

Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

'I have set before you today life and good, death and evil.'

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The liberal theologians of the past enjoyed noting that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament, that is, Christ, are so very different. Usually they prefer the Christ of the New to the God of the Old, arguing that the God of the Old was demanding, tight-fisted, merciless, occasionally cruel, and most surely not a God of love.

This they contrast to the Christ of the New, who healed the lame and gave sight to the blind; who preached many beatitudes and blessings to the poor, the weak, the persecuted, and brought just criticism to the powerful; who cast out the money changers from the temple, but forgave and welcomed the woman caught in adultery; the tax collector, the prostitute. This Christ was surely not a God that quibbled over details of the Law, seeing where we may stumble, that He may condemn us; rather He was most surely a God of love.

This is not a new idea. In fact it is the earliest of all Christian heresies. For this idea, that the Old God and the New Christ are completely different, the Old cold and demanding, the New merciful and loving, goes by many names: Marcionism, Manichaeism, Docetism, Gnosticism. Even in the Bible itself, it is mentioned in the book of Revelation as Nicholaitonism. It is a heresy so old that even St. John the Apostle had to condemn it.

Yet many of us, who like to think of ourselves as orthodox, or at least not particularly heretical, quietly entertain this way of thinking. The God of the Old Testament did things like call down plagues on Egypt and strike men dead for touching the Ark of the Covenant. The Christ of the New Testament calls down blessings on the needy, and heals those who merely touch the hem of His

garment.

But this way of thinking is a falsehood born of the same problem that plagues cable news: we pick our stories. And having picked out stories, we weave a narrative, which may or may not have anything to do with the truth.

God spoke to the people of Israel in the wilderness, and offered them what seems a simple deal, an agreement: follow my reasonable commandments, and you will receive good land, great wealth, good children, *life and good*. Reject God and his commandments, and you will receive *evil and death*.

After all the Israelites had been through, this seemed a good deal indeed. Follow some house rules, so to speak, and inherit the house. There is nothing more reasonable, or for that matter, more generous than that. And this from the once-thought surly God of Old, who was never so surly, so miserly, so unkind at all, but gave everything to a homeless people that would thank Him for nothing.

Now the Christ of the New speaks.' *If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.*' For *'which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it?'* And again, *'what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace.'*

He says this, strangely, to discourage people from following Him, for He saw that *great crowds accompanied Him*.

No longer is it the God of the Old that seems unkind and unreasonable, but the Christ of the New.

After all, this is church; Christianity. We uphold family values, eating around the dinner table, respect for elders, and kindness to all, including ourselves. Yet Christ Himself calls us to *hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and yes, our own life*. And as if to explain this seemingly tyrannical demand, He gives two parables, one of a man who should make sure he has

enough money to complete a tower before building it, another of a king who should make sure he has enough men to fight a war before fighting it. So, it seems, Jesus is saying, 'make sure you have enough hate for your family, your friends, your life, and this world before following me.'

Many attempts have been made to soften the words of our Lord. They say He is exaggerating for rhetorical effect or that He is really saying one *must be willing to hate father and mother and sister and brother*. Or they say that 'hate' does not mean 'hate' but merely to make such people in your life second to God, which is quite reasonable, since second to only God is a good place to be. But why soften what He has made harsh?

No, Christ demands that we *hate father and mother* even as in days of old He commanded that we *honor thy father and thy mother*. Now it seems again there are two Gods, the Old and the New, though this time, the Old seems the kinder, the New the cruel. How can this be, unless we accept the oldest heresy of the Church, though in a much darker way?

But no, there are not two Gods, but one God. And there are not two words, but one Word. For both in our reading from Deuteronomy and our reading from Luke, what God is doing, in the first case in a promising way, and in the second in a forbidding way, is inviting. God is inviting His people to be with Him at all costs.

If a pathfinder leading one trip were to say to his customers 'this trail is easy, and the distance short' and say of another trip elsewhere 'this trail is dangerous, and the distance long' in neither case is he being kind or cruel, merciful or merciless. He is only being honest. He is telling the truth.

So our one God tells the Israelites of old the truth: come into this land, keep my commandments, and flourish.

And the same God speaks to His Church today the truth: *take up your cross, renounce all you have, and follow me, even unto death, even death upon this cross*.

For this is the essential message of Christ's life: follow the truth, and you will lose everything.

Have you counted the cost of following Jesus, and found that you can afford it?

Have you drafted your armies for Christ's sake, and found that you can win?

If not, perhaps one should turn back now, for the Lord speaks: *'any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.'*

'Strait is the gate, and narrow is the path.' A dangerous trek indeed.

Do you doubt your resolve to follow Christ? Do you wonder if you are truly a Christian, or just a hypocrite?

Listen to me, O fellow hypocrites, as Peter walked upon the waters, only to sink, yet be lifted up by Jesus, so too will those who are brought low be lifted up by the Lord. [He asks only that we tread the same holy ground He trod. *Life and good* is promised to all who leave Egypt and all its luxury and make for the Kingdom of God and its endless glory] Only walk, the Lord like a pillar of fire by night guides the way. For:

'Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly.' For *'his leaf shall not wither.'*

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Sermon Texts: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-35.