

13th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 9.7.25

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

“See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. 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. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall certainly perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. 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, 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.”

Luke 14:25-33

Now large crowds were traveling with him, and he turned and said to them, “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. 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? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ 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? If he cannot, then while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions. (400)

First a word about a word: “hate.”

We hear this as animus; we likely do anyway. Hate and hatred have come to mean in our hearing animosity, loathing, revulsion, a *strong* feeling.

But in this rhetorical construction, which Jesus engaged while talking to the crowds that had come to follow him, the *large* crowds; in this biblical context where things seem often to come down to a binary choice, this or that, the one or the other but not both and certainly not a third option, “hate” indicates more the fact of that choice, that binary choice. To love is to choose this option, to hate is not to choose that option.

We see this rhetorical construction elsewhere.

Like, when Jesus said of serving God or worldly goods: “You shall love the one and hate the other, or you shall hate the one and love the other.” Because, apparently, we’re unable to serve both. It’s impossible to have two masters. You have to choose one. You have to choose *which* one.

Or like when the Lord is remembered to have said of the pair of brothers: “Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.” This, about the warring twins, one of whom ran off with the birthright and the blessing, the other of whom had to find his own way.

Or like this: Rebecca was loved, but Leah was hated. Thus says the story about these (Isaac’s) two wives, in so many words, Rebecca the bearer of those warring twin boys and Leah the bearer of a life less in the biblical spotlight. One was loved, the other “hated,”

none of which indicate the sort of feeling we’d call hate now. They’re more about a choice, a binary choice, one option of which would be left behind or less in focus in preference of the other option.

See, you have to choose this, Jesus is saying here. You have to *choose* this better way, this more life-giving habit, this acceptance of grace and practice of justice, and ultimately this way of the cross. And to choose this is not to choose all the other options, indeed to “hate” all the other options, turning away from them as ultimate, in spite of what pressure they might put on you.

Family ties are strong now, in many cases anyway. We might indeed feel a strong devotion to our children, our parents, our siblings—and we might feel this is right to feel. I know I do.

So, this binary choice that Jesus sets before us, sets before any who would listen to him, as we are this morning, as that ancient crowd did back in the day, that *large* crowd: it might sound like rather a violation, not to mention an unnecessary “either/or.” Why must we hate those whom we love in order to love Jesus and his gracious way? Why, indeed, when any such hatred might itself feel like a violation against Jesus and his gracious way? To hate at all when the whole point of what Jesus seems to be about in the world is love—love for God, love for neighbor, love even for stranger and alien in our midst, indeed love for our enemies, even our enemies: how could it be that to hate those whom we’d more naturally love is somehow to follow in the Jesus way?

Rest assured, if we think that now, it would have been all the more so thought back in the day. Really, if family ties seem tight nowadays (in some cases anyway), they were only more so in Jesus’ day. The family unit, what some would say these days is the building block of society, was even more so in the biblical world, binding in the biblical world—though the family itself would have taken a different shape, the family unit involving many more and sundry people than just the two parents and 2.5 children that make up the American Protestant ideal.

Family ties were binding back in the day—tightly binding. You *owed* it to them.

Jesus seems to be suggesting here they were too tightly binding. They could violate the freedom of the one, the God-intended liberty that a person should exercise in choosing to follow

the Jesus way rather than the dictated way of the patriarch or the coercive way of the group, the one or the mysterious many who otherwise would be in charge and whose say was final (if also tacit) no matter what.

That you should be free to choose your life, this hallmark of Americanism: this wasn't a given in the biblical world. No, indeed, even to speak in such terms, to speak in terms of one, in terms of "I" rather than "we": this also wasn't a given in the biblical world.

Remember: most of the biblical imagining comes to us in terms of "we." The people Israel, the people Judah, kingdoms and nations, the nascent church and body of Christ: the Bible mostly casts the known world in terms of a collective, a *polis*, a politics

...which is something I often, from this very pulpit, point out, feel the need to point out. Because it's an important corrective to our extreme of individualism, the extreme to which we as a society have gone in prizing the individual over and against the group,

...something you hear all the time once you begin to listen for it. From common speech to smarty-pants thinking, among all sorts of people from the staunchest classic conservative to the dippiest hippy at Burning Man, there's the assumption of the great truth of individualism. People speak in terms of "my truth." People speak of doing things "my way," indeed speak proudly of finally, at long last, doing it "my way." No smaller intellect than William F. Buckley Jr. understood the conflict between the individual and the collective as the defining struggle of his time—and it's assumed, in it being him to assert this, he a most prominent American Conservative of the 20th century, that in this struggle it'd be only right if the individual were to win out—the collective being criminal, the collective being corrupting and incapacitating. Communism, you know: its grand acts of collectivism left people behind starving on their own fertile farmland. The collective is dangerous.

Really, from Ayn Rand to the most influential "clean girl" on TikTok, there's agreement on this question (if ironically so for their all trying to get everyone in agreement on this value assumption): "I gotta be me!" this "me" to be dug out from beneath all the layers of social, relational imposition, "me" mined like a gem that I myself discover, deep down, unalloyed, unimpressed upon by any but me.

I'll tell you now, I think the whole thing is quite a bit more complicated than this either/or. I think the personal self is quite a bit more dynamic than simple self-discovery, finding that secret kernel hidden deep, though also more defiant of what we're told we are by our relationships, by our historical and place-based context and all the expectations such things bring. I

think the self is (yes) discovered as in-born but also conferred as relational and contextual, and perhaps most of all received as revelation from on-high, given by the God whose mind is on each and all, whose heart is with each and all, whose wisdom makes compassion for each and all, this God who makes, sustains, and redeems each and all, every part and particle of this interrelated entirety. There's a whole matrix that creates the one, singular, unique, never-before-been and never-to-be-repeated-again-in-all-of-history self—me, and you, and you, and you.

This question of the person, the personal being: it was a live one in the biblical imagination just as it can be found to be these days. But, where we've primed the self over and against the group, the biblical imagination nearly always has the group in mind, nearly always speaks of "we," or, when in terms of "you," intending "you all," the nation, the people.

The Psalms give us a rare chance in the Bible to think in terms of "I," these ancient poems. They speak in the first-person singular ("I") as much as they do the first-person plural ("we"). Consider the 139th Psalm, the one we used for the Call to Worship this morning. "O Lord, you have searched me and known me..."

Funny that I almost changed the lines we spoke together to speak of "we" rather than "I," wondering if it would be awkward to speak together in terms of each of us as individual.

What does it mean to say "I" in unison with others speaking of "I"?

Maybe it means just this, calling us into the tension that Jesus calls us into, "hating" those who formed us that what we might each find our own form, and that we might even decide upon the cruciform, to follow in the way of the cruciform, finding ourselves by following this one of ones, Jesus Christ. The impossible. The imperative.

We are headed to the cross. Jesus has turned his face to Jerusalem. Amidst his journey in the world, he has moved from itinerancy to determination, no longer wandering in and around Galilee but now headed to the capital city, the one that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it. It would yet take a long time, but here we go, here we are going whether or not the crowd seems to know it, the *large* crowd.

They should know it. Jesus had already spoken twice about it, and in terms not entirely vague. He'd already said twice what he would say three times, "Look, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be handed over to the gentiles, and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon. After they have flogged him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again." See, the crowds should have known. Three times would say as much. They should have known.

It just seemed so unbelievable! That someone so popular, that someone so close to the heart and concerns of the people, that someone so powerful and good, could so quickly and so decisively become a victim to collective will, the strange, person-less momentum of power.

I sometimes think these alienating imperatives that Jesus cast to this (now large) crowd and that Luke collected here are in response to the crowd having grown to become a *large* crowd. Jesus had begun to suspect people weren't understanding what they were joining up with. Jesus, noticing how popular his movement had become, suspected that people hadn't truly grokked all they were in for. They were a builder who failed truly to account for how hard it is put up a tower. They a king who decided to go to war but forgot how costly and devastating war is. They'd signed up for a ride whose ending they might have heard about but didn't really take seriously, didn't fully imagine their way in to. Following in this way was going to demand a willingness so to move, a decided willingness, not merely a riding the momentum of the crowd, the large crowd. It was going to demand an individual resilience, resilience of the sort that anyone can have but most would need to decide to have, to decide to cultivate that they might have.

I think of Tim O'Brien. A fiction writer whose stories are often about the Vietnam Era, he grew up in Minnesota, very close to the Canadian border, a young man when the draft came calling. He considered dodging, crossing into Canada. And he wrote of having thought of courage as something you only had so much of in life so you had to spend it wisely lest you be all out of it when you really need it. A practiced coward by his own admission, he came to discover that courage is something you gain in the more you spend it down. You gain in courage by practicing courage, turns out.

You gain in resilience by practicing resilience.

We are creatures of cultivation.

We are creatures of cultivation. We're not merely of nature, we're not merely the playing out of our earliest temperaments or the rediscovery of that hidden gem of our selves. We're also of culture, which we have to decide upon, we have to choose, and therefore we have to be free to choose, while also made wise so we might choose what's good. There's a circular development here. By grace we are opened to receive of grace. By goodness we are made wise to choose the good. By God calling us each by name we learn our names, the truth of them, the truth *in* them, the possibility that this utterance will match who we are.

The problem, of course, is that the choices we're to make so seldom come as binaries, one of the options being plainly a good one and one of the options being obviously bad, one of the

options clearly allowing for life and one of the options amounting to sure death—duh. Thus the problem with this rhetorical structure: life so seldom arrives in this form.

This, I imagine, was what the Law was for, the ancient law of the Hebrews, the Torah whose final words of ratification we heard today. The Law was perhaps intended to clarify things. Because, turns out, the world as God created it is bewildering. Turns out the Lord's creation, once beyond the Garden of Eden, is one of entangled good and evil. Good *and* evil: this which people now know but to so small a degree that, though we know the fact of these two, we can only seldom tell them apart. The Law would be to clear up that confusion, more clearly delineate among the entanglement. "Do this. Don't do that. Or that. Or that."

And perhaps it did "work" for a time. Perhaps it did work for a long time. But then it didn't. And injustice snuck its way in. And unequal access to resources slithered into being justified. And aggressors had their way. And power had its way. And nations fell apart. And people were dragged into exile, into lands where the Law held still less.

Just so with this rhetorical device: it works, sort of. Love the good, hate that which is not all good. Embrace what seems truth and turn away from that which binds up or enslaves or degrades. It works, as far as it goes. It's just that it doesn't go the distance.

Which distance Jesus means to prepare us for.

Which distance Jesus will nevertheless go—will go, turns out, all alone. The singleness of purpose he calls us to is one he alone can fulfill.

Which is okay. He is our savior. We follow. We fall short. We forgive. We adore.

Thanks be to God.