surrender our old assumptions about what matters in life, and willing to find our new identity in him.

Jesus is also explaining that he rejects anyone as a disciple who clings to comfort in order to avoid the uneasiness of being transformed – changed from the inside out – which is what happens when we decide to walk the walk as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Frederick Buechner (BEEK-ner: American writer, theologian, Presbyterian minister) writes, "Inspection stickers used to have printed on the back, 'Drive carefully: the life you save may be your own.' That is the wisdom of men in a nutshell. What God says, on the other hand, is, 'The life you save is the life you lose.' In other words, the life you clutch, hoard, guard, and play safe with is in the end a life worth little to anybody, including yourself; and only a life given away for love's sake is a life worth living..."

Paul's letter to Philemon is a down-to-earth, practical example of the kind of radical commitment that Jesus demands from those who decide to follow him. Paul writes from prison (in Ephesus around 56 AD, or in Rome around 60 AD) to make arrangements for the return of the runaway slave Onesimus to his master Philemon. Onesimus had come to Paul, and had become a Christian, and a friend. Paul knew that the penalty for running away could be very severe. He asks Philemon to not only give up the financial value of his slave, but even more, he invites a shift in attitude; that Philemon would see Onesimus no longer as a slave, but would

welcome him home as a brother. The request invites both the giving up of a possession, and a change of heart.

A core value in this discussion today is the tension that Jesus defines between comfort and transformation. Our decision to follow him changes our value system; it changes our understanding of human relationships; it changes our priorities; and it changes what motivates us. It shakes up our comfort zone.

If we settle into a sense of comfort over our works at in-reach and outreach, we need to ask ourselves if our comfort is threatening our own transformation into the likeness of Christ; or preventing us from fostering that transformation in each other, or in our preschool families, or our ‘Get on the Bus’ families, or people who receive our food or clothing donations. Are we too comfortable with ourselves to think of writing notes of caring to the people who receive our contributions of food and clothing? Are we too comfortable to call or write to the members of our faith family who aren’t coming on Sunday to worship with us? Are we too comfortable to find new ways to let the kids in boarding school in Kenya know that this whole congregation cares about them?

Jesus’ words ARE unsettling. Our experience of being a disciple – literally meaning to be a student of Jesus – should always be unsettling; giving us a holy uneasiness; drawing us to be creative, imaginative, innovative, inspired, excited, energized, and always thinking outside the box about ways to bring transformation – change from the inside out – for ourselves and for everyone who crosses our path in life.

This calling to what Bill Hybels calls “holy discontent” is one reason I am so delighted to have Deacon Robin Poppoff join this faith family. All of us need to keep stirring this pot of transformational energy. I hope that Robin will help keep the pot stirred.

Brother Geoffrey Tristram is the superior of the SSJE, an Episcopal religious community in Cambridge, Mass. He writes, “It is hard for God to re-clothe us in Christ when we are already fully dressed! God is challenging you to take off some garment which weighs you down—some disordered attachment, some damaging indulgence. Take it off, and leave it at the altar, and return to your life lighter.”

What material possessions or spiritual short-cuts weigh you down; standing in the way of your full openness to radical surrender to Christ?

Our Lord Jesus Christ challenges us to take on the discomfort of a life of on-going transformation. The reward for the effort is the promise of eternal life with him. So consider the tension... between comfort... and holy discontent, in your own spiritual journey. Amen.