

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Proper 19-B (12 Sept 2021)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

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Collect

O God, because without you we are not able to please you, mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Proverbs 1:20-33, Psalm 19, James 3:1-12, Mark 8:27-38

1 Responses to Reality

My daughter, Aviva, moved off to college this fall, and my son, Eli, has been making the most of that fact by choosing some movies for our family to watch that Aviva never would have agreed to watch. A couple week ago we watched one of the Terminator movies. [Remember? Phrases?] It was fun, but also it was awful. I'm a child of the '80's, and there were a lot of awful movies in the '80's.

As a generation that was shaped by television and movies, and later the Internet, there's a lot of formation that goes on through the media. The media teaches us how to talk, how to think about the world, how to respond to different situations. If there was a liquid-metal killer robot coming after you, do you know what to do? My family does. Step one, find the nearest steel mill.

In every time and in every place there is a cultural milieu, a standard set of expected behaviors and codes for responding to different situations. Rarely do we learn these responses explicitly: we absorb them almost by osmosis. And it's not even that simple. There are layers of standards and options for our behaviors. So the challenge that exists throughout life is in choosing which of those sets of behaviors and options I'm going to enact in my own life. That might, in fact, be the very definition of growing up, of adulting, of integrity. It is in choosing a set of options thoughtfully, on purpose, and sticking with it.

2 Jesus' Difficult Invitation

Christian formation is the molding of our own thoughts, words, and actions, the careful selection of our own habits, to reflect the ethic and the example of Jesus Christ. Christian formation is what Jesus is doing with his disciples in our Gospel reading today as they walk along through the villages of Caesarea Philippi. Jesus discusses with his disciples what it means to be the Messiah, the Christ. Contrary to the disciples' fondest hopes and wishes, being the Messiah does not mean military conquest, political power, or freedom from illness and pain. Instead, says Jesus, it means great suffering, rejection by one's peers, and surrender of one's very life. Following Jesus doesn't mean avoiding pain, enjoying the approval of others, and getting your own way. Instead, Jesus challenges those who would be his disciples to actually follow him: to willingly choose the same path that he treads, a path of seeking God above any other goal, of loving others as you love yourself, and of honoring the image of God in every human being. This kind of life, says Jesus, is going to bring conflict and challenges. When Jesus thinks of those challenges, he doesn't mince words. He points to the cross.

The cross! In Jesus' day, *polite* company would never even *mention* such a horrible thing as a cross. Jesus wasn't being polite, or sentimental, or figurative. Jesus was making a terrible demand of his disciples. How often do we try to downplay *taking up my cross* as some minor or isolated difficulty or challenge rather than a wholesale surrender of life, agency, and autonomy?

Following Jesus is costly. Following Jesus is difficult, dangerous, and sometimes deadly – even today. Like any other worthwhile relationship, there is risk involved and you may get hurt. If you are going to do what Jesus did, there's a real possibility that what got done to Jesus on the cross might get done to you!

Peter, the very first of Jesus' disciples, can't take it. He says, "No!" The cost is too high. This talk of suffering and death isn't going to sell, it's not going to get Jesus elected "Messiah." It's not how winners talk. Peter demands a different line of rhetoric. But Jesus also responds sharply. Jesus calls Peter, the first of his apostles, "Satan," a traditional term for "adversary," and observes that Peter is wanting to avoid the hard choices of a godly life lived with integrity.

3 Making Choices

To be a follower of Jesus is to make difficult choices. Unusual choices. Unpopular choices. When I was a freshman in college, I knew who the other person was on my hall who got up early Sunday morning every week for church. I was not entirely consistent in choosing Christian options and responses in every area of my life at that time. I'm still not! But showing up for church was a good starting place, a good beginning.

Because the church is a support group for people who choose the way of wisdom, the way of Jesus, the way of the cross. Church is a community of those who are willing to choose a different set of responses and options from the world around us in order to honor God, love our neighbor, and respect those who are disrespected by everyone else.

In church we *pray* in order to learn a new vocabulary and a new posture before God and the world. In church we *study the Scriptures* so that we can learn from the proven wisdom of those who have journeyed down this difficult path before us. In church we *serve others* in order to develop in ourselves the habits of thought and action that characterize God.

Church is where we *practice* making hard choices, obedient choices, that are required of anyone who would follow Jesus. Church is where we practice discerning between all the options out there, listening to which ones God is calling us to, and so learning to reveal that which we have already become by the sacrament of baptism. It is in making faithful choices in the countless little decisions of daily life that we will become mature Christians, adult Christians, prepared to make faithful choices even when decisions are weighty or fraught or unpopular.

4 Proverbs / Psalm 19

This weekend we here in the United States mark 20 years since the attacks of 9/11. Those attacks changed our country, changed us, and influenced 20 years of choices for good and for ill. As we remember that day, we can think back to our own pain, our own grief and trauma, and choose responses based on those things. That's a pretty common choice. But that's not the only choice.

Immediately after the twin towers were struck, hundreds of fire fighters, EMT's, and police, responded to the tragedy by rushing into the inferno in order to save others. They were able to do that because they had trained and prepared for such a day. They had been shaped by their academies and their communities of fellow fire-fighters, fellow EMT's, fellow law-enforcement officers. They did their duty and hundreds of them paid with their lives. That's what it means to be a first-responder, a public servant.

The United States spent 20 years in a war in Afghanistan in response to the attacks of 9/11. Thousands of Americans were killed and wounded in that war. Hundreds of thousands of Afghans died in the conflict. There is room to question motives and methods of that war: how it was begun, how it was prosecuted, and how it ended. But the soldiers who went and died, as well as the ones who returned with wounded bodies and wounded souls, did their duty according to their training, risking death for the love of their country. That's what it means to be a soldier.

Together, as Christ's church, we gather so that we, too, might learn to choose courageously. It's not an easy path. It's not something we learn overnight. But by faithful training in prayer, sacraments, scripture and service, the Holy Spirit forms *us* into followers of Christ. As hard times inevitably come our way, we will find that we have been prepared to make the hard choices to bear our own crosses, to live the way of Jesus with integrity and authenticity, and so to be God's agents of justice and reconciliation in God's world. That's what it means to be a Christian.

Amen.