

Sermon – Luke 14:25-33; Philemon 1-21
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Grace Lutheran Church
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“On the Basis of Love”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. When I left Grace this past Wednesday, all of my relationships were normal and intact. Thursday, however, everything changed. As I walked through the building, I was met with sidelong glances and hushed mutterings. People pointed and sneered. A few even booed me. One schoolchild’s father even said, “Man, that’s messed up.” I don’t really know why. I mean, all I did was dress up for Chicago Bears Spirit Day at Grace! (Put on Packers hat.) This one, simple change turned my relationships upside down. Of course, it was all in good fun – we’re all on the same team at Grace. I won’t even talk about the outcome of the game. And honestly, friends, I didn’t even want to do this today. I tried to stop myself; I really did. But in the grand tradition of the Apostle Paul, “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” I suppose I’m just a sinner in need of grace. The wondrous thing is, this grace will change my life – and not just my personal life, as if such a thing even exists – but my life in relationship to everyone around me. Grace will change my life and relationships more than this hat ever could, and in better ways, too!
2. The passages of scripture set before us today all point to the radical transformation that God’s will imposes upon God’s people, first through the chosen relationship with Israel, then through the Christ-centered expansion of that relationship through the gospel. As they prepare to enter the Promised Land, the Lord speaks to his people: “See, I have set before you

today life and prosperity, death and adversity . . . I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.” The entry into the Promised Land is a recapitulation of the creation story in which God’s people are free to choose. But they, like us and all people everywhere, fall into sin. Given the chance to choose life and prosperity for all, they instead choose death and adversity by seeking life and prosperity only for themselves as individuals and, perhaps, for those closest to them. In heaping up prosperity for themselves, they heap cursed adversity upon others. And the whole thing falls apart, because adversity, curse, and death for some ultimately means an absence of blessing, prosperity, and life for all. The promise of the Promised Land founders on the rocky shoals of human sin.

3. The work of Jesus Christ is radical in the true sense of the word. The gospel is a return to the roots of God’s original intent for us and for all creation. The gospel is also, of course, entirely new; new in the sense that such an intention was never before fulfilled and can only find fruition in the person and work of Jesus Christ. And so here comes Jesus with words of hope and comfort (ahem): “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.” And, for good measure, “None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” These are hard words, no doubt. Give away everything? Hate those closest to me? Despise my own life? The hardness of these words is met by the hardness of Christ’s cross, and that is why grace, as the German martyr-theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us, is costly. The free grace given by God in Christ is costly first because it costs Jesus everything: relationships, possessions, life. And it is costly because it demands everything of us; it costs us *our* lives. Jesus speaks words of hate and issues commands to give away our possessions because, after all, you can’t take it with you. When Jesus calls us to follow, he bids us come and die.

In following him to his cross, we find ourselves dying to sin, to the devil and his forces of evil, to the power of death itself. We must first renounce, let go of, everything that makes this life pleasing. We have to let it go, and then let ourselves go under the waters of the baptismal flood, so that in dying we may live. And in life, our possessions, our relationships, our very life is regifted to us. We are remade cruciform, cross-shaped, realigned to God's ancient yet not-until-now realized intention. "Grace," Bonhoeffer writes, "is costly because it forces people under the yoke of following Jesus Christ; it is grace when Jesus says, 'My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'"

4. In calling us to discipleship, to costly following, we are convicted. We cannot take up even the light burden of Christ's command without faltering and falling. We are driven ever and always back to the cross and the grace given there. But what if Jesus nevertheless means what he says? What if this isn't language only to convict, hyperbole to drive home a point? What if Jesus is serious? To be sure, Jesus does not intend us to hate; nor does Jesus imagine that we can all give away everything we own and live without sustenance in a flesh-and-blood world. But this does not soften or dilute our Savior's words. For Jesus has led us to the Promised Land; as God had long ago, so now Jesus has done everything necessary for our deliverance and freedom. We stand in newness of life on the threshold of a new world. Will we choose life and blessing and prosperity, or fall back into the old ways of death and curse and adversity? We choose life only when we renounce our relationships and receive them back again with Christ in between ourselves and the other; and, further, when we receive those whom Jesus insists we accept as our sisters and brothers. We choose life only when we let go of what we own; when we, to go back to Bonhoeffer, have what we have as if we didn't have it. Then we can see that everything we have has been entrusted to us so that we can work for the well-being of our neighbor. Following Jesus, even imperfectly, will always gently lead us back to grace. It will also be the springboard for us to jump back to God's original plan of abundant life for all.

5. We see this play out in ways both costly and graceful in Paul's letter to Philemon, which we read almost in its entirety this morning. Philemon, you see, was a slaveowner. His slave, Onesimus, had run away to an imprisoned Paul. Paul, caring for both Onesimus and for Philemon, dares not suggest a return to the previous *status quo*, but invites them both into God's old, new future, into the Christ-centered Kingdom. Paul knows that he could claim apostolic authority and demand that Philemon receive Onesimus back, without punishment, with freedom. Paul goes so far as to mention that he won't mention that Philemon owes his salvation to Paul's ministry (which is sort of like me mentioning that I won't mention that the Packers beat the Bears, in that it's exactly the same thing as mentioning it), but Paul nevertheless urges Philemon to act *only on the basis of love*, not out of systems of power and authority. To welcome Onesimus home as he would welcome a beloved brother. Not as property to be punished and retained. Not even as a forgiven slave. Not even yet as a free but lesser person. No, as a brother. The grace Philemon has received costs him. He's out a slave, a piece of human property. But he's gained a human brother, and in so doing anticipates the world that is to come, here and now. Systems and structures are undone, and it is costly to some, but it is a blessing of life for all. If Philemon can manage to let go of the old ways of life that were really the ways of death, he can live life on the other side of the grave, here and now, in this world.

6. We sometimes call this first Sunday after Labor Day "Rally Day". It's not a liturgical observation but is rather tied to the rhythms of our daily lives. And so we stand on the threshold of a new year of mission and ministry. What if today we choose to take Jesus seriously? You have been given grace to do so. Christ has died, yes, and been raised to set you free. And that gift is free in every sense of the word. But's it going to cost you. So today, having already died, choose life. Relinquish your claims on others. Have what you have as if

you didn't, so that you can use everything for God's purposes. Seek blessings and prosperity for all. Take up your cross and follow Christ, out of death and into life. Jesus invites you, and he really means it. Follow Jesus into the only life that is really life. You have died in Jesus' death. Now he welcomes you into his lightly yoked life. Follow Jesus, and watch as he changes everything. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.