

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
9/4/2016, The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost,  
Lectionary 23  
Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Psalm 1, Luke 14:25-33  
In Defense of the Fainthearted

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is a sermon in defense of the fainthearted. But we have some hard Bible readings before us. Let us begin with the last verse of this morning's Gospel Lesson. It is an uncompromising call to discipleship. Jesus says this:

<sup>33</sup>So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce *all that he has* cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:33, RSV)

This morning's Bible Lessons, I fear, are not for the timid. At first glance, our First Lesson, our Psalm, and our Gospel Lesson all suggest that the lukewarm and overlay cautious need not apply to be the disciples of Christ.

But that has got to be wrong! That is my theme for this morning's sermon. I believe that even the fainthearted, the lukewarm, and those who are intimidated by the cost of discipleship, should nonetheless throw in their lot with Jesus. After all, even the lukewarm are people for whom Christ died. Even the lukewarm and the fainthearted are people to whom Jesus says, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). And even the lukewarm and the fainthearted are capable of becoming stronger and hotter for the Lord.

I do not want any of you turning and walking away from Jesus. I do not care if you reckon the cost of discipleship to be too high. Let it be too high! Make up your mind to follow Jesus anyway!

Saint Peter was hot as fire in following Jesus. See what good it did him! Peter breathed words of loyalty to Jesus as if he were a fire-breathing dragon. In his enthusiasm for Jesus, he threw his fellow disciples under the bus:

Peter said to him, "Even though they all fall away, I will not."  
(Mark 14:29, RSV)

He even disputed with Jesus himself when our Lord predicted Peter's threefold denial.

But [Peter] said vehemently, "If I must die with you, I will not deny you." (Mark 14:31, RSV)

Peter was passionate for the Lord. But it did not matter. In the moment of crisis, he melted away. When the maid questioned him about Jesus, he denied our Lord. He became as mild as milk. If the mild and the lukewarm and unstable need not apply to be disciples of Jesus, then in the end, none of us qualify, because all of us are prone to failure. Each of us might swear to do what Jesus says in our text: each of us might swear to “renounce all that we have” in order to follow Jesus. So, we can swear all we want, but for all we know, we are going to fail in the moment of crisis as Peter failed. But come to Jesus nonetheless. Follow on behind Jesus whether you are a lion or a lamb. For it is in the following, that you and I have our best chance to become better people in this world.

The plan of my sermon, then, goes this way: In the first part, we will note how uncompromising this morning’s Bible Lessons are. They seek no half-measures. They want whole-hearted loyalty to God. They urge total submission to Christ. They present a stark choice between turning to the Lord or turning away, between life and death. Nothing fuzzy about these Bible Lessons.

Then, in the second part of the sermon, I will try to step back a bit and enlarge the perspective, with the goal that even if you and I should be feeling inadequate for the great call of discipleship, we should press forward anyway, grab hold of some fringe of our Lord’s garment and hold on for dear life. We should make up our minds to walk with Jesus and learn from him, whether or not we are heroes of the faith.

So, first: the uncompromising nature of this morning’s readings.

In our Deuteronomy Lesson, from Chapter 30, Moses has finished his preaching and is spelling out the meaning of it all for the people of Israel. And the meaning of it all is life or death:

<sup>19</sup>I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live... (Deuteronomy 30:19, RSV)

Either the people obey God’s law, or they perish. In particular, either they can give total loyalty to the LORD, or they can try to mix in loyalty to the LORD with loyalty to the various gods of Canaan. But if they do that, then they die. The First Table of the law requires that the people love the LORD with all their heart and mind and soul. If they do not, then they pay their ticket and take their ride. The LORD will not permit the worship of other gods. “You shall have no other gods before me”:

<sup>9</sup>you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God... (Deuteronomy 5:9, RSV)

If the people will have other gods, then they will be simultaneously turning away from the God of Life.

This is not a passage for the eternal compromisers in life. Moses does not preach with much nuance here. Throw in your lot whole-heartedly with the LORD, or else forget it. That's our First Lesson.

Next, our Psalm. It is Psalm 1 – the introduction to the whole Psalter. Psalm 1 is the keynote address. It expresses in beautiful and simple words the call heard throughout the Psalms. It speaks of two ways in life. It does not speak of three, or ten, or some flexible number adjusted to the realities of any particular generation. Nope. Just two.

There are those who “delight in the law of the LORD” (Psalm 1:2), and there are the ungodly – these two. Blessed is the one who delights in the law of the LORD. That one is like a tree planted by the rivers of water – a great image of strength. But the ungodly “are not so.” They are like the chaff which the wind drives away. And the LORD knows the difference between the two:

For the LORD knoweth the way of the righteous: but the way  
of the ungodly shall perish. (Psalm 1:6, KJV)

There is nothing in this Psalm inviting us to merely dabble a bit in religion. Delight in the law and the ways of the LORD is not to be simply one delight among others, but rather is to be the central delight for the people of God. The Psalm hopes for people whose hearts yearn for God. The Psalm hopes for a people who will be transformed bit by bit by the fact that they meditate on the law “day and night.”

Finally, on this nice summer morning, our peace could well be disturbed by the teaching of Jesus in our Gospel Lesson. “Count the cost,” he says. Do not be like a builder of a tower who does not first count the cost, with the humiliating result that his tower goes unfinished. Reckon the cost! Jesus certainly has the moral right to require this: He himself has counted the cost. He knows that he is destined for rejection and the cross, but he presses ahead anyway:

The Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of  
the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be slain, and be  
raised the third day. (Luke 9:22, KJV)

As Jesus is willing to renounce even his own life, here he asks his disciples to be ready to renounce all for his sake:

<sup>33</sup>So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce *all* that he  
has cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:33, RSV)

So, Jesus says to all those who would follow him, “Count the cost.” But I say, *in his name*, “Count the cost, and then forget that cost, take up your cross and

follow Jesus anyway.” Let it be with you and with me as Jesus said to Peter long ago, “What is that to thee? Follow thou me” (John 21:22, KJV) What is the cost of discipleship to you and to me? Let us be disciples anyway. For any of us, the cost of discipleship might prove heavy or might prove light, but we can leave that to the wisdom of the LORD. One thing we know is that Jesus will provide:

...for he has said, “I will never leave you or forsake you.”  
(Hebrews 13:5, NRSV)

Discipleship is not just for the lion-hearted. Holy Scripture teaches that the mild-hearted can be useful to the LORD too, if they be willing. Think, for example, of Moses. He feared that his slowness of speech would make him a poor leader of Israel:

<sup>10</sup>But Moses said to the LORD, “Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either heretofore or since thou hast spoken to thy servant; but I am slow of speech and of tongue.”

But the LORD would hear none of it:

<sup>11</sup>Then the LORD said to him, “Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him dumb, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? <sup>12</sup>Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak.” (Exodus 4:10-12, RSV)

It is as if the LORD is saying to Moses, “You are thinking too much. You are counting the cost overmuch. Go. Go! I will be with you.”

Again, think of Isaiah – that mighty prophet of the LORD. He did not start off his ministry in a bold way. Rather, he began with a sense of unworthiness:

<sup>5</sup>And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

But, again, it was if the LORD will hear none of it:

<sup>6</sup>Then flew one of the seraphim to me, having in his hand a burning coal which he had taken with tongs from the altar.  
<sup>7</sup>And he touched my mouth, and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven.” (Isaiah 6:5-7, RSV)

The true God can use the fainthearted. The true God can use those who count the cost, and are afraid of the cost, yet are willing to get up and follow him anyway.

So, if you should be as mild as a lamb, consider that lamb on the shoulders of Jesus. That lamb was not strong as Samson. That lamb was not wise as Solomon. That lamb could not preach like Saint Paul. That lamb was just a lamb – just a quiet creature in this world. But Jesus went out after the lamb to fetch it home: Jesus does not want to lose any of us, big or little, strong or weak, aggressive or mild: it does not matter. Jesus wants none of us to go wandering in this world without him.

If you fear that your tower is likely to go unfinished, let it go unfinished! At least you are going to *begin* to build. Maybe in God's grace, others will finish what you have begun. As for you yourself, once you begin to build, there is no necessity that you must turn away. There is no necessity that your tower will go unfinished. Christ's church has within it many little flowers, many little seeds as small as a mustard seed, who, perhaps to their own surprise, went on, grew in faith, and did good things for the One they tried to follow, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.