

What Do I Want? – Proper 18C

There is an old theater story about the amateur community actor who finally gets his big chance when a traveling production comes to town for a one night stand of some inspirational and patriotic historical drammer. The troupe are in the habit of hiring a few local spear-carrying extras, and our hero lands a part. He even gets a line. In the weeks leading up to the big night, he disappears from all his regular haunts, spending hours in the barn rehearsing: “Hark! I hear the cannon ROOOAAR!” “HARK!! I hear the cannon roar...” “Hark, I hear the CANNON roar,” etc. Finally the big day arrives. The company pulls up late in the afternoon, so there is no time for a rehearsal, but the stage manager assures our man that his professionalism will carry the day. “Just enter on cue with your spear, and when you get the sound effect, deliver your line, ok?” “Indubitably, Sir!” replies our hero, with a low, Shakespearean bow. Sure enough, the moment arrives. As the climax of the play approaches, he makes his entrance, and there is an enormous, deafening BOOM! from the wings and, “What the heck was that!?!?”

As amateur actors in a real life, ongoing Human Comedy, we are forever practicing our one big line: “What do I want, God? What do I want?” Meanwhile, through experience, God keeps trying to inspire us to stick to: “What do you want, God?” And sometimes we even get it right. But all too often, the animal ego, the selfish self, and the fearful beast in us, all set up a clamor that sends us back to only looking out for Number One: “Yabut what do I want?” We remain forever interested in our own experience and

future, not in the part God has written for us. We spend our prayer lives asking for help in understanding what we want instead of asking for help in wanting what God knows to be good.

“Spiritual seeking done by our fearful selves, and those are false selves, might be the biggest problem there is,” observes Richard Rohr. “When in the name of seeking God, the ego instead works to defend and protect itself, the result is an almost perfect cover for the narcissism we all have. We develop ways to feel good about ourselves and to think badly of everybody who is not aligned with us. The only thing more dangerous than this in an individual is when a group ego develops such a self-fixated mindset.”

Another way to describe this is selfishness. A group’s ego run rampant is more dangerous than the individual’s; when a group becomes selfish, all hell can break loose. Part of the transformation Jesus demands is that we begin to live our lives as we see fit, but according to God’s plan. That is not selfish. The selfish thing is to demand that others live their lives as we see fit. When a group does this, it can be catastrophic.

Here is Solzhenitsyn: “It gradually became clear to me that the line dividing good and evil does not run between states, classes or parties. It runs through every human heart.

When Jeremiah observes the potter at his wheel reworking a spoiled vessel into another one, the metaphor is one of repentance and transformation. The thrown pot

gets out of whack and God gather in its material and begins anew. Now God could of course shape people anyway God wishes, but instead wills that we take part in our own transformation by choosing to allow it. Life necessitates our participation and accountability.

Three times in our Luke passage today, Jesus tells the crowd that without a definite decision, a person cannot be his disciple. His demand is that we order our priorities thusly: God first, the other fellow second, and I'm third. We might soften the hyperbole a tad, and change the word, 'hate.' So for family, etc. (and to the list we must add our own selfish interests) the idea is, don't hate, subordinate.

The beauty of Jesus' teachings jumps off the page here in Luke. We are to subordinate everything to the will of God as we understand it, loving God by loving our neighbors and setting aside or rejecting everything that might get in the way of that love. Parents, siblings, spouses, the 'way we've always done things; all are secondary. It becomes clear that Jesus would have us reflect upon, reconsider and revise whatever practices, policies and paradigms we follow that we discover to be unloving. The longer we study him, the clearer it becomes that any kind of repression, suppression or oppression, except of evil and violence themselves, is just ungodly and wrong. Thus families get reconfigured, which means the society does too.

"Obedience to God is not blind," writes Dean Emilie Townes of Duke Divinity School, "It is a thought-probing and deliberative process in which we grow in our ability to ask the tough questions about life and living, not only of God, but also of ourselves."

Dean Townes continues, “At the heart of discipleship is transformation. The cost is a profoundly radical shift toward the ethics of Jesus with every fiber of our beings. There is no driftwood in discipleship; we cannot be shallow or uncommitted believers – the adjectives simply do not fit the nouns.”

I had a brief career in the real estate business. About 15 minutes. Our manager was big on sales trainers, inspirational speakers, success gurus, so we were sent to numerous presentations. One that has stuck with me, a fellow named Richard Flint, as I recall, would regularly use this tag line: “What you want means nothing, unless you’re willing to pay the price to obtain it.”

What will be the price of our discipleship? There is a different formula for each of us. Robert Duvall, in his wondrous performance as a preacher in *The Apostle* thunderously declares, “It’s free but it ain’t cheap!” under the revival tent. It is costly, by way of annoyance, discomfort and forbearance to love our enemies. We many never have a chance to participate as principals in a Truth and Reconciliation conversation with people who have treated us violently or vice-versa. After all, such opportunities are rare, and choosing them requires a rare courage. But every day provides a parade of folks and situations that make us want to fight or flee, to gossip or criticize -- or at least mutter under our breath. Maybe we even want to get a little revenge. When Paul tells us to pray without ceasing, it is for the grace and peace not to badger, badmouth, bully or boycott people we find trying. That’s all

our cross consists of throughout much of our lives.

The journey of discipleship is a process, not an overnight sensation, but it must be begun. Now would be good, not when we get done with the next few projects; not when life is easier and we have more time for it; not when our ducks are all in a row. For God knows they never will be, this side of the River Jordan. It must be begun, and it must be continued in earnest and with vigor. “The greatest thing in the world is not so much where we are, but in what direction we are moving,” said Oliver Wendell Holmes. Are we moving towards dissipation or towards sobriety? Slogans, like proverbs, are clichés because they are true: ‘Keep taking baby steps,’ ‘One day at a time,’ ‘Seek progress, not perfection.’

These are not some sort of trick statements on Jesus’ part, some kind of flim-flam scheme to con us out of our good times. He is prompting hard decisionmaking on our part, but the way a doctor might tell us, ‘Only a radical surgical operation will help you.’ As Helmut Thielecke has written, “Jesus says to us, ‘If you want to follow me, and if you set any real value on what this discipleship means to you, you must make a radical change; you must say goodbye to many things to which you would cling.’”

Jesus’ admonitions here are not as radical or unusual as they may sound. How many of us have moved away from our parents and loved ones to follow a career? How many have become so involved in succeeding in business by really trying, that we have insufficient time left for spouses and children? Nobody ever said, on their death-bed: “I wish

I hadn't spent so much time with those darn kids." The real new thing is Jesus' demand, not that something should have a higher priority than family, but that that something should be contemplation of God's purposes for humanity.

"It takes enormous courage to live the Christian gospel, which is so quintessentially a path of 'dying before you die.'" Bear in mind, one who took up a cross in Roman times was not going out to have life redirected, but ended. "It takes tremendous courage to move forward in hope, knowing 'whether I live or die, I am the Lord's.' This courage is beyond the capacity of the ego; a Christianity lived only ego-deep will ultimately betray itself." So writes Cynthia Bourgeault. The cross is before each of us. What that means will be different for each of us.

Not long ago, a friend of mine decided she should take a day of her precious vacation to visit some elderly family friends, now isolated from their loved ones in an assisted-living facility in New York. All went well until she left for the airport and found herself in a four-hour, mind-splitting, dashboard-pounding traffic jam on the Long Island Expressway. With Jesus, you pay your money and you take your chances -- on traffic jams, as well as all the other things that can make life challenging. One of those elderly friends died in the succeeding year, and my friend was grateful she'd had a chance to visit. And the traffic jam is just about forgotten. But the love lasts and lasts; it is not subject to market fluctuations. And truth to tell, the more you spend it, the more it grows. This is our role, to nurture love at our own expense.