

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

Our readings over the past few weeks have been difficult. And Jesus does not make things any easier for us in today's Gospel reading. In fact, 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. 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 punish you." 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. No parent is going to push their 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. The Israelites 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 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." Now I hope once again that 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. But it does not mean quite what it sounds like to us. We use the word "hate" differently than they did in the New Testament world. We use it only to describe our feelings. This not about feelings but about allegiances. 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 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 most fundamental problems, an example of our sinfulness, and 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 inevitably 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 gives us a way forward through the difficult predicament that Jesus exposes in our lives. Philemon is apparently someone whom Paul had played a key role in introducing to the faith. You could say he was a disciple of Paul's. But Paul is writing to Philemon now not as a teacher, but as a *brother* in the faith, on behalf of a certain Onesimus, a slave of Philemon who has run away. Paul has gotten to know Onesimus, has probably had role in introducing *him* to the faith, and is now sending him back to Philemon, but now as a brother in Christ. Without saying it directly, what Paul clearly wants here is for Philemon to give Onesimus his freedom and to forgive the debts he owes him. He wants this knowing that Philemon had every right, legally speaking, to keep Onesimus as his slave, to punish him for running away, and to insist on the repayment of his debts. But the way Paul goes about this is helpful for us, and reveals how God chooses to deal with us in Jesus. Paul does not order Philemon to free his slave, even though he seems to claim he has the authority to do that. He instead makes a case for why Philemon should *want* to free his slave. In Jesus Christ, God is doing a new thing, reconciling us with God's self, redefining our relationship, and remaking us in God's image. God is merciful, loving, and forgiving toward us so that *we* will be merciful, loving, and forgiving toward one another. What Paul is looking for is not just certain behaviors, "a favor just this one time" sort of thing. He is looking to change Philemon's heart toward Onesimus by reminding him of the gospel. He is looking for God's new relationship with Philemon in Jesus to bear fruit in a completely new kind of relationship between him and Onesimus.

And that, of course, is just the sort of thing that God is looking for in us as we gather here in Jesus' name. God is challenging us with the gospel and embracing us with the sacraments in order to change our hearts – toward God, toward our fellow human beings, and toward God's good creation. None of those difficult demands that God is making on the Israelites, that Jesus is making on his disciples, or even that Paul is suggesting to Philemon – none of those difficult demands are removed. Life *is* to be found in choosing good over evil and in looking to God instead of our selfish interests. Following Jesus and trusting his promises *does* mean changing our priorities and our relationships. And trusting Jesus *does* mean changing our relationship to our possessions. The promise of the gospel is that when by God's grace faith does take hold in us, when the Holy Spirit cracks our hearts open to begin loving the world as God loves the world, then those demands start to look less onerous, and the good choices start to make themselves. We begin focusing not on our rights and privileges, but on the common good, which sometimes means focusing on the rights of *others* in the face of injustice. We begin to care about the plight of the poor and the disadvantaged among us. We begin to see our wealth and our property not as things to be hoarded, but as gifts of God for which we are thankful and compelled to share. We begin to notice how the way the world works unfairly privileges some over others, and we look for ways to make changes. When our hearts are changed our loyalties change too, and our ways of thinking and acting change too.

May it be so. May God's work among us in word and sacrament lead to the life God intends for us. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.