

The Lessons Appointed for Use on
the

Sunday closest to September 7

Proper 18

Year C RCL



Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Psalm 1
Luke 14:25-33

The Collect

Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts; for, as you always resist the proud who confide in their own strength, so you never forsake those who make their boast of your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Moses said to all Israel the words which the Lord commanded him, “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings

and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.”

Psalm 1

Beatus vir qui non abiit

- 1 Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked, *
nor lingered in the way of sinners,
nor sat in the seats of the scornful!
- 2 Their delight is in the law of the LORD, *
and they meditate on his law day and night.
- 3 They are like trees planted by streams of water,
bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not
wither; *
everything they do shall prosper.
- 4 It is not so with the wicked; *
they are like chaff which the wind blows away.
- 5 Therefore the wicked shall not stand upright when
judgment comes, *
nor the sinner in the council of the righteous.
- 6 For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, *
but the way of the wicked is doomed.

Luke 14:25-33

Now large crowds were traveling with Jesus; and he turned and said to them, “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. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he

cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.”

SERMON

We don't like to acknowledge it, but the Bible contains some shocking things. One of the most beautiful Psalms, number 137, begins:

By the rivers of Babylon—
 there we sat down and there we wept
 when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
 we hung up our harps.
For there our captors
 asked us for songs,
 and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
 “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
How could we sing the Lord's song
 in a foreign land?

But then concludes:

O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
 Happy shall they be who pay you back
 what you have done to us!
Happy shall they be who take your little ones
 and dash them against the rock!

It's not just bronze age prophets who speak this way. Today, we have Jesus saying:

“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.

I can understand the feelings of those exiled to Babylon, the heartbreak of being separated from their country by force. I can understand how that might lead the writer of Psalm 137 to say shocking things. I can even convince myself that Bronze Age people might feel that they would be happy to dash out the brains of children, but when Jesus says something shocking, that kind of justification is much harder for me. “Hate wife and children”?? The poster child for “love your enemies” is telling me to hate my wife and children? How am I supposed to process that? Cut me a little slack here, Jesus! I’m only human!

Jesus does not cut slack, even when we want Him to. So we, in turn, find ways to read the words of Jesus in a more agreeable, less threatening way. If Jesus says something that makes us uncomfortable, we just make up our own Jesus! That's why we see uncompromising Jesus hidden behind so many convenient and well-loved easier things. *Singout Magazine* published some lyrics in 1964 that upset everyone. The song was called "Plastic Jesus". It went like this:

I don't care if it
Rains or freezes
As long as I've got my
Plastic Jesus
Ridin' on the dashboard
Of my car

Through my trials
And tribulations
And my travels
Through the nation

With my plastic Jesus
I'll go far.

Plastic Jesus, plastic Jesus
Ridin' on the dashboard of my car.
Plastic Jesus doesn't hear
'Cause he has a plastic ear
The man who invented plastic
Saved my soul.

When Jesus commands us to hate our families, He is using the strongest possible language to speak of the cost of discipleship, a cost we have negotiated, to our shame, down to a trivial level, instead embracing plastic Jesuses of our own creation. The news reported this week that Apple Computers, using a loop-hole in Irish law, only paid a tiny tax on their profits. The government now would like their 15 BILLION dollars back, please. Those sorts of shenanigans make everyone see red, but what of the sorts of shenanigans we play every

day with the cost of discipleship? Here's a horrifying exercise to play out in your own head. On a scale of one to ten, where one is “Nothing at all” and ten is “my everything”, what do you estimate your commitment to discipleship might be? Now, ask the same question of Jesus' commitment. It will do much to hush your pride.

The truth of it is that each of us is responsible for the creation of counterfeit religion – a plastic Jesus – every time we stray from the path of the commitment Jesus is showing us in these shocking words. A plastic Jesus is a caricature of Jesus that is not the real Jesus. It's the image we create in our minds – the Jesus we think we want to believe in. John Calvin wrote, “every one of us is, even from his mother's womb, a master craftsman of idols.” What he's saying is that you and I are like a plastic Jesus factory. When Jesus 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.

our first impulse is to find a way around that – to hold onto our plastic Jesus and avoid the cost of discipleship, and that is to avoid discipleship itself. In a sermon by Chip Blackshear, he said:

Many people today see Jesus in the same category as Mister Rogers – a kind, gentle moral teacher telling stories that have a good life lesson but not really requiring much on my part.

It's admirable to be a kind, gentle and moral person, but that is not what Jesus is talking about. Rather, He is speaking of the way we deceive ourselves into believing we are following Jesus when all we are really doing is being a nice person. I'm all for nice people, but Jesus did not wind up on the cross for being a nice guy.

Pastor Blackshear then reported a study by psychologist Christian Smith about American beliefs about God. He lists them as follows:

- 1. A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.**
- 2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.**
- 3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about yourself.**
- 4. God does not need to be particularly involved in your life except when He is needed to resolve a problem.**
- 5. Good people go to heaven when they die.**

In other words, many Americans believe that God's goal is to make me happy and to help out when I can't take care of things myself. Friends, that is NOT the God of the Bible. That's a made-up faith with ME as the center. That's a plastic Jesus.¹

A plastic Jesus, being made by the hands of man, is

¹ Chip Blackshear, "Plastic Jesus"

by definition an idol. Recall Moses' words of warning about following idols.

But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

It is not about acceptable behaviors. Imagining that God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other just makes of God a teacher of good behavior. God is nothing of the sort. God is the creator of all we experience and is entitled to our total commitment.

It is also not about the good guys and the bad guys. I am blessed with many, many kind, caring, delightful people who do not claim the name Christian. That does not make them bad people. Imagining that those who do not share your commitment to your faith to be villains

is the path down which ISIS has gone.

When we are tempted by our plastic Jesuses to put anything, even good things like acceptable behavior before our love of God, we are making a terrible choice and we should heed the words of Moses:

Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days..”

Can you be a kind, gentle person without claiming the name “Christian”? Of course you can. Can you be an awful person claiming the name “Christian”? Our experience teaches that you can. Can you be an awful person and still be a disciple of Christ? No, you cannot for Jesus tells us:

Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

It can never be enough to pledge allegiance to the

ideals from which our faith is formed without living them out to the very last. Even to Golgotha, church.

Even to Golgotha.

Amen

BENEDICTION

In our Scripture reading today Jesus is telling us that being a disciple is a total commitment. It is not a part-time thing. To follow Him you have to be willing to give up everything else that you love more than Him. You have to love Him more than your money or your pride or your family or even your own life.

What Jesus is saying is that being His disciple has to be the most important thing in your life. This is a radical concept for most of us, particularly in modern American culture. Our society says, “take care of number one.” Jesus says, “you’re not number one.”

Heed Him.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be
gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give
you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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