

## First Reading

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

<sup>15</sup>See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, <sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>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, <sup>20</sup>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

Psalm 1

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

## Second Reading

Philemon 1:1-21

<sup>1</sup>Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,  
To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, <sup>2</sup>to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our  
fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:  
<sup>3</sup>Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.  
<sup>4</sup>When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God <sup>5</sup>because I hear of your  
love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. <sup>6</sup>I pray that the sharing of  
your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for  
Christ. <sup>7</sup>I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because  
the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.  
<sup>8</sup>For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty,  
<sup>9</sup>yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love — and I, Paul, do this as an old  
man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. <sup>10</sup>I am appealing to you for my child,  
Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. <sup>11</sup>Formerly he was

useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. <sup>12</sup>I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. <sup>13</sup>I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; <sup>14</sup>but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. <sup>15</sup>Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, <sup>16</sup>no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother – especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

<sup>17</sup>So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. <sup>18</sup>If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. <sup>19</sup>I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. <sup>20</sup>Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. <sup>21</sup>Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

## **Gospel**

Luke 14:25-33

<sup>25</sup>Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, <sup>26</sup>"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. <sup>27</sup>Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. <sup>28</sup>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? <sup>29</sup>Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, <sup>30</sup>saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' <sup>31</sup>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? <sup>32</sup>If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. <sup>33</sup>So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

## **Come, Grow, Go**

Let us pray: Lord, send now Your Holy Spirit and enable us to worship You in Spirit and Truth, and let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen

I'd like to welcome you all this morning to Rally Day, the kick-off to our educational year. One definition of 'rally' is to "gather and inspire anew." I think that's a fitting definition, given our Sunday school theme this year of "Grow to Go: Disciples on a Mission" because we gather to be inspired; we grow to go; we become disciples in order to fulfill a mission.

I'm sure it's no accident that the lectionary reading for the day is on the "cost of discipleship." We all know that the word 'rabbi' means "teacher," but it's perhaps not as well known that the word 'disciple' means "learner" or "pupil."

Discipleship is ultimately about identity formation, learning who we are as new creations in Christ. The old is gone, it has been crucified with Christ, and, like children, we must learn our new identities, that of Christ alive in us.

Our new identity is that of a disciple, so I'd like to share with you this morning three marks of the individual disciple and how each one manifest itself collectively in the body of Christ: a disciple first comes, this is manifested in the Church as Gathered Community, then a disciple grows, this is manifested in the Church as Narrating Community, and then a disciple goes, this is manifested in the Church as Reconciling Community.

Before we can explore those marks of discipleship, though, there is one thing even more foundational. Before we can come, we must first identify our teacher.

I don't know about you, but today's Gospel lesson has always made me a little uncomfortable. Whoever does not hate his family can not be my disciple! Whoever doesn't carry his cross—keeping in mind that in the context of Roman occupation, this meant going to your death—whoever does not carry his cross can not be my disciple! Whoever doesn't give up all of his possessions can not be my disciple! Give up the things you love, the people you love and go die.

No wonder G.K. Chesterton once observed that “Christianity has not so much been tried and found wanting, as it has been found difficult and left untried.” Give up the things you love, the people you love and go die. Maybe we should put that on our marquee and watch the crowds come pouring in.

But the thing is, if we go back to the very first verse in today's lesson, we read: “Now large crowds were traveling with him.” This is a jarring incongruity to the modern media and market driven mind. Can you imagine a Nike campaign that said “Our latest shoe will pinch your toes, rub your heels and cost a lot of money”? No one would buy it, and yet people flocked to Jesus.

What was Jesus offering that was so good that people wanted to follow Him if that was His message? He was offering them nothing less than Himself. They wanted to be near Him. They wanted to hear Him. And they wanted to be like Him.

Now, to better understand this reading, let's look at the parallel passage of Matthew 10, it is recorded in verse 37 that Jesus said: “<sup>37</sup>Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me;

Right away we see that there's come qualification. Jesus tells us not to love others *more* than we love Him. In the Sermon on the Mount He says that if we are just angry at a brother or sister we will be liable to judgment. He also said that even though it was said by men of old that we should love our neighbors and hate our enemies, we should really love our enemies.

In context, then, it's clear that when Jesus tells us to hate our family he is using what the Oxford Annotated Bible calls “vigorous, vivid hyperbole.” We shouldn't love our enemies and hate our families; we should just love neither more than we love God.

The foundation of discipleship, then, is for us to recognize who is worthy of being our master and love Him above all the rest. After all, He taught us that no one can serve two masters or he'll love the one and hate the other.

Recognizing his teacher, the first mark of a disciple is he obeys his teacher's call: Come! In Matthew 11: 28, Jesus says: "28Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

If we look at the passage in Luke between last Sunday's reading and this we find the story of the great banquet. The lectionary skips this reading, but its context is crucial to understanding our Gospel lesson for today.

Here again we see the call. The host sent his slaves to those invited to tell them "Come, for everything is ready now." However, they all made excuses, some for reasons of possessions, others for reasons of relationship.

This passage comes just before our reading today and illuminates it because those originally invited to that banquet did not love God most. They did not recognize that it was their Creator inviting them, so they were not able to accurately count the cost of coming. If we count as the world counts we focus on what we give up, our possessions, or relationships, or our very lives.

If we count as God counts, we focus on what we gain. Those invited to the banquet did not see that the feast that they had been invited to was God Himself. David tells us in Psalm 34, to "Taste and see that the Lord is good." This is why large crowds followed Jesus. They knew where the real feast was to be had and they came.

If the first mark of a disciple, then, is to come, our first identity as **disciples** is that of a "gathered community." Our gathering hymn last week, "Gather Us In," proclaimed this truth: "Gather us in, the lost and forsaken; gather us in, the blind and the lame." These are the very ones who actually came for the feast. The writer of Hebrews tells us to not neglect to meet together. So first we must come individually; we must gather collectively.

The second mark of a disciple is we grow by learning.

Jesus tells us to "take up the cross." Now, going back to Matthew 11, after Jesus tells us to come unto Him, he says "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me... For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Taking up and carrying our cross is the same as taking Jesus' yoke upon us, and from the outside it may look difficult, but He promises to share it and He teach us how to carry it.

When farming with oxen, farmers always yoked a mature ox to a young, inexperienced ox. The strength of the mature bull overpowered the young bull, and the young ox learned to keep in step with the older and wiser bull. If the younger ox learns from him, it makes the burden a lot lighter and easier.

This learning, this growth, is a process. There's another analogy in Scripture to help illustrate this process.

We are adopted children of God, and as someone who has adopted children, I can tell you that this isn't a simple or painless process. Yes, legally, the adoption is "finalized"... that's the naïve word they use for it, when the judge signs the adoption papers. Likewise, the legal term used in Scripture for our salvation in Christ is justification, and though Jesus **did** accomplish that on the cross, "once for all", it doesn't eliminate the growth process.

Adoption is more like the grafting that Paul talks about in Romans 11. Jesus is the vine, and when we are adopted into His family we are grafted on. The grafted branch must grow into the vine.

Like a grafted vine we truly are "new creations in Christ;" it really is Christ who now lives in us, so we must gain knowledge of our new identity; that is, "learn of Him." Even though solitude and private prayer and study are extremely important, I would argue that God never intended this growth process to be a completely solitary experience.

Therefore, if the second mark of a disciple is a growing learner, our second identity as disciples together is that of a "narrating community." To narrate is to "relate events or experiences." It requires relationship, telling and hearing. Right here amidst our gathered community is where we tell and hear the story of God's work in our lives.

Identity formation can be described as stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. Since "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God," it is right here in church and Sunday school that we hear and tell the old, old stories and learn who we are and grow.

What does Scripture tell us about who we are? We are "children of the Living God;" we are "His workmanship created for good works in Christ;" we are "the sheep of His pasture," we are His disciples, his pupils, his students.

So, recognizing who our true Teacher is, we come to Him as a gathered community then we learn of Him as a narrating community and finally we go for Him as a reconciling community.

In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul explains the ministry of reconciliation, declaring that "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"<sup>18</sup> All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation...<sup>20</sup> So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us."

This ministry of reconciliation is nothing less than The Great Commission. One of our theme verses for the Grow to Go campaign is Jesus' last command to us. Recorded in Matthew 28: 19-20, Jesus commands us to "<sup>19</sup>Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Ambassadors go; they serve in a foreign land, and all of the Lord's disciples are aliens and strangers whose true home and treasure is elsewhere. If we are "Disciples on a Mission", that mission is to spiritually reproduce, that is, make more disciples, to teach them what we have first learned, but we must learn before we can teach; we must grow before we can go.

And further, we must remember that our going is actually an act of following. Jesus said "take up the cross and follow me." He said "follow me and I will make you fishers of men," foreshadowing at the beginning of his ministry the commission He gave at the end. In every thing He did Jesus set the example, showed us the way, and He told us that He will be with us always.

So, our going must always be following, like that young ox yoked to the older one, learning, growing, following the lead of the older, until one day we are the older ox leading, teaching, and even then Christ will be the farmer because "a disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher and the slave like the master." (Matthew 10:24-35)

If the first followers came because they saw the character of Christ, then we must be Christ for others. They must see Him in us. For that to happen we must come to him, learn of him and grow to be like him, and it will cost, but in the words of the Michael Card song, "when we say 'no' to the things of the world we open our hearts to the love of the Lord, and it's hard to imagine the freedom we find from the things we leave behind."

It will cost, but it will cost us our burdens, our failures, our disappointments. It will cost us our sin: our greed, our unkindness, our unbelief.

So count the cost, but count it as Peter, the fisherman, counted it; count it as Matthew, the tax collector, counted it, count it as the crowds traveling with Jesus counted it, and come, travel with Him, learn of Him, grow in Him, and go for Him.

Amen