

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
September 7, 2025 – 13 Pentecost
Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17; Luke 14:25-33
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

Today is the first Sunday in the Season of Creation. The psalm we prayed is a perfect beginning. The psalmist shares with us a glorious acknowledgment of God's power to create human life from conception to birth. We cannot comprehend the mystery of creation. The thoughts of God are beyond us. And yet this same Lord who created us knows us intimately – everything we do, all our thought and words. The psalmist says, "You [the Lord] press upon me behind and before and lay your hand upon me." In other words, God gives each of us guidance, support, and assistance. How marvelous and mysterious! Surely the Creator is worthy of our praise.

In our lesson from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, speaking for the Lord, Moses says (in the words of the Tanakh translation of the Jewish Publication Society): "I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life – if you and your offspring would live – by loving the Lord your God, heeding His commands, and holding fast to Him. For thereby you shall have life."

All of us are aware in our time of how dangerous it is to misrepresent the truth, through ignorance or malice. Terrible consequences may result. We are aware of the evils of stereotyping groups of people and how doing so may lead to division and enmity and violence. When we look down on others and regard ourselves as superior, we are not respecting the dignity of others, and we are not acknowledging that before God we are equals.

In this context I want to repeat what I said two weeks ago. Many of us have been taught some distinctions between Judaism and Christianity and between the Old and New Testaments that are misleading and unhelpful. We may have learned to think of Judaism as a religion centered on laws and strict rules about the details of human life. We may think of the "God of the Old Testament" as an angry God ready to condemn and punish people for breaking the laws and rules. We can certainly find texts in the Hebrew Bible to support these ideas. But we also find the magnificent words of the prophets trumpeting God's overarching messages to human beings: Love God. Love your neighbors as yourselves. Do justice. Love mercy. Care for the poor and needy. Walk in God's ways. Jesus taught and demonstrated these messages from God. He said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17).

To understand Jesus we must understand that he was a Jewish rabbi. The Two Great Commandments – to love God and our neighbors as ourselves – are quotations from the Hebrew Bible, not novel teachings of Jesus. He extended the meaning of walking in the ways of God in the words recorded in the Gospels, and Christians respect and revere his teaching. But we must not see Judaism as inferior to Christianity or disregard the fact that this was Jesus' religious tradition.

Now to our reading from Luke's Gospel. Our Gospel lessons in recent weeks have been quite challenging. This morning's lesson is perhaps the most challenging yet. Once again, let's remember that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and the cross. His messages are urgent and demanding, sharpened by his focus on what he is facing himself as he follows God's will.

Jesus turns to the crowd of people following him and says, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.” If we think of the word “hate” in the way we use it today – intense hostility and extreme dislike – who could choose to be Jesus’ disciple on those terms? And how can his demand be in any way aligned with the message he preached and lived throughout his ministry, to love our neighbors as ourselves?

Before we go on, we need a short lesson in ancient languages and translation. Jesus spoke a language called Aramaic, which was related to Hebrew. But the New Testament was written in Greek, so Jesus’ words recorded in the New Testament are in a language other than the one he spoke. We know that Jesus could read the Hebrew Bible. We know this because Luke reports an occasion when Jesus went to the synagogue on the Sabbath and read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, which was written in Hebrew (Luke 4:16-30). And there is a way of possibly recovering what Jesus might have said, or meant, beyond the Greek words in the Gospels. That is to look at the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (called the Septuagint) and see if the Greek word in the Gospels was used to translate a Hebrew word in the Bible. In this case, the Greek word for “hate” (*miseo*, as in misanthrope, ‘person-hater’) does translate a Hebrew word (*sana*) that sometimes means “be indifferent to, care less about” rather than absolute hate. That seems to be the sense that Jesus is conveying in his very strong statement.

So, let’s paraphrase the beginning of this morning’s lesson in light of all this information about translation. Jesus said, “Whoever comes to me and does not care less about father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, than he or she cares about me cannot be my disciple.” Jesus and our love for him must come first, but that does not mean that there is no room for others or for our love for them. In fact, our love for Jesus can inform and guide and strengthen our other loves, as long as our priorities are in proper order.

Then we hear some homely examples about being prepared. Who begins a major building project without calculating how much it will cost? Who plans to go to war without planning strategy and calculating risk? Only foolish people behave this way. Jesus warns the people following him to think ahead about what discipleship may cost. For the choice to follow Jesus will be costly, both in ways a person can foresee and in unexpected, unplanned for costs.

Finally, Jesus says, “none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” The Greek word translated “give up” means “to separate oneself from and leave behind.” Elsewhere in the New Testament the word means “say farewell” as in taking leave of someone. So, the final sentence in this morning’s lesson, following as it does from the examples Jesus just gave, would seem to mean, “Following me could cost you everything, so you had better be ready.” Jesus had just said to his followers, “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” Jesus is on the way to the cross. He knows the cost he is about to pay, and he isn’t pulling any punches when he speaks to his followers about the costs they may have to pay if they choose to follow him.

We who would follow Jesus are reminded what that choice may cost, yes, but we know also that this is the Way of Life, the way of blessedness that God desires for all of us. Amen.