Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 4

The Scriptures seem to paint a very black and white world for us today in which we are given a stark choice and there is an up or a down escalator at the end, hanging on that choice. And while we can accede to a measure of accuracy in that depiction, it cannot be the whole story. There is more; not only has common sense suggested it to us, so does Scripture. Jesus himself turns the phrase upside down in another place when he says, “He who is not against me is for me.” And Paul will suggest in Philippians that he rejoices in the selfishly motivated preaching of some, because Christ is proclaimed.

The world simply is not as black and white as these texts make it out to be. God loves the others too, and not just when they become Christians, he loves them even now. There is a large statue of a seagull in Temple Square in Salt Lake City. It commemorates the day in 1848 when seagulls came and devoured an infestation of insects which were threatening to eat all the Mormon’s crops, food without which the Mormons would have starved. Did God, our God, the only God, really send seagulls to save them from a locust plague that first summer in the Salt Lake Valley? It could be. He does not delight in the death of any man or woman, even the Mormon. He might have worked the very miracle that day which the LDS celebrate.

Again we are forced back into the healthy distinction between objective and subjective justification.

Objective – Jesus died for the whole of humanity. His blood was shed for every human being. He loves them all.

Subjective – not all people are in that relationship with God which is called faith. Remember that in the Bible, Faith is a verb! English doesn’t have that verb. I have to tell you that I knew more than a few Mormons whose faith I would have characterized as “Christian” and I won’t be surprised to see them in heaven with me. Of course only God can make that call.

As a result we have to ask this of ourselves: Is this black and white language subjective or objective justification? When Jesus says that any who would be a disciple must hate family and his/her own life in order to attain to such discipleship, is he speaking objectively or subjectively? It could be a little of both, but it will be necessary to explicate which element is which sort of justification. In calling us to question our own discipleship, it is surely subjective. But behind that, and surely as this is embedded in the whole Gospel narrative it is implicit if not explicit, lies the objective reality. The only one who really fits this description is Jesus. He has hated even his own life, he has abandoned his mother and not been the son she needed in her old age, but passed that off to another. This description cannot be said to describe any of us, only him. That in turn empowers the very sort of self-renunciation and true worship which Jesus describes here. His sacrifice is so great that we cannot imagine putting family or self before his great deed and love. It has priority over all, what is more, He lives in us (Galatians 2:20).
What is to be gained by the stark language of our readings today? What is the good of talking this way when the black and white is not a complete picture? Much and in several ways! The sort of language which the Scriptures use today is brisk and sharp with its law. It also allows the preacher to preach a particular kind of Gospel that is much in need of hearing and which is particularly potent, especially after last week’s readings and in preparation for next week’s readings.

The Gospel is not found in the free will choice of mankind. That is a trap into which many have fallen, and not just in modern times. Peter Abelard was a medieval theologian who was prone to this as well. There is a strong theme which runs through the whole Reformation era about this very issue. Lutherans in North America have largely given up this fight; although, I believe to their detriment. Luther would say to a Christian that he is totally a slave and he is totally free. He can choose anything and his will is utterly bound. In much the same way as the law and gospel dynamic will pronounce us sinner and saint at the same moment, this second Reformation “both/and” statement has declared us to be free and slave in the same breath.

The Arminian tradition (read Methodist and Holiness bodies such as the Nazarenes and Church of God) has long rejected this theology. They would suggest that the saved are saved because they have chosen right. God’s love is extended to all, we are merely supposed to reach out and grab the feast that is before us in Christ. He has opened the door and we must walk through it, there are a thousand of pictures which get used for this and they all miss the essential point that Luther was making. The sinner is unable to make that choice. Even the choice for God, which feels like something we do, is also the act of the gracious God who has given us a free “Yes” to say. Utterly corrupted we are like the broken television. All the tuning in the world is not going result a good picture because the screen is cracked. The TV cannot choose to give you a good picture. It is bound to give you the deformed image. It is only when God has created a new life, a new heart to love, that we have a “Yes” to speak. You have to replace the broken element. The wonder of it all is that even then, we still have a “no” to speak. This is the scandal that the Arminian and the Calvinist cannot abide. God is resistable, even when he has shown his grace and mercy to people. He places a far greater value on our freely given love than any of us can imagine. He creates the “yes” on our lips, but he does not command it in power. It does in fact remain a genuine choice on our part and this is what Moses and Jesus will be speaking about today.

For the preacher the difficulty lies in keeping this sorted out. If we preach the decision, we tend to lapse into the default Metho-bapti-costalism of the American religious scene. If we preach that we are lifeless lumps of stone, we contradict plain reason and what is more we diminish the work of God. He has indeed created within us the ability to choose, it is a real choice to be made. There is legitimately an exhortation which belongs in sermons. If Moses and Jesus can exhort people to decide, I think we can too. The sermon which does not exhort but only states what God has done as if the hearer remains passive even after the Spirit of God has done his regenerative
work has forgotten the exhortative and vocative nature of the Gospel itself. Scripture records an appeal to “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ!” There is an imperative “You…” spoken to the hearer in all this. As we have earlier said, it does indeed transform the person into a wholly different sort of person, a person who wishes for something different.

Collect of the Day

O merciful Lord, You did not spare Your only Son but delivered Him up for us all. Grant us courage and strength to take up the cross and follow Him, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

In the Gospel reading Jesus enjoins us to hate our own family. Is this exactly the sort of thing that the Father does to the Son here? The ancients did not see hatred as the opposite of love or as an emotion, as we do. For them, hatred was a deed done against someone inside a relationship which already existed. You cannot hate a stranger, not really hate them. Even today people who live wisely in therapy-land will tell you that hatred is usually subverted or twisted love. We hate people we care about, not the folks who are totally strangers to us.

When we get to the petition, the collect of this day handles this nicely. Do we not ask for the very virtues which God exhibited in sending the Son? Do we ask to be like Him? Discipleship is not what we do, but it is who we are, and whom we follow. We will always be like the one whom we follow. A wise man once told me that if I worshiped a vindictive, rule making, judgmental sort of God, I would soon be vindictive myself, a rule maker, and judgmental. Conversely if I worship a God who delights in his creation, loves it and sacrifices for it, I will soon be that sort of person who delights in God’s creation, who loves it and sacrifices for it.

It takes a measure of courage and strength to take up the cross and follow Jesus. But all this is built upon the fact that God has delivered up his only Son to death on that cross and also given the courage and strength which we must have. The logical order of all this is critical. The saving act comes first, not only in time but in a logical sequence for the person. Another way to think about this is that the proclaimed word, the promise given, the forgiveness spoken, is in fact a creative word when Christians speak it to their neighbor. God speaks a “Let there be…” through us. It endows the hearer with the courage, strength, and ability to heed and obey the call.

And so all this is addressed to a merciful Lord who has treated us not as our sins deserve and he does not treat our neighbors that way either. He has in fact, in mercy sent us with that same creative word which has so blessed us. We can take up a Christian cross and bear it and the good news that it has always proclaimed to the dying, sinful, lonely, hurting, sick people of this world.

Readings

Deuteronomy 30:15-20
“For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ 13 Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ 14 But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.

15 “See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. 16 If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. 17 But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, 18 I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. 19 I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, 20 loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.”

This is the biggest Mulligan of all time – they blew it forty years ago and now they have another shot at this whole following God thing. The preacher who is playing in these waters might want to hit the reality that they will choose right and blow it anyway. This might also be used to put the whole “once saved always saved” to rest. But preaching is not about preaching against some “them” but it has to be about us. We might want to remind folks of our own confirmation vows when we read these words. We too have stood before God and spoken a vow which is very similar to what Moses calls from his people. We have promised to follow God, suffering all, even death, rather than fall away. How have you done? How have I done? How has any of us done at keeping that promise?

This might also be a great place to remind folks of the daily choice we make to drown the old Adam in our baptismal waters and be raised anew by Christ. I don’t have to say that when I get up in the morning. I can just grab the coffee and the funny papers and omit that from my day. Or I can spend a few moments in prayer and penitence, word and devotion. I rather see Moses standing on the shores of the Jordan River confirming the whole lot of them. He is asking of them the same sort of promise that we ask of a young person when we confirm them. How we will wake up in the morning is a choice, and it is a choice between life and death. At least it is a choice between the Word of Life and Doonesbury.

Is verse 17 a description of a process? Does it begin with a coldness of heart, then a closing of the ears, then some attractive thing draws me away, and finally I find myself serving, enslaved to another god. Consistently the Bible speaks of the wandering of the Israelites as a forgetting the promises/covenants of God which then leads them to the worship/and service of another god.
And does it work so slowly in the other direction as well? Did it take God 40 years to get the Egypt out of the Israelites? They had served and worshiped other gods for so long it took a while to purge. This new generation made the promise and largely keep it. It will be their grandchildren who abandoned God in this very process which is describe in verse 17.

Moses has been leading this cantankerous crew for the last forty years. He has outlasted the worst of them, leaving a whole generation except for Joshua and Caleb dead in the desert. (They say every congregation is but four funerals from a change.) This next generation has been shaped by the Exodus event in profound ways. They were children at most when they left Egypt. The vast majority would only know the wandering in the wilderness. They have woken every day to gather manna except the Sabbath when God forbid them to do so. They have drunk water from the rock which accompanied them (I Corinthians 10) and, as Paul said, that Rock was none other than Christ himself. They have been lead through the wilderness by a pillar of fire and cloud. Now, after all these wonders and more, they have finally reached their goal. They are encamped on the plains of Moab, just east of the Jordan and Moses is giving his farewell speech. He will not cross that river. He has another river to cross, the river of death. Here at the end of his long series of farewell sermons which we know as the book of Deuteronomy, he has reminded them of their past and God’s great works. He has reminded them of the Torah and commanded them to teach it to their children. Now he exhorts them to choose.

This can hardly be a decision for Jesus (or more properly Yahweh) at this point, at least in the sense meant by those who are familiar with the altar call at a Billy Graham crusade. The people have been in the crucible of the exodus for forty years. This is the choice that confronts the established Christian too, most likely the choice which confronts the folks who are sitting before you, not the folks who are golfing this Sunday or sleeping in and leisurely browsing the Internet all Sunday morning. This is a choice which confronts every generation of Christian. Will we choose life that our children may live? (I cannot fathom why they use the word “offspring” above.) Will our lives consciously and deliberately reflect the great work of God or will we be conformed to the mind of this world. This seems to be more in the line with the reasoning which Paul makes in Romans 7 or that Philemon is challenged with in the Epistle reading today.

It is a real choice which we can make because God has already called us, made us his children and established us in His kingdom. We can walk away from all that. We are all in the hands of God, but they are open hands, not a clenched fist which would crush us to keep us. If we cannot leave, he doesn’t want us to stay as slaves.

Of course we need to have this conversation because Luther and Lutherans ever since have emphasized the passive nature of the Christian in the salvation event. It is true, we are passive when it comes to the salvation event. But the effect of salvation upon the human being is that it enlivens their Spirit, regenerates them, and begins a good work which is completed on the day of Christ. This text is not about the decision to follow Jesus, but about the countless decisions which
only a follower of Jesus can make, because they have a spirit which lives and has an agency which the unbeliever does not have.

I fear that in the effort to avoid sounding like those who elevate the human decision to the essence of conversion, we have in fact ceded a much more important point when it comes to talking about the Christian life which follows the conversion moment. We are in fact decision making people, we have very important decisions to make, and we can only make them because God has chosen us. To deny that we make these decisions is in effect a denial of God’s great decision for us.

Moses seems to say that this is simple and easy. It is. We have turned God’s commandments and rules and statutes into a demand for moral perfection. But Moses’ seems to mean here not that people are morally perfect, but that they bring their failings, their fears, their anxiety, and their guilt to God. We are keeping this commandment most clearly when we kneel before God and declare our need for God’s help. “I am afraid that I won’t be able to pay the mortgage” is just as much of a confession as “I cheated on my spouse.” Both of them are asserting that we need what God has for us. Moses is urging them to bring their problems to God and to no one else. The Baals and Asherah’s will not be able to solve these problems. They will perish if they trust such false gods.

The preacher might want to consider what the commandments Moses is referring to here are. Go to Leviticus and discover that most of the covenant is about the sacrificial system in which people brought sin and thank offerings. When something went awry, including death, including hard work (harvest) or pain (childbirth) they brought a sin offering. When things went well, they brought a thank or grain offering to God. Moses is urging them to remember that all this is either God’s to fix or God’s to bless. Can we preach that?

Psalm 1

Blessed is the man
   who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
  nor stands in the way of sinners,
  nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
2   but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
       and on his law he meditates day and night.

3 He is like a tree
   planted by streams of water
that yields its fruit in its season,
   and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers.
The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
for the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

I use this psalm as an exercise in parallelism my OT classes. The Hebrew poets loved parallelism, in fact it seems to be what made poetry poetic to them. They laid two statement side by side. Sometimes they said the same thing differently, sometimes they said the opposite thing, and sometimes they progressed as they laid them side by side. All three of these sorts of parallels are found in this little psalm. The first verse is a progressing parallel – from walking, to standing, to sitting. The second verse is a parallel of the same thing, but notice how looking at it through different lenses changes the way you see it. The blessed man delights in the Law, and meditates upon it day and night. Verses 3 and 4 show us opposites standing in parallel to one another. The blessed man is like an oak with roots in a stream of living water. It endures. The wicked are like chaff that the wind blows away. Once you begin to see this, one can slow down and read these psalms as I believe they should be read, slowly and meditatively.

In terms of the themes of the day, notice that we have the choice here, notice the three levels of choosing, walking, standing and sitting. Are they gradually less active or more active? It depends on if you are thinking of a royal court. Those who walk through the king’s court are servants, those who stand are the ministers, and those who sit are the close advisors. It could be the other way around too. The one who walks in wickedness is more wicked than the one who stands in a wicked place but does not actively participate and then he is more wicked than the fellow who has merely sat passively in the presence of wickedness. I think of someone who actively pursues the wicked deed (walks) and then someone who approves but does not do it, (stands) and then someone who knows it happens, disapproves, but doesn’t do anything about it. Notice the comparison and how it is drawn out. Pay special attention to what is actually compared. This is especially important in the last verse. It is the way of the wicked that perishes, not the wicked themselves; although, one can assume that too. But their way perishes. And the way of the righteous is known to God and blessed. Is there an interesting bit of Gospel in that? Does God love the wicked too? Of course he does, we learn of that elsewhere, but does this suggest that their way is really what perishes here and not the wicked themselves?

Philemon 1-21

1 Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our beloved fellow worker 2 and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:
3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

4 I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, 5 because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, 6 and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. 7 For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

8 Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, 9 yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus— 10 I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. 11 (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me,) 12 I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. 13 I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, 14 but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. 15 For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, 16 no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

17 So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. 18 If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. 19 I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. 20 Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

21 Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. 22 At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.

23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, 24 and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Philemon is a most interesting book. It is the shortest of Paul’s letters, almost the shortest book in the whole Bible. My brother-in-law, Dr. John Nordling, actually wrote the book on this little letter. He authored the Concordia Commentary on Philemon, some four hundred pages long. That might seem a little excessive for a book which only counts 25 verses. The lengthy excursus into slavery in the Roman Empire, however, is well worth the read.

Philemon is a unique book among the letters of Paul. It is clearly written to a single individual. The letters of I Timothy and Titus have the feel of being written to be read to the congregations at their respective installation. II Timothy also has the genuine feel of a letter written to a single person, but Philemon is remarkable for its argument, occasion, and subject matter.
Philemon also has a very interesting tradition that surrounds it. There is an ancient tradition that Philemon did in fact free his runaway slave, Onesimus as Paul asks/demands in this letter. Onesimus would continue to serve with Paul until his death and after the death of Timothy, the former slave would become the second bishop of Ephesus. There he would undertake the collection of Paul’s letters, binding them into a single book which was called the Apostolicum and widely distributed. Naturally, and under the influence of the Spirit, the letter which had won his own freedom was included, but almost as an appendix, the last of the letters.

This letter is bold, in fact, when I treat this letter in my classes, my students are frequently shocked at Paul’s boldness which for them crosses over the boundary into manipulation. I use this as another illustration of the fact that while our parishes frequently claim to be “biblical” we are not reading this material in a way that actually lets our young people access it. We give them little moral stories and key life verses, but we don’t ask them to actually read the story and wrestle with its implications. We are giving them a “children’s Bible” but not the real thing. I am regularly shocked at how immature the Christian students are in my classes when it comes to reading their Bibles. Is there any wonder they think it is irrelevant?

In its argument this letter makes use of very good letter writing style of the first century. So some of this is more an issue of style, but there is a sense to this which makes us uncomfortable. Paul seems to be manipulating poor Philemon into taking the action he seeks. He says, “I don’t want to talk about the fact you owe me everything…” but didn’t he just bring it up? In rhetorical terms this is a paralipsis, a term which Paul undoubtedly knew since any educated person in the ancient world had studied rhetoric and this is a very basic concept. Politicians still do this when they say, “I don’t want to talk about my opponent’s failed marriage…” or something similar to that.

Likewise, Paul says he doesn’t want to compel Philemon so Paul can tell everyone what a good guy he is, but within that statement isn’t there an implicit threat that he will tell everyone what a monster Philemon is if he doesn’t do this? We literally have thousands of letters from the first century and this was not out of character for people to be this forward. What does this mean for what we understand about Paul and first century Christianity? It certainly was culturally conditioned, what is more, it may have done things which we cannot do. The earliest Christians, even the apostles themselves, are not always the model for us.

What I think is most interesting is what we will take away from the discussion about why we do what we do. Notice at the end that Paul says it is up to Philemon, but by the way, get the guest room ready because Paul is planning on a visit. You can believe that he wants to see his friend Onesimus and not the grave of his friend when he gets there. (Runaway slaves were regularly crucified when caught as an example to their fellow slaves not to run away.) Is this manipulative? When we do something good as a child and our mother bribed us with a cookie, was that really a good deed? Is it a good deed when our government gives us a tax break for donating to our church? Was it a good deed when Philemon released Onesimus after Paul more
or less coerced him into it, in every way but the technical sense? What does this mean for the next capital campaign my congregation conducts? What does this mean for the next time we are looking for folks to stand for offices on the Church council?

Paul seems to have been pretty much forcing Philemon, at least as much as he was able to do so from a prison cell. He was pulling out all the stops. Onesimus is “my very heart” says Paul, and then appeals to him as “an old man.” This is worthy of any Jewish mother who is trying to get her son to come and visit. Isn’t this just a little much?

Many who read this letter also stumble over the fact that Paul does not seek the elimination of the institution of slavery. In fact, he seems quite respectful of Philemon’s property owning rights over his slave. This has troubled some, but there is something really interesting in here. Many of the first century converts were in fact slaves. We have several other places in the Bible where slaves are exhorted to serve with integrity and honor. What should we learn from this? I think too often we believe we cannot serve God if we are somehow bereft of rights, our comforts, or if we are oppressed. But is that really true?

God’s blessings are not dependent upon our own circumstances. He can bless us as a slave and he can bless us as a free man. The whole African American experience of slavery bears that out. Powerful Christian traditions in North America have grown out of those slave and former slave communities. The whole Christian movement seems to have grown out of the experiences of oppressed people. Just read some of the literature coming out of the Dalit communities in India today.

In the past we thought another great sermon potential might be found in verse 17 – this is essentially a forgiveness sermon. Paul is asking Philemon to forgive and the word “partner” is same word we use for fellowship as in communion fellowship, as in the fact that we are united in the body and blood of Christ. You might preach this sermon from the perspective of Philemon and all the reasons he might give for not doing what Paul wants him to do. As a slave owner, he was under immense pressure from his peers to maintain the rigid discipline which Romans thought was essential for social order. They may have been right. If Paul’s suggestion were to have been acted upon widely the whole Roman Empire might have collapsed. It depended on slavery and the obedience of slaves.

Philemon also had a real right to execute this slave, even crucify him. It was legal, it was expected of him, it was normal. He might have done it in a prior situation and any slave owner might be expected to do it again. Slaves had to know that there were serious consequences for running away, or they would all run away.

Of course, having endured the Civil War 150 years ago and thoroughly steeped in the idea of basic human rights, we are repelled by some of this, but isn’t it really true that some of the same excuses and rationalizations for our own less savory deeds have left our own lips?
Paul is enjoining Philemon to a radical act of forgiveness. It is not just some warm fuzzy feeling, but a deed which could have serious repercussions. He might lose place and acceptance in the community of free Roman Citizens of a certain class who held slaves. He might see other slaves run away. He might be called a subversive or worse, a “slave-lover” if he did this. All the pressure Paul puts on this poor man might have been necessary to overcome some of these obstacles.

You might also bring in another very interesting idea here. Why does Onesimus go back? He had apparently escaped and gotten away with it. But he goes back, perhaps to death by crucifixion if Paul’s letter is not successful. Did Paul send him back as the letter implies? Perhaps, but I also envision a situation in which Onesimus is tormented by the guilt of what he has done. He resolves to go back and Paul says, “Wait, before you go, let me write this letter to Philemon.” I always think that changes the equation for me when we talk about the rhetoric of the letter. If Paul was really trying to save a man’s life, is any rhetoric too far?


25 Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, 26 “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. 27 Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. 28 For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? 29 Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, 30 saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’ 31 Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? 32 And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. 33 So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.

34 “Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? 35 It is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile. It is thrown away. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

And now we get to this text. What is Jesus doing to us and why does Luke keep coming back to this theme of destruction and especially familial destruction? Doesn’t he have family values? What would the commentators on Fox News say about this Gospel if they really read it? “Luke is trying to tear families apart and destroy America!” Of course the liberal left might just think this was an action plan too. I am dreading the day when in order to have a license to perform a wedding in my state I will have agree to perform weddings for homosexual couples. Recently a bakery had its license suspended here because they refused to bake a wedding cake for a lesbian couple.
I don’t know what Bill Moyers, Glen Beck, Sarah Palin, Rush Limbaugh, and the rest of that crowd might say about this, but here is my best shot at what I think we should say about it. I believe Jesus is exposing in us a tendency to bring along into his kingdom the things we think are good about us. But in truth, even at our best, we are not fit for that kingdom. Even the very best things of life cannot be brought to that realm, including our families. That is a hard thing to bear. It is not that God does not love my family, he does. It’s not that God wants me to abandon my family, he doesn’t. In truth, my family is a source of tremendous blessing to me. But my family does not meet the heavenly standard. I am not that good of a father, husband, or son.

Jesus presents us with the radical choice. The kingdom of God, the cross, is worth more to us than anything else. I pray that I won’t ever have to make that choice, but it is the claim that he makes over me. I would like to think that I can go to heaven with my family intact and the relationships with the people I love strong and secure, but the truth is that it is not guaranteed. What is more, even the best of relationships on earth, the marriage that lasts for sixty some years and is sweet and loving, is a corrupt and pale shadow of the real relationships we will have in heaven.

That is a pretty bleak sermon, however. Especially if you just leave it there.

Is there nothing more than this stark reality presented to us of God’s radical demand upon us? Jesus likens this to a man building a tower and estimating the cost or a king faced with an invasion and forced to consider his chances of victory. Jesus wants us to enter this with our eyes wide open. Jesus spoke these difficult words in the context of the person who is given to count the cost of following Jesus. Jesus made and makes a radical demand upon the hearer. He is staking a claim which takes precedent over even family and life itself. Jesus will not be displaced by my family or even my own interest in my self-preservation. If I think that I choose Jesus to be a benefit to me, I am sadly mistaken. He will claim my whole being and every relationship. That is not a bad thing, but if I demand that I have Jesus and those things on my terms, I will have a problem and my problem is with Jesus.

Let’s face it, it will be very hard to preach a sermon on the hatred of others. We can probably make the connection about hating self, self-denial. But it will be hard to do the connection with the family piece.

The preacher might want to bring into the sermon the idea of the baptismal renunciation of the Devil, all his works and all his ways. The Christian is being asked by Jesus today, not so much to hate in the sense of an active “hatred” of these things, but it is the opposite of clinging to them, the opposite of saying these things are my life itself. As much as I don’t really like it, you might just want to use The Message which speaks of how we are to let go of these things, or be willing to let go of them. If you cling to family to the exclusion of Christ, then you are engaged in the opposite of hatred here, it is an idolatrous clinging.
At the end of the reading we get this “helpful” little line about saltiness and salt and by the time we get done with this we are wondering if it really is the Gospel of the Lord. I think he is not talking about our “preserving” nature or our role as a Christian here. I have heard an interesting idea that salt in bread baking is actually there to calm the yeast down. It tempers the wilder impulses. But even that, I am not sure is the target Jesus has in mind for us here. I think he is talking about our life itself. I have usually read this little passage as a warning and a possibility. I am increasingly seeing it as a description of reality. Life is good, salt is good. If salt loses is saltiness it is worthless. Life that has lost its connection to the Source of life is likewise destined for the rubbish heap. Why are we clinging to it when it obviously is dying? It has lost its saltiness. It is only good for the garbage, throw it away already so he can re-make a new one in its place.

I am thinking, perhaps wishfully, that there is more to this. The section right before this, which falls between this and the reading for last week about the dinner banquets and inviting the poor and the lame, the section between is the parable of the king who threw the wedding feast and the invitees were too busy. The king then sends his servants out to compel people from the highways and byways into this house. Of course the verses immediately after we will see next week as the beloved parables of the lost sheep and lost coin in Luke 15.

I believe in that context that this section of Luke can be read in a Gospel way which does in fact preserve the healthy sinner/saint and free/slave dichotomies we discussed earlier. I think the key lay in the “hate” word which our translation employs. That word had a slightly stronger and more varied meaning in the ancient world. Just as love was a deed not an emotion, likewise hatred implied not a bitter emotion but a deed. This is the very thing we terrifyingly ask of our confirmation students when we confirm them. Will he or she suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from this faith? After that Christian says “yes,” we always pray. Is that because we honestly terrified at the promise we have just heard?

To hate here seems to me to give up, to surrender or to separate oneself from this thing. It was a matter of division, not emotion. In much the same way that in some places in the early church the baptized would give up their home, their money, their clothes, everything, they hated it for the sake of Christ. Then, naked and penniless, they would enter the font to be destroyed in those waters, hating even their own life. It was only upon rising up from them that their possessions would be returned to them, now to be lived for Christ. If you were unwilling to “hate” your money and give it up, you could not enter that font, nor could you spend it for Christ. You could not carry it with you into that place. In the baptismal rite today we retain a little of this. We ask the candidate or their sponsors if they renounce the devil and all his works and all his ways. It is easy to hate the devil, the deuced problem comes in the grey areas in between pure evil and good. Those are the hard choices to make.

Does this simply make much more sense if you understand that Luke is talking to a community of people who have endured or are about to endure persecution. The persecutors often posed a
gruesome choice for the Christian. They could renounce Christ or lose their families, or their families would lose them. It looks like hatred to hold to Christ in that sort of a circumstance. But Jesus is telling them that this will happen. Sometime, some of you will be forced to make this terrible choice between faith and family. When that happens, it would be best if you had estimated that cost ahead of time and made preparation for it. It is better for your wife to lose you as a martyr than to keep you as an apostate. To the world that looks like hate. To the Christian it looks very differently. Even the cross, however, looks very different to the Christian than it does to the world. I don’t think you can explain it to the world. To the Christian you probably don’t need to explain it.

Likewise we are called upon by Christ not to own anything, even my own parents and children. We are altogether too flippant with that word “my” when describing those relationships sometimes anyway, as though we “owned” them. The Christian call to obedient following of Jesus means that he has become my all. But that does not mean he takes my parents or children from me, rather, they are returned to be loved in his name. I must admit this last part is not in this text, but I think we can safely import it from the neighboring texts.

The parable of the king who throws the banquet is about God filling his heaven with people who have no claim upon that place. The servants are sent out to compel them in. The lost sheep, the lost coin are parables of emptiness and lost-ness. Of course the next parable of the prodigal son may be important here too. It is as though the one who has nothing is the one who is ready. Jesus came to raise dead people not buy drinks for the marginally alive. Even the things we love the most can come between us and God. They cannot be truly loved, not like we truly love God.

Augustine had this distinction that he made between enjoy and use. Everything in this life, including people, were to be used to enjoy God. If we truly enjoyed even people, in the same way that we enjoy God we have a serious idolatry problem.

Law

1. Our human nature loves to confuse the creature with the creator, the blessing with the one who blesses. Our broken humanity always is turned inwardly to say that all I really need is money, power, health, etc. then I could really be happy. There is only one to enjoy, and that is God.

2. That true enjoyment of God often means making the difficult choices of life. The world cannot fathom why we would not find our happiness in the accumulation of things or the building of bank accounts or even in the domestic virtues of our own home and family. All these things are good, are they not? Yes, they are good, but they are not “The Good.” This requires wisdom, a discernment we are not born with.

3. Not only are we sometimes called upon to think differently about the good things in our life, but this often is not a single great decision to make; although, it can be. For
most of us, this is a series of little choices that we may make. Sheep always get lost one blade of grass at a time. Almost no one walks off the precipice, deliberately. But we can be induced to stand a little closer to the edge, to whittle away on the branch we are standing on until it cannot support us anymore. “The tree is large; it can take a little abuse.” But when you compromise the ancient bark of a tree you present an avenue for the parasite to enter who wreaks terrible havoc.

4. Christ makes a radical demand upon us. There is no bandage solution that will result in salvation. We cannot say to him, “I would like a little cosmetic work done, touch up my vision, restore my youthful vigor, but otherwise leave me alone.” The salvation which Christ brings is the resurrection of the dead, the re-creating of the whole person who must be slain in the waters of baptism. That old man does not die easily and our whole life now becomes a living out of a rejection of him and all that he tempts us to do.

Gospel

1. The salt which has lost its saltiness is the product of Jesus creation. There is a way for salt to regain its saltiness. Jesus simply re-creates it in baptism.

2. The life which is destroyed in our baptism is also restored there. The placement of our family and loved ones into their proper place in the hierarchy of our lives, permits us to love them as we ought to love them. And to love them as is actually much healthier for them.

3. We are empowered by the working of the Holy Spirit to choose life. There is a real choice for us to make here. We can do this because Christ has raised us to live with him.

4. The old way of life is conquerable in Christ, to deny that truth is to deny the potency of our own salvation. It may be a work which is completed on the day of Christ Jesus, but to resign ourselves to living in sin’s squalor is an act of un-faith. The old Roman slave holder named Philemon probably could never have imagined freeing one of his former slaves who had run away. To do so was to invite every other slave to make a break for it. But Christ has set us free to be liberators, his whole world has changed.

Sermon Ideas

1. Lose it all…Gain it all (From the Gospel Lesson – That the hearer’s life would be salty – filled with the goodness, zest, and joy which comes from a life which is not my own, but a gift from God above, through his Son Jesus Christ.)

This sermon is addressed to the believer, not the unbeliever, at least not really. It will radically define the human being as a creature whose very existence hangs on God and
his favor. Nothing is really ours, it either belongs to God or it belongs to our foe, Satan.
In the final judgment, on the last day, who will claim my car, my house, my job, my time,
my money, or any of it? It will not be mine, no not even this body, this mind, this self that
I would think I rule and govern. None of it is mine. It is all God’s.

And none of it, not a stitch of is fit for heaven. Shall I bring my marriage to heaven? How
often haven’t I hurt my spouse with thoughtless words and deeds? We can make this
work for decades, but could it work for millennia? Hardly! Jesus speaks to our families,
to our very selves today, not that he hates them or really wants us to hate them, but if we
would love them in his place, we need to know right now that such loves have no place in
his heaven. When we claim them in that way, our enemy smiles; such “love” truly
belongs to him.

But there is another way. A way which is good and sweet, a salty life, which is not bland
and lifeless, though the world would have you think so sometimes. God has given us
family and friends, house and home, food and drink, clothing, shoes, and all that we need
to support this body and life because he loves it, and his love is necessary for it. When we
realize that all this labor is actually a gift from God, all this living we earn, is a gift from
God, all this life we spend, is a gift from God, suddenly it gets to be a lot of fun, spicy,
even an adventure. We can leave behind us the score keeping and the comparisons and
the ratings. We can live in this moment, enjoy the person we are with, give thanks for the
glass of wine we share and laugh at the events of this day, no matter what they are.

I will not take my marriage to heaven, I will be given something much better, much
deeper, closer, sweeter. I will not take this life of health and sickness to heaven, but only
health there, freely given, wholly given, and sustained by the very hand of God.

On the day of our baptism, God claimed this life, loved it, and loves it still. But most of
all he claimed and loves me and you, and makes a solemn promise to us today, that this
life is not all there is. As good as it gets, he has better.

2. Not from compulsion, but of my own accord (From the Epistle lesson – that the hearer
would believe that his/her good works, even when they are not pure of motive, are
occasions for God’s joy, His kingdom’s work, and our peace.)

This sermon wrestles with that tough question we asked in the notes for the Epistle
reading, a question whose answer is really good. Paul seems to be compelling Philemon
to give up his slave. He says he wants it willingly, but he surely puts the pressure on.

Think back to your last good deed. If it is really hard to think of one, we have to have
another conversation than this one. But if you think back to when you last did something
well, a good deed, and you really examine your motives, your thoughts, your heart, you
will find that buried in all that is your old Adam lurking. You may have helped the old
woman who lives across the street, but the old stinker within all of us was wondering if
anyone saw you, if someone would thank you, if there would be some reward, even a little stroke of thanks from the old woman herself. If it was not there, he was miffed.

Philemon helps us see something of our own lives. We never do something really good, not really good of its own merit. Even on our best days, we need the law to push us, we need the compulsion, the prod of some selfish gain.

What of such people as us? What of Philemon, what of Paul himself. We read in Romans 7 that he struggled with his own heart and hands and how they often were not at peace with one another. His salvation and ours is the same Jesus Christ who freed him from his body of death. If an apostle who wrote 25% of the NT had the struggle with this, we should not be surprised.

But here is the odd thing, though our lives are really corrupted by sin, though we often have fallen short, God is incredibly gracious and merciful. God rejoices in your good works, even when they are not pure of motive. Jesus died on a cross because you are not a good person, and he rose again to live with you today. Philemon was a business man who was probably feeling like if he showed mercy to this runaway slave he would be the laughing stock of the neighborhood and his own slaves would stop respecting him. He needed pressure to do this amazing deed. He should not have. The love of Jesus should be all we need, but consistently it is not and our good deeds are sullied by our own selfish desires. God does not reject them on that account, but loves them still.

What is more, he uses them. They become the occasion for his kingdom to come and his will eventually to work its way out. Truly we are called upon to strive for purity of motive, but we are not excused from doing anything until we have a pure motive. God calls us to do good. And he promises us that in our lives he is at work, even when we are not pure in this. God loves to see us do kind, generous, loving things, even if you are calculating.

And here is the strange little thing that he works: When we start to do good things, he often uses those things to change us. The calculating scoundrel who gives to the poor, will find that his heart is changed by that act, and the next time he gives it will be a different sort of giving, just a little bit. After a hundred such gifts he will be amazed to find that his motives are far more pure.

Perhaps you are far down that path and some of the things that you do are truly altruistic and born of a pure love of Jesus. Praise God for that. But don’t take comfort in that, take comfort in the grace of God. Even on your worst day, when you don’t have it right, he gets it right, he makes it right, he is right.

3. Forgive him for Love’s Sake (Epistle – That the Holy Spirit would empower the hearer to radical acts of servant love, especially forgiveness.)
If you have some good readers and actors in our congregation, you might just set the scene and have the encounter between Onesimus and Philemon acted out. You will need a couple of other characters to pull this off well. Tychicus was accompanying Onesimus and it is likely that members of the congregation in Colossae also came along when Onesimus delivered this letter to Paul. You could have them up in front, the preacher would set the scene and you might just have the whole letter read out-loud as part of the sermon. I would then turn to the parish ask them what they think happened next. The Bible does not say. What you will want to do is challenge them to see that God is making the same sort of radical demand upon them and their lives as well.

The world has countless excuses for us why we cannot really follow Christ in his way. It is not safe, it is not prudent, or responsible. Sometimes justice even demands that we exact the penalty from the sinner. The woman who steals bread to feed her children has committed a crime. Shall we fine her, imprison her, and starve her children? What is more, to follow in Christ’s way will make door mats of us, people will take advantage of us and we will be rotated to the bottom of the human pile.

It is true, there are no guarantees of success or even comfort in the Christian way of life. Paul was regularly beaten, imprisoned, and even sometimes left for dead. He worked long hours, was rejected and abused by the Corinthian church, and faced many opponents inside and outside the Church. But Paul was simply heeding the words of the gospel lesson today, picking up a Jesus-sized cross and following his master.

Think of poor Philemon today. His slave has run away. That was a sizeable financial loss. A young male slave like we imagine Onesimus to be must have cost him a great deal or at least could be sold for a great deal. What is more he had his other slaves to think about. What if he did not punish this runaway? Would they run away too? And then he had his place in respectable slave-owning Roman society to think about. His neighbors also had slaves, they were concerned about them running away. If he did not maintain the rigid standard which the law demanded, wouldn’t their slaves also be encouraged to run away? He might get thrown right out of the country club for this! Who would golf with him every Monday down at the Colossae Country Club (the CCC as the locals all call it.)

Then one day this stinker of a runaway, Onesimus, shows up. His name, a slave name, means “useful.” But now he has become worse than useless, he is a positive pain in the shorts. He has come trembling into Philemon’s presence holding out a letter from none other than the Apostle Paul himself, a letter addressed to Philemon, his owner and a member of the Christian community in Colossae. He is standing there with Tychicus and members of the church. They read the letter out-loud.

What would you do if you were Philemon? We are faced with similar calls to practice radical forgiveness every day and we have all the same excuses and reasons why we should be conformed to the world. Every life has its “Onesimuses” within its experience.
The world tells us that we are justified in writing them off, avoiding them, cutting them off. The world, however, does not have Jesus and so it has no way to overcome this hurt. But we have Jesus. We can walk into any conflicted situation with confidence. There is no sin in this room for which Jesus has not already died. Paul must have known this when he wrote this letter. Jesus was part of this, and he could make this happen. What will you do?

You should probably have a few situations in mind when we are apt to make excuses for our unsavory behavior.

We thought it was important to look at the way that Paul addressed this conflict. He built up Philemon, praised him, spoke well of him, and that was important and good to do. It might sound a little manipulative to us, but it really is not. He is purposefully focusing on the blessings to Philemon so he is ready to hear and listen to what Paul is about to say. This is important for opening this man’s ears which were undoubtedly closed by the cultural context in which he lived.

4. The Way of the Righteous (Psalm 1 but really a combo on all three other readings: That the Holy Spirit would call and empower the hearer to walk in the way of the righteous.)

This sermon would either start or end with the Psalm. The body of the sermon would move first through the OT reading with Moses’ call to the Israelites to choose. It would then have Jesus radicalize this call and finally have Paul’s letter to Philemon be an example of this as Paul asks Philemon to choose. Will he “hate” his old way of life – the slave owner who would kill his recaptured runaway slave? Paul’s letter seems to put some skin on Jesus’ call and Moses’ exhortation to a decision.

The Psalm will function either as a preparation to hear this progression or a reflection upon it.

The danger of this sermon is that it will be a shallow skimming over the readings. We don’t want that. The preacher will need to speak precisely and carefully, but if he prepares well and chooses his words carefully this could be really potent.

The Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

Luther perhaps gives the key to all of this. He consistently saw that the psalms need to be read as though they are the words of Christ or that Christ is the subject of all these songs. When this is the comparison and the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked is seen through the lens of his Cross, this becomes sweet Gospel and the description which progresses through the OT, Gospel, and finally the Epistle lesson becomes something other than moralizing law.