

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

Today marks the beginning of our program year at Grace, which we're kicking off with a multi-generational service and fellowship event we're calling "Growing With Love and Service." I hope you'll stick around for that event. The beginning of a new year is a good time to take stock of where we are and where we're going – to consider our mission as a congregation, our individual commitment to that common mission, why we do what we do, what we maybe need to do better, and what we might do that is new and different.

Our readings today help us with that task. But Jesus does not make things easy in the today's Gospel reading. I mentioned last week that were not done with the difficult texts, and this one is about as difficult as they get. But before I tackle that, I want to first set the stage with our first reading from Deuteronomy. Then I'll come back to this passage from Luke, and finally I'll try to find us a way forward using Paul's letter to Philemon.

Our reading from Deuteronomy has Moses speaking on behalf of God to the people of Israel as they are about to enter the promised land. This is a time of new beginnings for them, and Moses wants to prepare them for their new life in their new home. They have made it this far by the grace of God. It was God who freed them from slavery in Egypt. It was God who fed them during their 40 years in the wilderness, and it is God who is now making it possible for them to take possession of the promised land. If they will continue to trust in God, continue to follow God's commandments to love God and one another, then things will go well with them. If they turn instead to the local gods, if they pursue their own individual agendas at the expense of the community as a whole, things will go badly. You can think about this in two different ways. You could think of it as a threat, as God saying, "if you don't do things my way, I'm going to let you have it – make your life miserable." Or, (and I think this is better,) you could think of it as God having their best interests at heart, and knowing what will work best for them. This would be more like a parent teaching a child to ride a bike. "If you look down at your front wheel the whole time, you'll lose your balance and crash. If you keep your focus down the road in front of you, you'll keep your balance and have a smooth ride." That's not a threat. A parent is not going to push the child over for looking down at the front wheel. That is counsel and advice from someone who knows what they are talking about. And that, I think, is just how God is speaking to Israel here.

But we know how that story turned out. Israel insisted on following those other gods and pursuing their own interests, and so things went badly for them. They chose death instead of life. They trusted in their own plans and ended up getting conquered by other nations. So God has now come to them again, this time in Jesus, to set them back on the path to life. And in this reading from Luke, Jesus lays out the stakes for them and all who would follow him. "Here is what you need to do if you are really going to follow me on the path to life that really is life:" Jesus tells them, "Hate your family and hate your life." I hope that bothered you when you heard me read that a few minutes ago. "If you don't hate your family – parents, siblings, children, spouse, and even your own life, you cannot be my disciple." That is shocking, no doubt about it. It was meant to be. So you'll be relieved to know that once again we have a bit of a translation problem here. We use the word "hate" differently than they did in the New Testament world. We use it only to describe our feelings. That's not what's going on here. A better translation would be, unless you *disregard* your family and your life, you cannot be my disciple. Jesus is not

calling on his followers to have angry, evil thoughts about their closest relatives, or anyone else. He is calling on us to reject our common sense and tribal instincts and to not show favoritism toward our families. But that does not make things much easier, does it? Because in this respect our culture and the cultures of the ancient world share the same values. The good, honorable, decent thing to do is to be fiercely loyal to your family. Many of us would do almost anything for our children. It's why organizations like "Focus On The Family" sound so good and wholesome. Until you notice that Jesus is calling out our family favoritism as one of our fundamental problems, an example of our sinfulness, a value that actually gets in the way of loving our neighbor as ourselves, because we won't do anything for other people's children, will we? And the same goes for our love of money and material possessions. Again, we have a translation problem in that last verse of our Gospel reading, so that Jesus is not necessarily telling us to get rid of all of our money and possessions. But he is calling upon us to give up our love of those things and our reliance upon them, because once again, they all too often get in the way of the life God has created us for. As Martin Luther famously said in his Large Catechism, whatever we put our ultimate trust in, that is our god. Wealth, possessions, and family easily become idols, false gods that lead us away from life instead of toward it.

Paul's letter to Philemon holds a clue to a way forward out of the difficult predicament that Jesus exposes in our lives. Paul is writing to his brother in the faith, Philemon, on behalf of a runaway slave Onesimus, whom Paul is now sending back to him also as a brother in Christ. Without saying it in so many words, what Paul is asking is that Philemon give Onesimus his freedom, even though slavery was perfectly legal in those days. But the way Paul goes about this is helpful for us, and reveals how God chooses to deal with us too. Paul does not order Philemon to free his slave. He makes a case for why he should *want* to free his slave. In Jesus Christ, God has redefined our relationship with God and one another. God has been merciful, loving, and forgiving toward us so that we might be merciful, loving, and forgiving toward one another. Paul is looking for a complete change of heart in Philemon, not just one discrete action. And that is what God wants from us too.

As we kick off a new program year here at Grace, our texts today are laying it on the line for us. What we are about here as a congregation is following Jesus, proclaiming in faith the life that God has promised to us, the life of mercy, love, and forgiveness that Jesus lived out in his earthly life and continues to live out in those who gather around his Word and Sacraments. And Jesus could not be any clearer that his call to follow is no easy assignment. It's going to take your time. It's going to take your commitment. It's going to take your attention and your energy. But most of all it's going to take your heart. Because that's what Jesus really wants. He wants to turn our hearts away from our deadly self-centeredness and to open them to God and our fellow human beings, because that is the way to real life.

Since that is God's central focus, it must be ours also, above all else. And so by God's grace we will continually remind ourselves of the radical, countercultural, and counter-intuitive nature of the gospel. We will continually hold before each other all the ways we fail to live up to our calling. But most importantly, we will continually remind each other of God's faithfulness to the promises made to us in Holy Baptism, the promises of love and forgiveness for Jesus sake, and the promise of transformation by the power of the Holy Spirit into the people that God continues to call us to be. This is our task and our hope. May God make us faithful to it. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.