

13th Sunday After Pentecost
September 4, 2022

We live in a world that is conflicted. It has been this way since the beginning, for sin rules in this age. When we hear that we were born in sin, it is easy to chafe at this and say to ourselves, “But that child is sweet and innocent.” It misses the point of our circumstance. We are born not in relationship with the One who created us. He created us to be in relationship with Him. God is holy. We are not. These are the circumstances of the conflict.

It is hard for us to come to the irreducible fact that we are not the master of our own destiny. The pride into which we were born wants to hold our selves in the first position. Jesus has made clear to us that we are not first. The One who created us is the One who must form us. We have been made clay, so the potter must be the One who shapes us. If we do as the world does and shape ourselves, it will be a mess. That is why the world is so messy. People want to do it on their own. More than that, our spirit must be shaped by the Holy Spirit so that we may become holy even as He is holy. Something must change and the change begins with the salvation we are offered in Christ. Christ and Christ alone is our Savior.

If you place yourselves fully in the hands of Jesus, then there is little I can add to this, for this is the reality of the salvation which is ours in Christ. He is the author and finisher of our faith. He must be the One who shapes us. This is the intimate and personal part of our journey with our Lord and Savior. It is through the little things that happen each day where the shaping of the image of Christ takes place in us.

The little things we do reflect where our faith really is. The attitude we have in secret reflects how we really act toward our neighbor. The temptations we resist or give into make indelible marks on our soul. Everything is connected together. Too often, we think in terms of small and large when it comes to our sanctification, or the sins which we commit, but the truth is that it all leaves a mark which moves us in various directions. Through the lessons today, we see that Jesus is telling us that everything matters. Everything has meaning. Everything we experience moves us either in the direction of becoming a heavenly being, or else into becoming hellish being. We know that in the end this is exactly what will happen, for there will be a separation.

What then? Only this, that we learn to take seriously the journey of faith that our Lord has set before us. That we recognize that the One who created us must be the One who finishes us. We are cognizant of our own becoming. What we will be we do not yet know, but this we do know, that we shall be like Christ. Everything has a purpose, for we know that all things work together for good for those who are called according to the Lord’s purpose and who shall be conformed to His image.

Jesus opens with what seems to us troublesome words. Hate my father and mother? Think about when Jesus’ family was outside and it was drawn to His attention. He said that the ones who did the Father’s will were His brothers and sisters. It is not that we should divorce ourselves from the earthly family into which we were born, but a matter of priorities. Are the connections we have on this earth more important than our connection with the Lord. You may say to yourself that of course your connection is primary, but think of all of the times where pressures in this world cause us to give into the temptation of going along to get along. This is not a matter of becoming a zealot, but about whether or not you or I love the Lord above all things. He takes this farther by saying that we must take up our cross or else we cannot be His disciple. What does this mean?

I think of the many folk I have encountered that declared a lack of faith because of some circumstance. God was not there, did not do what I expected, or things like this. It is as if some think God is like a genie in a bottle that can be summoned and commanded at will. It is He who made us and not the other way round.

This is why Jesus tells us to consider the cost. If you are not willing to pay the price, then it will not be yours. This is not to say that we have to obtain our salvation, for it is a free gift of God, but that if we are unwilling to go on the journey set before us by Christ, there can be no salvation. Therefore, take great care about what you cling to.

Your faith has been founded upon the invitation our Lord has given you. Through the water of your baptism, you received the promises of the Lord. But take care here, for Jesus said “as many as believe” would receive what is promised. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. You have received the gift of faith. What will you do with it? This is the action of belief. Many say they believe, but they are actually just giving acknowledgment, as if saying, “Yeah, that’s right.” But what use is that if there is no real movement? Jesus is telling us that we are to finish what has begun. That is, literally walking with Jesus each day knowing that He will work on you step by step to conform you to His image. This is why Scripture tells us to “Work out our salvation with fear and trembling,” as if it all depended upon you, but also followed up with, “For it is God who is at work in you.”

This brings us to the difficult place where we can see that yes, I must give up my will in order for the Father’s will to be done in me. Yes, I must take seriously this gift of faith and each day nurture it that it may mature me in the way the Lord knows I need to be matured.

What is the cost? We often think in terms of what we need to give up. Think about this for a moment. If you or I cling to something in this world, knowing that all shall be left behind, is the price of clinging to this thing more important than the eternal life we shall inherit? Said this way, it does seem silly what we cling to, the temporal things, when what is before us is eternity. Therefore, understand what Jesus is saying. He is not telling us to be reactionary, get rid of all of our stuff, but that we must detach ourselves from the stuff that encumbers us such that we leave behind what really matters and that is your eternal soul.

For this, we have the example of Philemon and Onesimus. Of Philemon, Paul asks that he would not think like the world, but realize that he has gained a brother forever. Will Philemon think as a believer, or as someone in the world who will cling to his property. Of Onesimus, he is asked whether he will trust the Lord even if it means being a slave once again. Both have the same request, “Will you trust the Lord above all things?” Note here too that Paul does not use coercion. Our Lord never coerces us into obedience. But here also, we are reminded that to obey is better than sacrifice. Have you not been asked, or asked, “Will you do the right thing?” We do want others to be obedient, but are we willing to be obedient.

You see, these things are spiritual, very spiritual, but they do have implications in this age in which we are now living. Loving your neighbor may come at a cost. Doing the right thing may come at a cost. Following the Lord will come at a cost. It will cost you nothing, but also everything. You give up nothing when you give up everything and gain everything having given up nothing. This sounds strange, but this is the reality when one believes with all of their heart, mind, soul, and strength. The world plays games, but Jesus has come to do the serious business of saving us and preparing us for eternal life. The gift is yours. What you do with the gift will be your answer to Jesus question when He asks you and me to follow Him. Come into eternal life and follow Jesus now and forever. Amen.