

SERMON for Sunday, September 9, 2007  
Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Luke 14:25-33

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### Do I Have To?

The moment we have dreaded always comes too quickly, when we say goodbye and drive away from the college campus having left our freshman student sharing a room with a stranger, or when we say the final words of farewell to a loved parent or spouse, or when we watch our tiny child climb onto a yellow bus far too big for the little legs. And those dreaded moments can also be turning points, of signing the dotted line for a first mortgage, or a job contract...the moments of life, when we know we need to make a decision or take a step, when we need to choose even if the choice is a small one. But we are often paralyzed. And then we get swept away with the current, with the flow, with whatever is swirling around us, making no choice at all, and in so abdicating the moment, stay right where we are.

This is a beautiful morning, one that would hardly seem to be a morning of decision making, a day for anything more than cheering on the Ironmen and women, or enjoying the hot dogs and hamburgers at the church picnic in just a couple of hours, going for a bike ride or watching a football game or two. It is not a momentous day on the calendar, not a national or liturgical holiday. Why even speak this kind of language? Is this just the sermonizing blabbing of a preacher raising an issue that is of absolutely no relevance or importance to you? Is it making a drama out of simple ordinary time, a simple, ordinary Sunday morning?

This week's magazine, *Christian Century*, reviews\* a study of Stephen Prothero, professor of religious studies at Boston University. He claims that America has become a nation that is at once *deeply religious and profoundly ignorant about religion*. He says that personal belief in God remains high, and Americans say that personal convictions shape their public behavior and positions. Yet, he reports, *surveys show that the majority of Americans cannot name even one of the four gospels, only one-third know that it was Jesus who delivered the Sermon on the Mount, and 10 percent think that Joan of Arc was Noah's wife...*and that those who would call themselves devout Christians are, on average, as ignorant about the facts of Christianity as other Americans. When it comes to the knowledge of Islam and Asian religions, we are also ignorant. Here are a few of the quiz questions of Professor Prothero: *◦Name the four Gospels ◦What are the first five books of the Hebrew Bible or the Christian Old Testament? ◦God helps those who help themselves: Is this in the Bible? If so, where? ◦Name the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism ◦What is Ramadan? In what religion is it celebrated?* I will not ask for the answers, but how did you do? And why is it important? James Madison said, *A people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.* Quite apart from public life, what about a life of faith? Those Bibles that our children receive at age 3, second grade, and sixth grade are not only for them. They are reminders for all of us of the sacred story that is not only to be studied in Sunday School and Confirmation. God's loving intention from the moment of creation and God's unfolding grace comes alive in this book, we hold the Word of God in our hands so that we will be able to learn and experience the presence of the Word of God in this and every moment.

Those of you who are teachers must sometimes wonder, particularly as you face a new class of students, what impact you will have on their lives. Will they remember

you? Or, more practically, what will they remember of you? I remember in particular a high school English teacher, known for his rigorous curriculum, his rather stern demeanor, the excellence of his grammar, and hopefully, the excellence of his students. During the two years I was in Mr. Frank Ramsey's class, we not only became familiar with a large body of poetry and literature, but we memorized a few poems as well, complete with punctuation. The first, I think, was Robert Frost's classic, *The Road Not Taken*:

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler,  
long I stood And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;  
Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,  
And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.  
I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.*

Captured in his thought was the importance of those moments, even small ones on a Sunday morning.

In the gospel of Luke, the portion from chapter 14 that is our lesson for today, Jesus throws out a challenge to the ones who were gathered around him, a large crowd according to the Scripture. He says that anyone who wants to follow and be a disciple needs to set priorities. The words are harsh, *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...none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.* Do I have to, Jesus? Must I put my commitment to Jesus first? Why cannot I not just weave it in among all the other important things in my life? Education, healthy lifestyle, my children and my family, and providing food and housing for them, my career? Why would I want to give up any of that? Jesus isn't asking you to make that choice, to ignore your familial commitments and responsibilities. Jesus is not talking about family life, but about kingdom life, and what decisions we make to live and bring in the kingdom of justice and peace, the kingdom of God. Thomas à Kempis, a Roman Catholic monk of the fifteenth century, wrote in his book the *Imitation of Christ*, *Many come following Jesus who love his heavenly kingdom but few come looking forward to suffering. Many admire His miracles but few follow Him in humiliation to the cross.* Given the choice, what would we say, what would we do? It's easy, we think, for Thomas à Kempis. After all, as an ancient Roman Catholic monk, he could afford to say those bold and brave things! Not so for our far more complex and complicated lives. We excuse ourselves.

In the 1960's Millard Fuller of Alabama was the picture of the American success story. He had earned millions as head of his own marketing firm, and his potential was huge. However his life, his marriage, his integrity were falling apart as he spent more and more time achieving more and more. Finally listening to God's claim on his life, he wrestled with his mixed-up priorities. Renewing his Christian commitment, he quit his job, moved to a more modest house, and with his wife began to focus their

attention and resources on the poor and the need for housing. He founded Koinonia Farms with Clarence Jordan building homes for the poor in rural Georgia, spent time building houses in Africa. By 1976, *Habitat for Humanity* had begun. He gave up his life as he had shaped it, and it was returned to him in the shape of the cross. It perhaps looked to others that he had traded success for failure, comfort for discomfort, had ignored the needs of his own family for the needs of other families. He perhaps knew exactly what Jesus meant, exactly what it meant when we yield to the claim of God, when we open our eyes to God's justice, when we commit to Christ's mission, when we follow Christ as disciples.

What is before you this day? And what will you choose? Here is another poem for the day, this one from Roman Catholic sister Margaret Halaska:

*Imagine God standing on your front porch...  
 God knocks at my door... 'Rent is cheap,' I say.  
 'I don't want to rent. I want to buy,' says God...  
 'I might let you have a room or two.'  
 'Thanks,' says God. 'I like what I see.'  
 'I'd like to give you the whole house, but I'm not sure...'  
 'Think on it,' says God. 'I wouldn't put you out...you  
 have more space than you've ever had.'  
 'I don't understand...'  
 'I know,' says God, 'but I can't tell you about that. You'll  
 Have to discover it for yourself. That can happen only if you  
 let me have the whole house.'  
 'A bit risky,' I say.  
 'Yes,' says God, 'but try me...'*

Conventional wisdom tells us to hold tightly, to make decisions wisely, to not act irrationally, impetuously, to be careful and cautious. Jesus teaches us otherwise. Give it all up, and choose life. Martin Luther said, *Many things I have tried to grasp and have lost. That which I have placed in God's hands, I still have.*

Thanks be to God. Amen.