

“Choosing to Pay the Cost”  
Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33  
September 5, 2010

Let me share a cute little story I read this week. It seems that Will Willimon, Dean of the Chapel down at Duke University, got a call from an upset parent, a VERY upset parent. "I hold you personally responsible for this," he said. - "Me?" Will asked. That father was upset because his graduate school bound daughter had just informed him that she was going to "throw it all away" (the way the father described it) and go do mission work with the Presbyterians in Haiti. "Isn't that absurd!" shouted the father. "A BS degree in mechanical engineering from Duke and she's going to dig ditches in Haiti." Willimon responded by saying, "Well, I doubt that she's received much training in the Engineering Department here for that kind of work, but she's probably a fast learner and will probably get the hang of ditch-digging in a few months," Will said. The father was not amused and went on to talk about Christian commitment getting in the way of his daughters career. Dr. Willimon pointed out that the well-meaning parents were the ones who had started this ball rolling. THEY were the ones who had her baptized, read Bible stories to her, took her to Sunday School. Will said, "You're the one who introduced her to Jesus, not me." The father responded, "But all we ever wanted her to be was a Presbyterian."

Be a member of a church ..... But don't let it affect or shape your life. Martin Luther is quoted as having said, "A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing, is worth nothing." Over and over again we confront the call of scripture to take up our cross and follow. It is not just polite church talk. It is not a call to join a church for the times that it is convenient or for when we like the people that we sit next to in the pew. This is a tough - life changing - life rearranging call.

This past week I read about a mountain village in Europe where a wealthy nobleman lived several centuries ago. He wondered what legacy he should leave to his townspeople. He made a good decision when he decided to build them a church. No one was permitted to see the plans or the inside of the church until it was finished. At its grand opening, the people gathered and marveled at the beauty of the new church. It was a masterpiece. But as the people admired the new church someone said, "Wait a minute! Where are the lamps? It is really quite dark in here. How will the church be lighted?" The nobleman pointed to some brackets in the walls, and then he gave each family a lamp with the instruction that they must bring it each time they came to worship. "Each time you are here" the nobleman said, "the place where you are seated will be lighted. Each time you are not here, that place will be dark."

What a cute idea! But, oh what a rotten trick. That means that I am responsible. Everyone else is depending on me. Without my light the whole place is just a little bit darker. Will we take up our cross [and our light] and follow Christ so that light is brought into the kingdom.

Will we do what it takes to follow Christ? Will we ..... That really gets at the point of the scriptures today. Will we .... Or won't we? There are always choices to make .... Every day .... Every hour .... In everything we do or decide not to do ..... We must make choices. And a lot of the time we don't like to choose. But as long as we keep breathing we will choose even if by lack of a choice.

"See, I have set before you this day a choice .... Life and prosperity or death and adversity! You choose!" It seems a little bit like the bride that was pictured on her wedding contemplating

the question the pastor has just asked her, “Will you take this man for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness or health, till death do you part.” After a moments thought she said, “I’ll take better, richer and health, please!”

Choose this day ..... It is really a ‘no brainer’. Who would not choose life and prosperity? But the problem is that there are strings attached. If the choice is life and prosperity that means choosing to follow God. According to Moses in our first scripture life and prosperity are connected to obeying God ... Walking in his ways ... Observing His commandments, decrees and ordinances. Now suddenly, the choice got a lot tougher. Now suddenly there are important matters of daily life that I will have to be involved with. So what will it be? Life and prosperity - or - death and adversity. No one wants to choose death and adversity .... But if it means that I will have to obey the commands of God I am going to have to think about it for a while. In fact I am going to have to think about it for a long time .... a long, long time and probably every day and in every situation when I am confronted with doing it my way - or God’s way. You choose!

The fact of the matter is that it is not a simple choice at all. It sounds so good coming out of the mouth of Moses. And I suspect that if we had been standing there in the desert with the Israelites that day when they were about to cross over the Jordan River into the promised land after wandering in the wilderness for year after year we would have been really quick to nod our heads and say, ‘sign me up for that God following thing.’ I’m for it. Life and prosperity sounds great to me. Just don’t get to specific in the details.

It is interesting to hold our second reading up next to the choice that Moses holds before us today. The story of Philemon and Onesimus takes us right into the specifics of what it means to choose God. Forget about all of our feelings about slavery and just remember that it was an accepted part of life in those days. And what we believe is that Onesimus was the slave of Philemon and the slave had run away from the master. Somehow the slave had sought and found sanctuary with Paul and Paul has convinced Onesimus that he had to go back to his master. Paul asks Philemon to forgive the run away slave and take him back not so much as a returning slave but as a brother with no punishment - everything forgiven and forgotten. Will you do it? That is what it means to choose life and prosperity.

It is not a simple choice. Choosing life and prosperity can mean setting the call to follow God ahead of family and friends. That is what is intended by that difficult language of ‘hating father and mother, brother and sister, wife and child.’ That language is not intended in the way we understand the concept of ‘hate’. It is priority language. When following the commands of God runs into conflict with actions that even your family asks you to take .... are you willing to chose to follow God?

It is not a simple choice. It is not simple because too often we think that we know the way to life and prosperity. We think that we can figure out what is best for ourselves and it does not involve forgiving run away slaves or our neighbors or our family. We think that choosing life means grabbing for all the gusto we can and doing things the way we want to do them no matter what anyone else says. So things like forgiveness, grace, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, justice and where everyone might sit at the table [if you remember what we were talking about last week] has nothing to do with it.

But God, in His love and mercy, wants the very best for us. God want life and prosperity for us even if it means that we will have to give of ourselves for the sake of our neighbors and the world. Choose God. Choose life.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in ‘The Cost of Discipleship’, “The demand for absolute liberty

brings men to the depths of slavery.” And so we live as slaves to the will and way of God who give us life and prosperity.

AMEN