



Lectionary 23 – Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
8:15 & 11:00 am, September 4, 2016
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

[Deuteronomy 30:15-20](#); [Philemon 1-21](#); [Luke 14:25-33](#)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Upon the receipt of my first paycheck from my first job after college, I began to indulge in things like music and books. The sales pitch from the RCA Record Club enticed me with “Get 10 albums for a dollar!” (Yes, I said “albums”—obviously this was many years ago, during the time of the dinosaurs, when we listened to record albums.) But as I said, the sales pitch went like this: “Get any 10 albums for \$1, buy four more at regular club prices, then cancel your membership at any time.” The Book of the Month Club went one better, with the following offer: “Buy six books and you never have to buy anything else!” These were quite tempting offers, because their promise, set out in bold print, basically said “Join us....so you can quit.” Oh, I know their intent was to retain me as a member and keep me buying. But their advertising sounded as if membership was a rather loose and casual thing. It worked for me. I promptly joined the RCA Record Club and got my 10 albums (including this nifty set of Beethoven’s 9 symphonies), paid for a few more at regular club prices, and canceled my membership. I joined the Book of the Month Club, got six books free (including my complete and unabridged edition of 3 novels by Leon Uris—*Exodus*, *Mila 18*, and *QBVIII*), and then canceled my membership. To be honest, it’s a good thing I did cancel my memberships—in my first job, I wasn’t making enough money to finance a bunch of new records and books. And it was surprisingly easy to cancel my memberships. I did so without regret or a longing to rejoin, with little monetary investment, and with virtually no energy or time wasted.

I recalled that long-ago momentary indulgence as I studied our readings for today. And I noticed that Jesus did **not** employ the same kind of strategy as the RCA Record Club or the Book of the Month Club. Quite the contrary. The one who is head of the Church offered no glitzy advertising on glossy papyrus that states, “Follow Christ for just three months and then you can quit at any time!” When Jesus talked about discipleship in earlier chapters in Luke—when he met up with some fisherman by the sea and said, “Follow me” or came to the tax collector and said the same, he made no mention of vacation days. No contract was produced with fine print indicating how to terminate membership if desired. No partial commitment was acceptable to him. So by the time we reach this 14th chapter of Luke, Jesus is not only saying, “Follow me,” but now he’s describing the fullness of that kind of following. Being Christian is not some kind of casual discipleship. Rather, Jesus makes demands on the people who want to follow him. Unlike the RCA Record Club, which made membership sound so painless, Jesus warns the crowd in advance that, frankly, following him will not be easy.

Twice a year I oversee a set of new member classes, and I've just sent out a bunch of invitations to returning guests who seem interested in making Trinity their church home. It's always a wonderful experience getting to know these soon-to-be Trinity members. During our class time, they learn a bit about who we are, and what our mission is. In those classes, we also learn a bit about them, and discover these folks have some awesome gifts that will be a blessing in our fellowship and in the world. Of course, we only ask them to attend seven classes, and then be received as a member, and once that happens, a member—in fact, any Trinity member, new or one with years of membership—can retain membership simply by receiving Holy Communion once and offering a contribution of record once in the current or preceding year. That's from the official constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Not that we advertise membership that way: "Hey—just commune and put some money in the offering plate once in two years, and you, too, can be a member of Trinity!" No, we don't suggest that's what church membership is. Yet it is true that, for some folks, that **is** all they will offer of themselves. A casual kind of membership. For all kinds of reasons: Church activities don't fit into a busy schedule. They get out of the habit. The stresses of life take their toll. Sometimes people disagree with something the church is doing. Or what happens here doesn't seem relevant to what's happening out there. For whatever reason, people stop being an active part of the Church. And our fellowship is the lesser because their gifts, their energy, and their Christian friendship are no longer part of our collective experience. It truly doesn't take much to be considered an "official" member of the Church. But it also doesn't take much to detach yourself from the Body of Christ, and to embrace a casual discipleship.

Recall I said that Jesus makes demands on people who want to follow him, and this reading is rife with those demands. For instance, Jesus says that unless a person hates their family, he or she cannot be his disciple. Now, that sounds harsh, doesn't it? Why would Jesus suggest something like that? After all, we're familiar with what Jesus says about love. Jesus says the two great commandments are that you love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and that you love your neighbor as yourself. So when we then hear we are to hate our family, it sounds as though Jesus has just contradicted himself. He's contradicted his law of love. Well, it may be Jesus was using a popular literary device of the day—exaggeration. Certainly those around him, and Luke's audience, too, would have realized this. The literary technique of exaggeration was intended to show the overriding importance of placing God first as the most important relationship in our lives. In effect, Jesus was saying, "Love God so much, and follow me in God's kingdom ways with such single-minded devotion, that by comparison, it will be as if you hate everything else."

I admit, however, that the idea that this is simply a literary device is not the fullest explanation. Maybe we are remiss if we try to soften the word "hate" here. When Jesus says to hate those things, and love God above everything else, he could be saying that by our loving God above everything else, you and I might just find ourselves in **conflict** with everything else. There is tension and conflict inherent in being a disciple.

Look at Paul. Our second lesson is a prime example of living in conflict. Paul is dealing with a situation regarding a slave named Onesimus. Slavery was permitted during Paul's time, yet slaves were also becoming Christ-followers alongside their masters. And apparently, Onesimus has some real gifts as a disciple of Jesus. Paul has found him most helpful. He considers Onesimus his friend as well. So suddenly Paul realizes he no longer

considers Onesimus a slave, but instead a fellow worker in the ministry, and a baptized child of God. You can almost see how Paul's own mind has been thrown into a tizzy, and conflicted, as he welcomes a slave beside him in the work of sharing the Gospel.

And while Paul does not try single-handedly to dismantle the Roman Empire's entire economic system of slavery, he does take this one little corner of the world, and embrace the conflict there appears to be between the Good News of Jesus which frees, and the institution of slavery which binds. Then Paul brings that conflict into another person's life—Philemon. Paul appeals to Philemon to embrace the conflict as well. Remember: Loving God above everything else may just put you into conflict with everything else. Paul knows that. He dares to suggest to Philemon that Onesimus is more beneficial as a fellow worker in the kingdom of God than he ever was as a slave. Paul doesn't demand, but he does encourage Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother. And then consider whether he might even treat him not just as a brother but free him from slavery once and for all.

Like Paul, faithfully following Jesus may move us into conflict with those persons we know well and love dearly, such as our most important relationships. And discipleship may move us into conflict with those things we know well and love dearly, such as our most treasured ideas and possessions. And we will have to decide. We will have a choice to make.

Hmmm. Discipleship is not so simple as it may first appear. Membership in Christ's Church is not intended to be a casual foray into the faith, without risk and without investment. There are choices to be made, and a potential cost involved, and Jesus is clear that we need to be prepared for that. Hence the story Jesus goes on to tell about the man who attempts to build a tower but does not have enough supplies to complete it. And the story about the king ready to wage war, but who first meets with his trusted advisors to determine whether he has enough soldiers to face the enemy. Because once you go into battle, there's no turning back. Jesus is saying here, "I'm not the Book of the Month Club. I offer no glitzy come-on and an easy way to back out. I'm telling you right up front what being my disciple requires."

The cost of following Jesus will be paid in different kinds of currency. For some of us here it will be a choice about how we direct our income from something that serves ourselves to something that serves others. For others of us it will mean choosing to love and forgive someone who really hurt us. For still others of us it will be a choice to spend more time in study and prayer in order to listen to God's call to us. Some of these will be hard choices to make, and we will need all of God's strength and guidance to help us.

But our Lord asks no more of us than he asks of himself. Jesus didn't go halfway to the cross and say, "Whoa. I think I'll turn around. I've changed my mind. Cancel my membership." No, Jesus counted the cost of his journey to Jerusalem; he made his choice; and decided that giving you and me new life in the kingdom was worth the cost. **AMEN.**

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