

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 16c  
Deuteronomy 30:15-20  
Philemon 1-21  
Luke 14:25-33

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Let's start with a simple story. A while ago I got involved in a community organization (not church-related) and there was one woman I disliked from the moment I met her – let's call her Renee. Renee was very outspoken, even bossy. I found it annoying that Renee had to have a finger in every project. She was controlling. She was a person of privilege, accustomed to throwing her weight around. She was a lot richer than me, drove a flashy car, chattered on about her perfect children. And I was personally offended by her dismissive attitude toward religion. Honestly, she pushed every one of my buttons. I decided to keep my distance from Renee.

But something interesting happened, over time. As we were thrown together in different situations, I got to know Renee better. I learned she was a survivor. She came from humble beginnings. Her brittle exterior was a kind of protective shell. And her life wasn't as perfect as it seemed – of course not, nobody's is. I came to see that Renee and I had more in common than I thought, and most important, we both cared a great deal about the organization we were helping out with. We never became close friends, but I actually grew to value Renee and respect her.

Has something like that ever happened to you? It's beautiful how relationships can be transformed when we find our common humanity and common purpose. I really see it as a sign of God's Spirit at work for transformation.

And God has an even bigger transformation in mind than overcoming personality conflicts. God wants to transform everything in our lives – in fact everything in the universe -- away from the ways of hate and sin and death, toward the ways of God's kingdom. The ways of compassion, peace, forgiveness, generosity, humility, courage, and love for enemies.

We Lutherans treasure God's unconditional love. We know we don't have to earn God's love – it's a free gift. God forgives and accepts us, just as we are, and makes us God's children forever. But there's even more good news– a wonderful invitation that comes along with God's radical acceptance. The truth is: *God accepts us just as we are, but God never wants to leave us the same.* God wants to transform us, leading us deeper into the life that truly is life, the life that truly gives life to the world.

Each of today's three scriptures reveals some kind of transformation God wants for us.

First there's the message of Deuteronomy: Choose life! When the Israelites finally reached the promised land, they stood on one side of the river looking across at their new home. Moses warned them that big choices lay ahead as they built their new community. Some choices would lead to life, others to death. They could choose life by worshipping One God and rejecting all others. They could choose life by embracing the Ten Commandments that teach how to love the Lord your God with heart, mind, soul and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. Choose life, God said, choose a God-centered path that's faithful to God, who is faithful to you.

For us, choosing life means putting God first in a very intentional and transforming way. Holding fast to God, and truly taking God's commandments to heart, doing our best to obey. Choosing life means we carefully test our choices, we say yes to what promotes goodness and health, we say a firm no to the many paths of self-destruction that tempt us. When we face a decision, we discern, we pray about it, we ask advice. We test our options against what we believe God would have us do. We don't do this because we're afraid of God – but because we value God's wisdom to transform our naturally selfish habits into loving, generous habits that create healthier human community. God wants to transform us so we choose life, for everyone.

God also wants to transform us to see all people as siblings – that's the message of Philemon. Paul wrote this little letter on behalf of a slave named Onesimus who had run away from his Christian owner. Paul asked the master Philemon not to punish the slave, but treat him with love. Even more, Paul asked him to receive the slave back as a brother in Christ. Well, this was social dynamite! It upset the rigid Roman hierarchy that determined who mattered and who didn't. Most people considered slaves non-persons, just tools of labor, possessions. But it was different in the early Christian movement. Radical human equality was the norm in Christian house churches, where *“there [was] no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female... for all are one in Christ Jesus”* (Gal 3:28). In early churches, women had equal status with men, slaves were equal to free, rich and poor mingled as peers, and strangers were welcomed for the sake of Christ. It could be one reason the early church grew as fast as it did. Oppressed people found belonging and mutual dignity in relationships that liberated everyone and made them family in Christ. Paul didn't tell Philemon what to do about his slave, but urged him to test his own heart and choose life, embrace him as a brother.

God wants to transform all human relationships so that all people are treated as siblings. What would that look like today? What would happen to the divisions that currently prevent us from recognizing each other as full human beings? Today the forces of fear and hate are intent on dividing the human family – rich from poor, white from

brown from black, citizen from newcomer, conservative from liberal, Christian from Muslim from Jew from Hindu. Dividing the human family young from old, male from female from gender-nonconforming folks. Those who don't fit the old categories are rejected, their lives even become dangerous. But in Christ's name we are called to treat all human beings as beloved siblings -- respected, cherished family members -- across all these painful divides and historical barriers that have to be reckoned with. We are able to overcome our prejudice. My interaction with Renee was just the tiniest example of how the Spirit works to bring us to common humanity. Any relationship can be a starting place for blessing. Justice grows as we test our hearts and choose life for everyone. God so deeply desires that we greet all people as siblings in a truly radical way.

Our third and final teaching today is radical too -- Jesus' words about counting the cost. It's a warning to the crowds who followed Jesus because of his spectacular miracles. A warning that there is a cost to discipleship, it's not just a lovely add-on to your life. Opposition will come. Old loyalties have to take second place when God is first. This teaching is not so much about despising or being hostile to your family -- but extricating yourself from their approval. Following Jesus, we may need to give up pleasing people, something we first learned in our families. Because not everyone is pleased when we speak up for gender justice or even racial justice. Not everyone is pleased when we put God first.

Following Jesus means embracing risk. Living our faith often does require courage, whether it's going against the crowd, or telling the truth, or investing resources in what we believe in. A lot of us don't like to rock the boat -- but we can't allow fear to rule us, especially not in these times when so much is up for grabs in our society.

I do want to say that radical discipleship begins right where we live, right now. Sometimes reading these demanding scriptures, we get the idea that our highest calling in God's eyes would be to pull up stakes and move someplace else. Leave behind your family, give up your job, sell all your stuff, move to some faraway mission field and help people who really need it. Generations of Christians have held up that ideal of holiness, of course, but in so many ways it's too easy. It's too easy -- and too destructive -- for rich Christians to see themselves as the givers, the directors, setting others straight. This approach has perpetuated racism and injustice and oppression all around the globe.

Jesus isn't urging to take off on a mission trip. No, it's trickier than that, and more rewarding. God is calling us to dive deep into the lives we've been granted to live, here and now, wherever God has planted us, and seek in every way to completely orient our lives to the way of Jesus. God is calling us, in our ordinary settings, to live as deeply as we can into Jesus' way of compassion, peace, forgiveness, generosity, humility, courage,

and love for enemies. To me that sounds even riskier than taking off on a foreign mission. But it also sounds beautiful and satisfying. It sounds like the life that truly is life.

You know, none of us can ever fully count the cost of anything we undertake. How could we possibly count the cost of becoming a parent, what it will call forth from us? How can we possibly know what it will mean for us to marry, or divorce, or take a new job, or move to a different town? Every choice has consequences. Looking ahead, we can never fully count the cost – but we ask God to give us wisdom and courage to choose life, practice sibling love for all people, and trust God's transforming Spirit. Thanks be to God. Amen.