

No Free Lunch

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33 Psalm 1 9-9-07

There is an old song from India that sings:

*I have decided to follow Jesus,
I have decided to follow Jesus.
I have decided to follow Jesus--
No turning back, no turning back.*

*Though no one join me, still I will follow,
Though no one join me, still I will follow,
Though no one join me, still I will follow—
No turning back, no turning back.*

*The world behind me, the cross before me,
The world behind me, the cross before me,
The world behind me, the cross before me—
No turning back, no turning back.*

This song is very simple and very perky and is one we could imagine catching people up in its easy patter as they sing out to express what their faith means to them. But faith needs to go a little deeper than the emotions caught up in a song. Many have said that is why “the doors of New England meetinghouses are so high, so that worshippers can bring in their heads as well as their hearts.”

Jesus, in the Gospel of Luke, might have been addressing a group of people caught up by emotion and need and even singing such a simple little song. His words seem a little harsh reminding them that following his new way of life might set family members against one another and that such a pathway would cost them much. He cautioned them to count the cost of following in his footsteps before they even started out, for the cost would be great. It would mean leaving the lives they knew for a way they did not know. There was going to be “no free lunch” if they decided to sign on to this new movement. They needed to really think about what their decision would mean to themselves and to everyone around them.

Most of us here, if not all of us, have been born into Christianity—it is the only way we have known to reach up and become a little closer to God while we try to learn how to reach out to our fellow humans. Our families have traditions of following the Christian faith—sometimes in a rather loose way and sometimes in a more structured environment. Many have been regular church-goers while some have been rather sporadic. When people tell me why they have been away from the church, I remind them, “God always knows just where we are and what we are up to.” I tell them this because some Sunday school teacher, at some time, told me this. She must have told me often, because it stuck in my mind making me, at times, a rather dull girl.

I went into the ministry late in life, as you know. I was thirty-seven before I entered seminary following two years of counting and considering what the decision could cost me. We do not have a structured process of discernment as Continuing Congregationalists. There are no boards or committees we work with to determine whether what we sense as a call to ministry is valid,

and whether or not we are suited to become pastors. We struggle alone. And, if we have been tapped on the shoulder by God, it is a struggle. But, after time, we discover that resistance is futile, there is no other way for us to go. There is no way out. The cost is always high when people are called into such a public life. It means that we must lose our old way of life. And, even more than that, we must lose ourselves.

And that was what Jesus was telling all of us. That not only the old way of life we have been living must be set aside, but also our ego-driven, self-seeking selves. That hymn we sang a few minutes ago, “Here I Am Lord, is it, I Lord, I have heard you calling in the night,” has echoed through the ages as those chronicled in the pages of the Hebrew Bible and in our New Testament have learned.

The entire nation of Israel was called as God’s “chosen people.” In Deuteronomy we saw God telling those people God wanted them, but there would be a cost. If they chose the way of God they would choose to observe and keep God’s rules and regulations. If they did not, they would perish. Choosing God meant choosing life—Israel was encouraged to do so by a God who loved them. The history of that nation shows what a struggle it was for them to give up their own desires to fully become God’s people.

It is a struggle for individuals as well as nations. The little story of Onesimus, the runaway slave, that is told in Paul’s letter to Philemon, reveals the effort the apostle undertook to restore a right relationship between a master and his servant. Paul is telling Philemon to act in love and to receive his slave into a better position, that of brother or child. We do not know what happened. There was possibly a real struggle on the master’s part to change his way of thinking and give up an old pattern in life in regard to his slave. We can only hope that Philemon heard Paul’s message and welcomed the runaway back, much as the father, in another well-known story, welcomed back his prodigal son.

The message for us and the way of life that lies before us is very clear from this morning’s readings. It was very clear to Dietrich Bonhoeffer who said that “When Jesus calls us to follow him, he bids us to come and die.” That was The Cost of Discipleship to him--to let go of what has tied us to past ways of looking at the world and living our lives. The cost is great for those who choose to do so for the path keeps leading us deeper and deeper into life. It requires us to get our hands dirty in ministry, never wanting to turn back.

We get awfully tired at times, you and I, trying to help people struggle with life and find the path to fuller ways of living. We doubt that we are doing anyone any good. But then, there is a tiny inch of movement. Tiny but powerful. It is a tiny inch of encouragement, a tiny reminder of the goodness and God-ness that dwells within each and every human. That tiny little bit keeps us going, keeps us struggling when we have “decided to follow Jesus” and even when we learn that there is “no free lunch.”

Sometimes we may feel that the price we have to pay is just too much, but there is that tiny inch of movement on which another inch may be built. And there is hope—a flicker of hope. A candle in the darkness that leads us forward so that we may boldly sing: “Here I am Lord, is it I Lord? I have heard you calling in the night. I will go, Lord, if you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart.” Amen