

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 16, September 8, 2013, dedicated to all the children and teachers as they return for the beginning of a new Christian Education year, to all the members who voted 11 years ago today (both for and against) to become an Open and Affirming Congregation, to all who have joined our fellowship since feeling the strength of an extravagant love known in Christ Jesus our Savior, and always to the Glory of God!*

## **“What God Sets in Place”**

***Dt. 30:15-20; Luke 14:25-33***

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Our two passages today come from two sermons – one by Moses and one by Jesus. And their messages clarify our purpose in life and divide us into people who choose right or wrong; good or evil; life or death and discipleship or family followership. Let me explain.

In Deuteronomy, Moses has been preaching a long time when we arrive at the 30<sup>th</sup> Chapter. In actuality, this is one of the longest sermons in history. It is certainly the longest sermon in the Bible. Moses started preaching in chapter 1 of Deuteronomy and his sermon will end in chapter 33 after two long poetic passages known as “The Song of Moses” and “The Blessing of Moses,” and several narratives telling about his death and transferring leadership to Joshua. Once these final pieces of the sermon are delivered, the 120-year-old Moses lies down and dies. From pulpit to grave - this prophet of God surely knows how to deliver people and sermons!

Here in the 30<sup>th</sup> chapter his words rise to a fevered pitch as he appeals to Israel to do the right thing, to make good choices - to choose good over evil and life over death. In the four verses building up to 30:15–20, Moses has assured God’s people that the commandments of the LORD are neither too hard nor too remote: *“No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.”* (Verses 11–14. See also Romans 10:5–8) He has told them that God’s commandments don’t exceed our human capacity to understand and perform them. We can do these things that God has set in place.

Even though the preacher Moses says these things, he doesn’t have a lot of confidence in his congregation to do the right thing. After all he has been preaching to them for 40 years – all of which have been spent wandering with them in a desert. Although it took God 10 plagues and a few weeks to get them out of Egypt, it has taken 40 years to get Egypt out of them. In the eyes of Moses (and God) “the Chosen People of God” have not always made GOOD choices. They are still stuck in a desert standing across from God’s Promised Land for a reason. Simply put, they have made a ton of bad choices. They have been “Breaking Bad” in desert time.

Can you relate to this? Have you ever made bad choices? Having been presented with all the right materials for success, have you ever fallen short of making the right choice? Have you said the wrong words to a friend, a family member or a co-worker when the right words were right beside the wrong words on your tongue? Have you done the wrong thing in relation to others? Have you made the wrong turn when the “one way” sign was staring you in the face? Have you ever ended up on a dead end street when you could have chosen a thoroughfare to life and hope?

Every single one of us has made bad choices in word and deed. We woke up and set out to choose good and we chose evil. We set out to choose life and we chose a way that looked and felt like death itself.

Conversely, many of us have made exceptionally good choices in life. We have chosen well in our choice of colleges, our spouses or life partners, our vocations and add to this our choice of a

congregation of faith that has nurtured our life affirming pathway to God. Count it as dumb luck or thoughtful decision-making – but the choices have been good.

Moses emphasizes the word **“TODAY”** throughout this passage. He knew and we know that our lives are composed of thousands of “little choices” made day in and day out across a lifetime spanning tens of thousands of days (for what is worth – we reach our first 10,000 days in our 28<sup>th</sup> year of life). How we make those thousands of choices adds up to a lifetime of choosing.

You see, Moses was a great teacher and leader. I contend (along with Eli Weisel) that he was the greatest leader in biblical history. I say this because of his delivering his people from slavery to freedom and leading them through 40 years of change. Jesus aside, Moses led his people amazingly well.

He knew that the key to life was to minimize bad choices and maximize good choices. He calls us across time for each of us to make good choices. The first and most important choice is to love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and the second great choice is like it – to love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus summarized these two central commandments in his teachings based on tried and true commandments coming out of the Old Testament.

Making such good choices will cause us to weave a beautiful tapestry of love in our lives. In the words of Quaker poet and abolitionist, John Greenleaf Whittier, *“The Tissue of Life to be, we weave with colors of our own, and in the Field of Destiny, we reap what we have sown.”*

### **Enter Jesus.**

In Luke 14, Jesus is also clarifying choices that his followers must make to be called disciples. He states his case in words that are as uncompromising as Moses’ words. He points out that those who would follow him must consider carefully the cost of discipleship. Today’s gospel reading leaves no doubt that disciples

must make a sharp break with their past, sell all, and do as the Lord commands. Grace is free, but it is not cheap.

We live in a market driven society, so it is not surprising that we feel the urge to "sell" Christianity in the marketplace of competing ideas and ways of life. Yet, when our Christian mission is shaped toward the "sell" mentality, it more often than not becomes a "low-cost" and "low-risk" commodity. How else will we persuade others to receive the faith, if not by coming in with a lower or better offer? But when we encounter Jesus in Luke 14, we wonder if our Christian faith is really a low-cost, low-risk endeavor – or if it ever can be?

Jesus clearly challenges his followers (read us) to “Count the cost” of discipleship. He 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"* (14:25). This sounds like the passage from Luke 12:51-53 (which I dodged a few weeks ago with my sermon series – the Gospel boomerang has struck!). There Jesus warns of families about being divided over his message. Because Jesus in his person and message requires those who would follow him to answer the ultimate allegiance question, it is not surprising that he may inherently bring family strife.

The language of this particular saying, however, raises concern for all of us. Jesus calls us to **hate** our families. Does Jesus really want us **to hate** our families of origin and our very lives? According to the dictionary the word “hate” is defined as *“intense hostility and aversion; distaste coupled with sustained ill will”*.

Well if that’s what Jesus is asking for — then count me out. No matter how you feel about your family this morning, do we really want to summon up intense hostility, aversion and distaste coupled with sustained ill will? I don’t think so! There may well be days when I don’t exactly like my family and life itself, but to hate my family and hate even life itself? There is no way I am going to do that Jesus!

But, is that really what he is calling for? Well, no. First, we have to read this passage noting that Jesus is using hyperbolic language as he often does in his teaching. He is calling us to be in primary allegiance with him. So it is allegiance to his way, not hatred of our families' ways at issue here.

Second, the use of "hate" in Luke reflects an idiom that comes from the Hebrew Scriptures. In Genesis 29:30-31, we hear that Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah and that Leah was "hated" by Jacob. A similar use of the Hebrew word for "hate" occurs in Moses' long sermon in Deuteronomy 21:15-17 where it is also clear that the issue is one of preference or allegiance.

So, Jesus is not calling his followers to hate their families in terms of emotional response; instead, he calls for undivided loyalty to himself above family loyalties. It is loyalty to Christ and his cause to which disciples are called. Discipleship is defined by following Jesus and "carrying the cross." This means that we give up our self interests and competing loyalties and give ourselves over to discipleship. Neither of these sayings of Jesus lends themselves to an "easy believism" or a "low-cost" form of faith. Instead, they stress the high cost of following Jesus. This is still tough stuff. For those returning from summer break, I bet you wish you came back to something easier and simpler.

If Jesus' words calling us to follow are not compelling enough, he does what he does best, and he tells two stories. The first envisions a landowner building a tower, either for storing produce or guarding land and animals (14:28-30). If the landowner has not estimated how much the tower will cost, it is possible that the project will remain unfinished due to lack of funds. The end result will be ridicule from all who see the unfinished structure.

We can relate to this parable today – as we observe the scaffolding in the chancel. Many of us in the church's leadership are concerned that we finish what we started – our building campaign, our stewardship of gifts and more. We need to make good on promises made so that we – in essence – don't end up with scaffolding in the sanctuary permanently. But this is a life lesson, too. We all have to finish what we started.

The second story is about a king who assesses the number of his troops in light of the greater number that his enemy possesses (14:31-32). If he cannot win with the number of soldiers he has, the only wise course will be to negotiate with his enemy long before they meet in battle.

As Americans, we can relate to this parable as well. As our President and Congress consider getting us into another war in a nation which borders Iraq, the questions abound – once again, have we really thought through the consequences and costs of getting into war? Have we learned nothing about charging onto the battlefield of a nation's civil war in which neither side sees themselves aligned with us or our values? Have we fully assessed that with Hezbollah one side and al-Qaeda on the other side, we have no friends in this fight? Perhaps we would do well to negotiate and not add more bombs on top of a Syrian population, which has suffered immensely and intensely.

Jesus tells these two stories to illustrate the necessity of "counting the cost" of discipleship. We have to finish what we start in the discipleship journey or we shouldn't step out on the journey at all. Following Jesus is an all or nothing proposition. The concluding summary makes the connections clear: *"None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."* (14:33; for this theme see Luke 12) Again, Jesus is saying – count the cost, consider the consequences, commit to be loyal, stick with your allegiances because you will be confronted with competing loyalties – including family, self-interest and possessions.

Jesus is demonstrating the sticker shock of following him. Do not go blithely into the marketplace of discipleship. To follow Jesus has a cost as well as a joy. It is a gift – but it is a gift with a demand. Salvation in Jesus Christ is not merely a transaction – like getting cash out of a money machine – it is a covenantal relationship that demands our heartfelt following.

**Our lives are shaped mightily by what God has set in place.**

I had this image come to mind. Imagine the world is like a concert hall filled with many instruments and many musical scores. Each of us can select our own instrument and sing our own song. And God will rejoice in the music of our souls. But the concert hall will be so much more alive with the joy of music, the more we choose to make a joyful noise together. Such choices make all the difference in the music of our lives.

May God guide your heart and soul this week to choose good, to choose life and to follow in the life giving way of Jesus. Amen.

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