

Deuteronomy 30:15-20  
Philemon 1:1-23  
Luke 14:25-33

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Pentecost 13 C – Local Heroes Rally Sunday  
September 8, 2019

Yesterday morning was the memorial service for Walter Boutin, a most beloved church member and friend to many of us. So the church was full of people showing their respect, appreciation and support; a reunion which brought forth stories of blessings throughout the changing seasons of his life journey. Thank God for such reaffirming experiences in the Communion of Saints. We are reminded how as imperfect people, we are still perfectly loved and can bless the lives of others in serving our Lord's kingdom. In commending Wally to God's Heavenly Kingdom, we say "Well done, good and faithful servant!" He has planted many seeds of love, hope, and faith by sharing Good News in publishing our church newsletter for 3 decades, inspiring children in the role of Saint Nicholas for 2 decades, enriching the fellowship, stewardship and leadership of All Saints 4 decades. You might call him a local hero as witness and friend.

Lutheran Christians profess to be both saint and sinner, confessing our need for grace and forgiveness, praying we can be vessels of grace, forgiveness, hope, love and faith. We take seriously Christ's command in our Baptismal calling: "Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify our Father in Heaven." I'm not sure any of us can claim regular success in our daily track records, but we strive to run the long distance race of faith with hope and perseverance, appreciative of those who pick us up as we stumble. The best way to live is ... gratefully ... counting our blessings and striving to be one to others.

Our communities and families need heroes to emulate, role-models willing to mentor us, a cloud of witnesses to cheer us on, coworkers and friends with similar values and aspirations. We thank Pastor Sue Ellen who found a wonderful liturgy to embody our appreciation of public servants such as the police force, the fire department, disaster response teams, medical personnel, governing leadership, school teachers, caregivers, and charitable volunteers. It takes dedication, training, perseverance, self-sacrifice, discipline, and accountability to serve in such roles. Most don't receive trophies or fanfare, not very often anyway. Human nature too often focuses on what's wrong instead of what's right. People can easily list their criticisms and complaints, somehow begrudging reminders to count their blessings of things and relationships they take for granted. Personal crusades either focus on tearing down or on building up; which is it for you? Do your heroes build up or tear down?

This morning's Gospel Lesson throws us a curve-ball, as if in direct opposition to the importance of close-knit families and communities. We want to proclaim how faith unites people together, creating intimacy in marriages, helping to guide and bond generations from cradle to the grave, fostering a Communion of Saints, and the reconciliation of sins forgiven. But this is not the focus or concern of Christ's sermon in the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke. Jesus confronted the crowd concerning their motivations in following Him as disciples. Did they understand the possible high cost of discipleship? Would other priorities get in the way?

What Jesus actually says is shocking! In Luke's version, Christ says: "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." Matthew's account softens it quite a bit, saying: "Whoever loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me." It's still a confronting statement, but at least we get the point about priorities. We are tempted to love these people or even our possessions more than we love God. Ultimately, this amounts to selfish greed in desiring gifts with little regard to honoring the One who gives them.

But Luke's version comes across like nails scraping across a chalkboard. Shouldn't we protest against hating relationships God has given us, and hating the life God created for us, as this would dishonor our Heavenly Creator as well? Surely we should not embrace such contempt, ignoring the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment to honor our fathers and mothers. Didn't Christ command we love one another as He has loved us? What's going on here?

Do you know what a hyperbole is? Webster's Dictionary defines it as "an extravagant exaggeration." It is a dramatic image used to make a point and capture people's attention. To say that my mother used to pile food on my plate a mile high would be a hyperbole. Perhaps you know someone who claims the roof would cave in if he or she were to step foot into a church. These are obvious exaggerations, but each underscores an unusual claim beyond normal expectations.

I'm not going to ask for a show of hands in how many of you hate your parents or spouse, nor your children or siblings. We'd be in a sorry state of affairs to require members to hate anyone as some sort of loyalty test for Jesus. I don't believe this is God's intention for our lives, nor would that be good stewardship of our relationships.

These verses are not meant to stand alone. We are shocked to the degree we must examine what we believe, and test our knowledge of what else the Bible has to say about the purpose of family, marriage and friendships. Might such blessings prove to be distractions in firming up our foundations of faith? Should a spouse, parent or child demand top priority?

Jesus then launches into the illustration of laying a foundation to build a tower. If we don't count the cost, we won't have what it takes to see it through. A lot of people try to build their lives around the wrong things, creating shaky structures which won't stand the test of time through the storms of life. Jesus isn't really talking about the right way to build a tower. He was talking about building people's lives. The support and understanding of family and friends mean a lot to us. But if we don't know the support of a God who understands us better than we ourselves, what good will it do when we lose the gift of life itself?

Are we so afraid of death, we think there is nothing worth dying for? If so, is there anything worth living for? The Cross is a symbol of death in the eyes of this world. Yet Jesus said we must carry the Cross to follow Him. Death is a part of the journey in faith we must each face. Faith sees the Cross as a symbol of new life, trusting in Christ's promises as our only possessions in entering the gates of Heaven.

Speaking of Heaven, if you had a choice of trying to get there by the merits of your own efforts and achievements, or by the promise of God's forgiveness and love... which would you choose? Personally, I would go for grace and mercy every time. When it comes to our relationships, we may get frustrated and disappointed with family and friends. We might be tempted to give them what we think they deserve. But the Bible doesn't say we should treat others as we've been treated, but to treat others as we would like them to treat us. In other words, instead of playing by the world's rules, do it God's way.

Jesus is saying we must love God more than we love our family and friends. It is the only way we can ultimately demonstrate the grace of God to them rather than our own merit system of rewards and punishments. None of us would want to be in the Old Testament shoes of Job, losing family, friends, wealth and health. His despondent wife advised Job to curse God and die. But in spite of all these devastations, Job clung desperately to faith, saying: "Blessed be the name of the Lord!"

The hyperbole in Luke's Gospel confronts us to make a decision about faith for better or for worse, in good times or bad. Life is filled with choices, which are best not left to impulse or chance. When our foundations get tested, bringing us to our knees in prayer to search our souls as well as the heavens, what will be our ultimate source of hope and joy? We get confused about our roles and purpose for life. Thank God for the good role models who demonstrate faithfulness and compassion! Heroes embody a sacrificial discipline and a visionary priority beyond self-concern. Life and death do confront us with ultimate questions concerning our roles in each circumstance as seasons change. The right response declares: "Seek first the Kingdom of God, and all the true blessings of life shall be added unto you."

Amen.