

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – 2025

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Philemon 1:1-21

Luke 14:25-35

I'm going out shopping tomorrow – just window shopping. I need a new cross. I'm not talking about the ones that I wear around my neck – I don't need a new one of those. I'm not talking about the ones that I mount on the wall – I don't need a new one of those either. I'm talking about the one that God gives me to bear – I want a new one so I'm going shopping. There's a store in downtown Redlands that specializes in difficulties that Christians often endure. I think that I'll go there first. There's cancer, depression, uncontrollable anxiety and radical self-doubt (I saw those in the front of the store last time I was there). Those are in the “enduring suffering” section of crosses to bear. Maybe I'll trade the one I'm presently bearing for one of those. There's also the universal section, you know, self-denial, sacrifice and service, persecution for faith, patience and lack of acclaim for good works, but those are so cookie cutter, so uninspiring, so, like, yesterday. I'm ready for something new. We do get to choose our crosses, don't we?

No; we don't choose our crosses. It isn't possible for a Christian *not* to have a cross to bear, by the way. God *will* give you a cross to bear, you can be sure. *How* you bear it is another matter. Christianity is the life of the Son of God invading our own. Jesus is the *crucified* King. Jesus *will always be* the crucified King. His kingdom is built on a cross, a sacrifice, a triumph that knows no boundary. And we are His disciples. We are disciples of a crucified God and His life invades our own. He wants us to follow Him. Above all things, the God who created us, who loves us, who redeemed us by His blood – He wants us to receive His life and follow Him. This “following” is put to you in somewhat shocking terms this morning. “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). What? Remember, Jesus said that the summation of the law is to love God above all things and love one's neighbor as oneself (Mark 12:30-31). In His Word, God tells husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church (Ephesians 5:25). The Lord tells us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44). So, something else is going on here in this “hate” language. He doesn't want us to hate our most treasured relations.

Do you remember doing calculations in 4th grade, probabilities and statistics and simplifying equations? No? But you do remember pie charts, right? A pie chart is a circular graph divided into wedge-shaped slices, where each slice represents a portion or percentage of the whole. Here's a little quiz to see how well your 4th grade teacher taught you. Four equal wedge-shaped slices that encompass the whole graph – what percentage is each portion? Jesus doesn't do pie charts. He wants all of you. “You shall have no other gods” (Exodus 20:3). There's no pie chart in that commandment, no percentage of your heart that goes to God and another percentage some other place. Now, love is His gift and it is alive in you. Love is sweet and it energizes us and blesses us and elevates us and we give it and we receive it. But the pie chart of our heart is all God's. It is a figure of speech, a trope, a Hebrew idiom. Listen again: “if anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” It is a comparison. Compared with your devotion to Christ, all other relationships can only be viewed by way of contrast. Your relationship with Him is so unique, so paramount, so definitive that nothing else is to infringe. Why do you

suppose that is? Why would our Lord choose such austere verbiage? Why would our Father call Himself a “jealous God” (Exodus 20:5)?

Because He wants you to finish. Because He wants you to get through this life and make it to heaven. Because those who put Him second have a way-greater chance of not finishing in faith. God belongs in the unique place of absolute devotion. He is passionate about you being and remaining His. The alternative is just plain rotten. Jesus goes on at some length about not finishing. It’ll be a radical bummer for those who don’t finish. Which brings us to a pretty interesting point about people that you see in church. You know what no one ever says to me, ever? Gee, it’s so great to see so many old people in your congregation. Someday, someone who truly knows how important it is to finish will say to me, “Pastor, it’s great to see such a fabulous tribe of wrinkly, bent-over, cane using, white-haired, wheelchair rolling, faithful old-timers in your church.” Old Christians are icons of those who know how to finish what they started.

Have you seen people quit? It’s sad. I’ve seen it. The world is not a spiritually safe place. Temptations abound. Why do people quit? What causes people to give up? Were they not ready for the kind of life that Jesus calls us to? Did they get bored? Were the temporal rewards not spicy enough? Did the “humanness” of the church disillusion them? Did they reject the notion that genuine peril exists for them when they die apart from Christ and His blood? Did they begin to believe that their sin is just not that grave? Did the glory of Christ and His cross fade in their heart? Have you ever heard someone describe themselves as a non-practicing Christian? What does that even mean? That sounds like salt that has lost its saltiness or a disciple who isn’t particularly interested in bearing his cross. Here’s a hero verse for our old people: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7). Let’s honor the veteran Christians among us.

We need to stay salty (I’m not speaking about course language – let’s give that up). Salt and light – Christians are called to be salt and light. We are these things *precisely* because Christ’s life invades our own. Light is obvious. We put a light up on a stand to give light to the house. We don’t put our light under a bush – that helps no one. Christians are to be seen, heard. Salt is a preservative. Salt brings flavor. Salt losing its saltiness is what happens when you have a cross-less Christianity. No charity for the needy, no sacrifice for others, no witness to the truth, no bravery to confess one’s allegiance to Christ, no trust in God to see us through pain, hardship, loss. How are we bearing our crosses? It is an important question. Do you readily forgive those who don’t treat you well or have you thrown that cross off in search of something that suits you better? Are you more interested in worshipping your children, your status, your leisure or are you thoroughly devoted to the Divine Service? Are you doing everything in your power to make sure that the world doesn’t hate you – keeping that “I’m a follower of Christ” thing on the down-low? I’m certainly not a perfect disciple – not close. Neither are you. Shall we strive to bear our crosses better?

Let’s talk about the Finisher. Jesus alludes to building a tower – sitting down, counting the cost, planning appropriately to finish the work. If the builder falls short, fails to complete the job, then he will suffer the ridicule of those who see the half-built wreck. The Lord alludes also to a king who is on the brink of war and evaluating His assets, calculating the probability of success.

What is the tower that Christ built? He built the One, Holy, Christian, and Apostolic Church. It has stood because it is a superlative structure, with the Crucified King as the chief cornerstone. It has stood against persecution, and it has stood in times of world war, it has stood against famine and pestilence and elite apathy and it has stood in the face of tyranny and postmodernism and the scandals of fallible men. The Lord Christ finished the church. The gates of hell will not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18). The church is made in His image. His blood and His sacrifice animate the church and we are the beneficiaries. The Lord Christ bore His cross to the end. He was fused to it by nails. But it was love that held Him there. Love for you. And a magnificent determination to vanquish the unholy prince of sin and death and hell. Jesus' assets in this war were purity, truth, and a never-ending righteousness. He laid Himself open to the judgment we deserve. That is the cross that elevates us, energizes us, teaches us, absolves us, enriches us, and leads us. We are so delighted to be His disciples. He is risen and life has never been fuller.