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

The Battle of Gallipoli was a campaign of WWI that took place on the Gallipoli peninsula in what is now Turkey, but which was then part of the Ottoman Empire. The peninsula forms the northern bank of the Dardanelles, a strait that provided maritime access between the Russian Empire and its fellow Allied Forces in WWI. So, with the intention of securing this strait, Great Britain and France, the Russian allies, launched first a naval attack and then an amphibious landing on the peninsula. Their hope was to capture the capital of the Ottomans, Constantinople, what is now Istanbul.

The Ottomans were able to defeat the naval attack. And finally, after eight and a half long months of fighting, with heavy casualties on both sides, the British and the French abandoned the land campaign and withdrew their forces to Egypt. Gallipoli became one of the Ottoman Empire's greatest victories and it was a defining moment for the future nation of Turkey. But it came at a huge cost to both sides. Approximately 252,000, or 44% of the 568,000 allied forces were killed. The toll for the Ottoman forces, supported by both the Austro-Hungarian and German Empires, was even higher – loss estimates range between 69% and 80% of the 315,500 Ottoman troops. It was one of the bloodiest battles of WWI.

“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?” What king indeed? We human beings are not near as good at sending delegations and arriving at peace treaties as we are at slaughtering one another. We are not so good at sitting down and thinking about what something is truly going to cost us. Maybe that's exactly Jesus' point. He's not advocating building bigger and stronger armies; he's illustrating the folly of embarking on a venture without being sure that one can see it through. Counting the cost of something brings us to the point of clarity and decisiveness; it helps us to see.

All of today's lessons are about making a choice (and essentially counting the cost of that choice) – choosing life over death, choosing God/Jesus over the ways of the world. In Deuteronomy, we hear Moses' final charge to the people of Israel. There are two ways, he explains to them. It's really simple: life or death, prosperity or adversity. “Choose life!” he tells them. To choose life is to love the Lord your God, and loving God means following the pattern of life which God has revealed. To choose death is to give no heed to God, to serve or honor other gods and other values. Renounce the things that turn your hearts and lead you astray from God. Choose life because that's what God wants for you, Moses says.

The psalmist agrees and tells us what life is like when we choose God, as well as what life (or actually death) is like when we choose otherwise. Choosing life means constant renewal and refreshment, fruitfulness and thriving. On the other hand, choosing the things of this world and not following God make one like the living dead – dry and barren, crippled and stifled.

Then we get to Paul's letter to Philemon. It's a wonderful, personal letter in Paul's own hand to a dear friend and co-worker, one who has apparently been a leader in the church. Paul essentially offers Philemon the same choice – life or death. Life for Philemon means living into the Gospel, opening himself up to a new relationship with the man who was formerly his slave, and accepting Onesimus as

his brother in Christ. On the other hand, death is disregarding this opportunity and following what the world says he should do with this slave who ran away. Does Philemon have a lot to lose in his reputation among his peers? Probably. Does he have a lot to gain by welcoming Onesimus as a brother? Absolutely.

The passage from Luke's Gospel is another one of those passages, like last week, where it is nearly impossible to take it at face value or literally. But just like last week, does Jesus mean what he says? Emphatically yes. Notice that today's passage begins with describing the crowds that are now following Jesus from village to village. Most of them are probably not disciples. Jesus probably hasn't *called* any of them. The crowds have heard what Jesus has been preaching, and they have seen the miracles that he has done, and they want a piece of the action. But Jesus makes it clear that he is not interested in tag-alongs or casual observers. Jesus wants disciples who embody the reality of what they claim. As one writer has put it, "to follow Jesus is not just cupcakes and cumbayas." [*Harry K. Ohmig, Synthesis Sep. 9, 2001*].

Jesus wants to be sure that everyone is clear on what discipleship looks like. It is not about misery or some incredible price that one must pay to be a follower. Jesus' point is simply that unless the people who want to follow him clearly see that what they receive in following Jesus is so far over and above everything else that might be valued, they can't truly succeed in being Jesus' disciples. To follow Jesus means a whole new center of gravity, a new orientation to the world as well as to God. To follow Jesus means to renounce the ways of the world that rely on domination and competition. To follow Jesus means to embrace God first, before family, before self-preservation, before pleasure, before any of our attachments to this world, be they objects or intangible things such status or security or power.

Jesus' words are harsh. They do not fit into the protocol for Dale Carnegie's "How to Win Friends and Influence People." They do not fit into what all the church growth consultants say a parish should be like – safe, caring, welcoming. Jesus' words repel rather than attract. Jesus doesn't make it easy for people to want to follow him, precisely because it isn't easy to *really* follow him.

Since this is election season, let's imagine a politician standing on a dais somewhere addressing a crowd. N. T. Wright, British bishop and author, suggests that he or she might sound like this: "If you're going to vote for me, you're voting to lose your homes and families; you're asking for higher taxes and lower wages; you're deciding in favor of losing all you love best! So come on, who's on my side???" Chances are, the audience will be so bumfuzzled by this that they won't even heckle or throw tomatoes. Whoever heard of a politician winning with that kind of platform?

N. T. Wright says that that is really pretty much what Jesus is doing and saying. "Want to learn to be my disciples? Well, you'll have to be willing to hate your family and loved ones, to give up everything else that has meaning for you and to get ready for a nasty death." Hmm. Not a great sales pitch. At least by the world's standards. But then Wright suggests we reframe it from the political spectrum to that of a leader of an expedition.

What if this expedition involves forging a path through a high and dangerous mountain pass in order to bring urgent medical aid to villagers who have been cut off from the world by say, an earthquake? "If you want to come any further," the leader says, "you'll have to leave your packs behind. From here on, the path is too steep and narrow to carry all that stuff. You probably won't find it again. And you'd better send your last emails and texts home. This is a very dangerous route and it's likely that several of us won't make it back." *That*, Wright says, makes it understandable. We might not

like the sound of it, and we may choose to turn back, but it does at least make sense. Jesus is more like the leader of that expedition. He's not trying to win popularity votes; he's on an urgent mission.

Christianity is very often identified with so-called family values, so it surprises us, and perhaps confuses us, to hear Jesus tell us that we have to hate our parents and our siblings and even ourselves. But to read or to hear this passage and think that Jesus is commanding literal hatred of one's family is to miss the point and to mishear the rhetoric. Most scholars think that Jesus is using his words in such a way, in a Semitic figure of speech, that his listeners, the crowd, understand that he means the opposite. In Jesus' world, a preference is stated by pairing two things with love and hate. It doesn't have anything to do with emotions; it's a matter of priorities. If Jesus were to say that he loves ice cream and hates cake, it would not actually mean that he is unreceptive towards cake, it would simply mean that ice cream is his first choice.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and he knows what awaits him there. He knows that this is a difficult road to travel. He knows that a lot of people like the *idea* of being a disciple, but not so many like the *work* of being a disciple. Jesus also knows that this journey is as much about letting go of possessions as it is letting go of being possessed by them. As long as the world persecutes those who try to transform it, those who are trying to change it will pay a high price. The demands of discipleship, of following Jesus, are great and they demand radical changes in our lives. Discipleship costs all that we are and all that we have. That is not because God demands it but because the world does. There can be no competing loyalties. The cost of discipleship is paid in many different currencies. For some people, it might mean a reorientation of time and energy. For others, such as Philemon, it may mean a change in relationships. Or a change in vocation, or a commitment of financial resources. The cost of discipleship is all consuming. Choose life, Moses and the psalmist and Paul say. Choose life, Jesus says. Jesus is telling the crowd and us that we are liable to lose a lot if we choose to follow him, but what we will gain is immeasurably greater.

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