

Thirteenth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/C): "Choosing Life: Choosing to Love What God Loves"
Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 1; Luke 14:25-33
September 6-7, 2025
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Following up on today's Gospel, here's a news flash: I am **not** going to start hating my spouse and my child, my sister, or life itself! Not in **today's** understanding of the word *hate*, as in "I hate his guts," an emotion-ridden, negative passion toward a person or thing, a desire at some level for that person or thing's destruction. In Jesus' day the word *hate* was simpler, describing an action not a state of mind or heart. If I hated something it meant that I **preferred** and therefore I **chose** another option instead. Jesus isn't asking us all to disown our families. But He **is** saying, if push comes to shove and there's a conflict of interests, that we choose Him over everyone and everything else, despite the cost, despite the cross we will then have to bear, the rejection we'll have to face, the financial losses we may have to incur.

Speaking of which, here's another news flash: I am not going to give up all my possessions! In the Book of Acts we read that some of Jesus' followers in the early church took that literally, sold their homes, held everything in common. No one had too much; no one had too little. Not surprisingly, that didn't work out for too long. Some people today still take Jesus' command literally for themselves, selling all they have and entering monastic communities where they take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Examples include our friends up at the Episcopal Community of St. John Baptist in Mendham, where we go on our women's retreat. Sr. Monica Claire, their Sister Superior, just wrote a book about her own journey from performing in stand-up comedy clubs and working at PR agencies in LA to whittling away her debt, selling her possessions, giving away her beloved cat, and joining the convent. I **do** believe the world is richer for the prayers and ministries of those who divest themselves of worldly wealth, but I **do not** believe Jesus requires that of **all** of us. That said, I **also** think Jesus is requiring more of us than most of us are currently willing to give of ourselves: time, talents, the contents of our wallet. A little examination of conscience is to reflect on this gem in the Rule of St. Benedict, the go-to instruction book for Benedictines, a monastic order. But those of us out in the world can also find inspiration in its wisdom, including this: "Prefer nothing whatever to Christ." We can ask ourselves, "Is it true? Am I preferring nothing whatever to Christ? Or have I elevated something or someone above Christ? Not in so many words, but evident in the priorities I've set. Whom or

what am I serving with my time, my talent, my treasure?" *The Message* translation of Luke 14:33 says:

Simply put, if you're not willing to take what is dearest to you, whether plans or people, and kiss it goodbye, you can't be my disciple.

There's a really interesting connection between today's Gospel and our first lesson. In the Gospel Jesus says, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and **even life itself**, cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:26) In Deuteronomy God says, "**Choose life** so that you and your descendants may live." (Deut. 30:19b) That may seem like a contradiction, except that Jesus is preparing His disciples for the possibility they will have to die for their faith. (Tradition tells us that all the apostles **did** become martyrs except John). The passage from Deuteronomy is a bigger umbrella, a more universal command to regard life as a precious gift of God to be treasured and protected. The Lord is very clear about the best way to preserve and enhance life:

*If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God... by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments... then you shall live.... **Choose life** so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him, for that means life to you* (Deut. 30:16a-b, 19b-20a)

One side of our front lawn signboard currently reads:

TODAY I CHOOSE
TO LOVE GOD
AND TO LOVE
WHAT GOD LOVES.

Sunday School begins this weekend. The heart of Sunday School is teaching our children that Jesus loves them "this much" and that our loving God expects us to love our neighbor. We teach the children what God loves: reverence toward God, respect toward neighbor, justice, mercy, kindness, humility, generosity. We believe if our children and youth internalize this Good News, they will be like the blessed people the psalmist describes in Psalm 1, assigned for this weekend:

They are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither.... (Psalm 1:3a)

The children learn to see things from a God's-eye perspective. Lord-willing, they learn to value what God values versus what the world values, because they are often in direct contradiction. The children have plenty of venues in which to learn "resume virtues," marketable skills. But it is in

their homes, in this family of faith, in Sunday School, that they learn what have been called “eulogy virtues,” the qualities that honor God, serve their neighbor, bless the world.

In Sunday School the kids learn about God’s love, about God’s expectations of us, about what God promises to those who love God. They learn these things from Scripture, including the 1st Letter of John, which points out:

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹ God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us...

*God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them... ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ Those who say, “I love God,” and hate a brother or sister are liars, for **those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.** ²¹ The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.*

This passage always makes me think of C.S. Lewis’ *The Screwtape Letters*. In this fictional series of letters between Master Tempter Screwtape and an apprentice devil, his nephew Wormwood, the senior devil gives his student tips about how to lead his human “Patient” to damnation. For instance: convince him that he loves humanity but hates the person in the pew next to him ☺. Insidious baby steps! Satan masquerading as an angel of light....

When we choose life, we need to take the long view. Most important victories aren’t won quickly. When we choose life, we can’t look for accolades for doing the right thing. We will sometimes be swimming against the tide of popular opinion. When we choose life, we’ll find ourselves carrying a cross at times. But we’ll be in good and holy Company (knowing that if Good Friday is here, Easter’s a comin’!). Most of all, when we choose life, we’ll know that we’re loving and obeying God. There’s a story about someone telling a famous professor that he’d met one of the man’s former students. The prof responded, “He may have attended my lectures, but he was not one of my students.”¹ Hopefully our children won’t just attend Sunday School, but be Jesus’ students, lifelong. Hopefully **we** won’t just attend Bible study or participate in worship, but truly be Jesus’ students, lifelong. Amen

¹William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (rev. ed., Daily Study Bible series, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), p. 196).

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