13th Sunday after Pentecost, September 7, 2025 (L23C) Pastor Chris Repp
Deut. 30:15-20, Luke 14:25-33, Philemon Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

These are some tough readings this week, particularly our Gospel reading. That was the attitude I took into my text study group on Tuesday morning, and I wasn't the only one. We were dreading having to preach on these texts. But we came out of that study having wrestled some good news out of these texts, particularly the Gospel. And this is one of those Sundays that the readings work particularly well together, so I'm going to tackle them each in turn. They also tie in nicely with God's Work, Our Hands Sunday, when we focus on how we can be partners and agents of God's creative, redeeming, and sustaining work in the world. Let's see if I can make all these connections in the next few minutes.

The first reading comes from near the end of the book of Deuteronomy, the last book of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, the books that take us from creation to the Children of Israel entering the Promised Land. We need to be careful how we read these books and apply them to ourselves and our time, because I think they are consistently misunderstood and misapplied. The temptation is to see them as a kind of decision theology that can be used to win God's favor and make us into a successful and victorious nation. And it is not a surprising take, since that seems to be exactly what is promised in this passage. If you choose rightly and follow God's commandments, you will reap great rewards. You will become powerful, prosperous, and long-lived. And you know that that is just how they are being taken by many Christians in America today. If we would only get God back into schools, post the ten commandments in classrooms and courthouses, make America a Christian nation, we could reap the promise of becoming successful and victorious like Israel.

But least two things are missed in this approach. The first is that the choice being offered up here is not one that can be forced on people. It is a matter of the heart. Hold that thought, now, because it is the key to these texts, and it will come back in the Philemon text, which I'll finish with. The second thing that is missed in this approach is that God sets this choice before God's chosen people knowing that they will fail to choose life in the end. After Moses finishes conveying this message to the people, God takes Moses aside and tells him that the time is coming near for him to die. He will not enter the Promised Land with his people. He already knew that part, but God also lets him know that the people will not, in fact, keep the promise they make today after they enter the Promised Land. They will turn to other gods, and God will turn away from them for a time and allow them to be conquered by their enemies. This is a crucial point that we only get by reading this passage in context: God calls on God's people to choose God and life over other gods and death, knowing that they will ultimately fail… *knowing that they will ultimately fail*. It's like marrying someone you know will be unfaithful to you. You would think that with that kind of knowledge, God would call it off right here. But God has made a promise to Abraham and Sarah, and Isaac and Jacob, and God means to make good on that promise; their descendants will inherit the land. They will become, at least for a time, a successful and victorious nation. God has chosen them, and will not give up on them, even when they give up on God.

That sets us up nicely for the Gospel reading, though you might not think so on first reading. This text, like the Deuteronomy reading, seems to be giving us a choice. Follow Jesus or follow the ways of the world. If you want to follow Jesus you have to give up your family and your wealth. You can't have both. You must make a choice. The elephant in this room, though, is Jesus' declaration that being his disciple means hating your family: father and mother, wife and

children, brothers and sisters. If God is love and Jesus is God, then what the heck is going on here? First, we need to be clear about what Jesus is not saying. He is not saying that we should feel hatred toward our families. Hate and love in the context in which Jesus and his disciples lived and in which Luke is writing his Gospel was not so much about what you felt as what you did. That's very different in our context, where hate and love are *all about* how you feel, and much less about what you do. Biblical scholars have suggested that what Jesus is getting at here is that when you take his teaching seriously – that's what disciples do if they're good disciples – if you put his teaching into practice, which is not about hate but love (even for enemies!), if you actually loved your neighbor as yourself in your actions as well as in your heart and treated everyone equally, your family included – then that is going to look to the world like you actually hate your family. Why is that? Because you won't be *favoring* your family any more like you're supposed to do. You have seen this dynamic at work in our own time and place when sexism and racism are identified and we attempt to address them.

Let me test this out. What is your first thought when someone is identified as a feminist? Do you think that that person hates men? Maybe *you* don't (or maybe you do), but you certainly know that that is how that word is so often received. Even many women who are in favor of equal opportunities and rights for men and women won't identify themselves feminists because that seems to the world like hatred of men. And you know the same kind of thing happens when it comes to racism, when the simple affirmation that "Black Lives Matter" is so threatening to so many white people. How fragile are we when even *talking* about race is seen as divisive? If you identify racism as a problem, if you teach in schools about our long history of racialized oppression and exploitation, then *you're* the one who's being racist, don't you know.

Jesus knows how hard it is for his disciples and for us to go against our culture and our instincts. It's almost like he knows that we are "in captivity to sin and cannot free ourselves." He knows that what he is asking is impossible for us humans. But he needs us to trust that it is not impossible for God. Even his disciples, who have left home and family to follow him, who have felt the accusation of "hating their families," do not ultimately measure up to Jesus' teaching. But he calls them anyway to follow him to the cross, where he will confront the powers of this world and beyond that rebel against God and attempt to draw us away from God and God's love for us and the world. The disciples will fail there too, choosing wrongly, running away in fear, and loving their lives more than their teacher and Lord. But Jesus will endure death for them and for us, and will emerge victorious over the powers of sin, death, and evil on Easter morning to call them again and to entrust them with his ongoing mission of speaking true love into the world.

And that's where the Philemon reading comes in, the one time we get an entire book of the Bible for a Sunday morning reading. Philemon's slave Onesimus has run away. But Onesimus is not just any slave. He is also a fellow believer. Paul is sending him back to Philemon, who in ordinary circumstances would punish him severely. But Paul reminds Philemon who he is and who Onesimus is, and wants Philemon to figure out for himself what the right relationship between them should look like. Paul could have railed against the evils of slavery, and he could have commanded Philemon not only to forgive Onesimus, but to release him from slavery. But he doesn't. He reminds him of the gospel and urges him to trust the promise of God's coming kingdom. And that is just what God is doing with us, with you and me today on this God's Word, Our Hands Sunday. God is reminding us of who we are and whose we are, and inviting us who have been freed by his cross to love God with our whole heart and our neighbor as ourselves in ways that look crazy to the world. May we, by God's grace, live out of that promise. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.