

God Is Here, And We Are Loved—Is That Enough? – Judy Cox

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 1; Philemon 1:1-21; Luke 14:25-33

Have you ever heard of a “monkey trap”? Its first documented mention might be in Robert Pirsig’s classic, Zen And The Art Of Motorcycle Maintenance. He describes a hollowed-out coconut holding rice, with a hole just large enough for a monkey’s hand to go in, but not large enough for a monkey’s fist, grasping that rice, to come back out. So the monkey, his fist clenched around the rice, can’t escape, due to his own greed. In his hanging on to (or if you will, “choosing for”) that rice, he’s chosen against his freedom and his life.

In our Luke passage Jesus again appears in public. Large crowds travel with him, but only he knows where he’s headed. We’ve heard repeatedly in Luke that he’s deliberately journeying to Jerusalem and the cross, toward the shame, humiliation, suffering and death that he realizes lie ahead.

With miraculous Sabbath healings Jesus has confronted the self-honoring Pharisees, and predicted humbling for them; he calls for both inclusion and honor for the humble, specifically those crippled financially and physically. So perhaps the enthusiasm of these crowds is running high. Yet Jesus has no desire to be the latest hero-of-the-moment for those wanting to get in on this attention and honor. He bluntly puts tough, sweeping demands on any who would follow him. He’s more of a clear-eyed realist than they, and we, can handle, and ruthlessly exposes who we are.

Again we hear Jesus require that loyalty to him eclipse the obligations of family relationship. As Luke continues to show us, in his shame-and-honor based “tribal” culture this is a huge deal—and also massively offensive! We Americans focus more on individual than communal identity, but within our “family values”-oriented Christian subculture we might just begin to feel that offense. Luke keeps emphasizing and re-emphasizing it! In chapter 9 Jesus denied any prior claims of family on those wanting to follow him; in chapter 12 he spoke of families divided as adversaries because of him. Here he’s upping the ante, even to the language of hate. Scholar and preacher Fred Craddock clarifies that this Semitic expression involves “turning away from” or “detaching from,” more than our default to emotional detesting. Even so, the disciples can no longer take their identity from their families, but from the relationship to him whose disciples they are.

Given our backdrop with the Old Testament passages today, this tension from Luke escalates. In the book of Deuteronomy Moses has offered Israel, finally on the brink of the Promised Land, a choice: life or death. This passage has nothing to do with the biological, human life vs. death choice some see in it. Here the choice for life-with-God, in loyal covenant relationship, has accompanying covenantal blessing—prosperity, national growth, security, long lives, etc. In contrast, the choice for life outside that relationship, participating in the idol worship of other nations, results in death and curse for Israel. Standing in that tradition the psalmist notes that those who live in covenant, or *delight ... in the law of the LORD*, are named *the righteous*, over whose *way* the LORD will watch. Taken from the book’s title, we call this “Deuteronomistic theology” (that’s a mouthful!). If they loyally follow Yahweh, in that covenantal relationship they’ll receive blessing of health and wealth and honoring and flourishing, prospering not only

spiritually but also physically, financially, and socially. Disloyalty, however, *bowing down to other gods and serving them*, will result in death and curse. Kate Bowler, professor at Duke, expert researcher of the name-it-and-claim-it, health and wealth “prosperity gospel” movement, notes its distortion of this Deuteronomistic theology. It twists the mutually covenantal relationship between God and Israel into one of transaction—God’s people using God as a vending machine, putting in “this” to get out “that” desired blessing! Bowler unpacks the impact of prosperity theology on American Christians, even those rightly wary of it. We don’t realize, she says, how much it slides over into our expectations of what God’s blessing has to look like in our life. Given her ongoing experience managing what could quickly become terminal cancer, she’s uniquely suited to recognize this. And she bears witness herself, in the midst of deep uncertainty and suffering: “God is here, and we are loved. It is enough.”

Today we might say, sitting with both Luke and Deuteronomy, that Jesus seems to say to excited wanna-be followers: choose death!

Listen to what comes after the warning against family identity: those who do not hate *even life itself*, carrying their own cross and following Jesus, cannot be his disciples. Crucifixion is all too common as a favorite form of capital punishment under the Romans. Jesus, and the crowds, are horrifically familiar with seeing the accused carrying a heavy beam to the site where he will be crucified upon it. So Jesus uses an image that invokes deliberately detaching from life and heading towards death—creepy! Creepy like saying the Kingdom of God is like cancer! No wonder we’re tempted to slide into prosperity theology. But in the words of religion professor Lynn Japenga, “This prosperity gospel is an oxymoron that could hardly be further from these words of Jesus.” She continues: “If it is too easy and attractive to follow Jesus, maybe we do not fully understand Jesus or the gospel.”

Jesus continues discouraging wanna-be followers, with two parables demanding realistic, clear-eyed evaluation. Don’t bite off more than you can chew, or grab so much rice you trap yourself! A probably wealthy landowner needs a tower—probably as protection, to keep guard against the theft of ripening crops. He carefully compares construction expenses with his available resources beforehand. At all costs he wants to avoid the public shame and ridicule of having to leave the tower half-finished. (There’s some indication that image-conscious Pilate, the Roman governor, played out a similar scenario; Jesus’ audience might have been grinning and rolling their eyes here!) Again, in their shame-and-honor-based society public ridicule feels like ultimate pain. Better to be robbed with crops all taken, in itself a vulnerable and maybe shaming experience, than to be ridiculed!

The twinned parable starts a warring king. (The crowds do all share the experience of being subject to Rome!) Here we consider the king’s logic: can the resources of his army defeat another’s twice its size? Better to sue for peace in advance, taking the vulnerable posture of surrender, than the shame of a foolhardy bravado bringing defeat.

On the surface these parables speak good common sense! But do they really? The discerning ones both end up in a position of honesty and vulnerability. They acknowledge their lack of resources. The tower-builder would rather be robbed than leave the tower half-built; the king would rather surrender than “go down in a blaze of glory.” And isn’t deliberately accepting

vulnerability exactly what Jesus is all about? What else is the Incarnation? What else is trusting the Father enough, in the words of Philippians 2, to *become obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross?*

Luke isn't done, doesn't let us off that easily—if it feels “easy”! We try to evaluate ourselves honestly, and acknowledge our need for vulnerability. But what do we really know of vulnerability and trust? The closing verse twists this around, so that we wince even more! If I can stretch the analogy, we are trapped gluttons with fists too full of the wrong resources! Jesus continues: *So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.* Here I admit I feel him speaking directly to my own, and our culture's, besetting sin!

Very clearly, Jesus is interpreting and correcting Deuteronomistic theology. Instead of promising life, security, health and wealth, he takes them off the table. Luke's motif of the Way Jesus walks, the journey toward Jerusalem and the cross, in his sequel, Acts, becomes The Way of Christian community. Followers of The Way, as Christians are called, radically model this giving up of all their possessions. Acts 2:44-45: *All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.* Luke isn't talking just freedom from being “owned” by possessions, but literally giving them all up. All wanna-be disciples, hearing, are challenged to let The Way of the Crucified One redefine our identity and our security, as it did for the early church.

So what are the resources we need to complete our task of discipleship, to walk this Way? Or, in the language of Deuteronomy, are our go-to resources, those we hold in our hands, blessing or curse—freedom or trap? Yes, Jesus speaks here to our besetting sin. Our possessions and privilege are the resources we Americans default to, in which we find our security. They, even more than family relationships, define our American identity and security. We don't only hold them in our hands, we grasp them—how then can we hold and carry the cross to follow Jesus at the same time? Our hands are already full! If in our grasping we can't empty our hands to carry our own cross, then our privilege and wealth are curse and trap, not blessing. We don't have the right resources to follow Jesus.

Jesus, the clear-eyed realist, calls us to follow him in vulnerability and self-emptying, AND ruthlessly diagnoses what it is that keeps us from doing so. He makes us face this truth about ourselves.

But in grace he also provides us with what we need to follow this Way, the ultimate resource: himself. Yes, he takes off the table the promises of health, wealth and prosperity. And he invites us to a different Table entirely; here we pray weekly that glorious and terrifying prayer, that we might “experience anew the suffering, death and resurrection of ... Jesus Christ... Who gave His body and blood for all.” We ASK to experience his suffering and death, not only his resurrection. We who follow the Crucified One realize we mistakenly see a false dichotomy today, if we read it as a choice between choosing life or choosing death. Jesus calls us to not an either/or but a both/and. It is both death—ours following his—AND life—his own life in us.

And so we pray for the Holy Spirit to empty our grasping hands, that we can open our hands here at this Table to receive Christ. Perhaps it is only in receiving this Food, at this Table, that we can learn to say with our fellow-believer and fellow-sufferer, Kate Bowler, “God is here, and we are loved! It is enough.”