

Pentecost 13 Proper 18 – Year C – Track 2 - 9-8-2019

I saw this post from an acquaintance this week. It was something she found on a site called “I Do Not Owe You Anything.” That should have been a clue to me – a warning sign. I ignored it and looked at the post, which said this: “I think the 680,000 ‘whites’ who died in the civil war giving blacks their freedom is ‘reparation’ enough.” --- I chewed and stewed and then asked: “Giving?” as in “giving blacks their freedom?” - Who took it away to begin with? She did not get it. She did not understand my perhaps too subtle a presentation of the question: How could anyone think we can *possess* or *own* others? I would not have to *give* something back to you if I had not taken it to begin with.

But this is not a sermon on slavery or reparations. It *is* about possessions, and right relationships, and how things are in the way of God.

Last week I said Jesus was messing with the social mores of his time. In today’s gospel, we have more of the same – in spades. When Jesus says, “Anyone who does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple,” he is messing with the social structure of his day, and of his religion. There was no social security in his time, no social services, no safety net. One’s security, one’s *status* rested in one’s family. Even someone’s name showed this. Remember Simon, *bar* Jonah – Simon, *son of* Jonah – Remember the whole genealogy of Jesus given us in the beginning of Matthew’s gospel. We use surnames in the same way now. We baptized a “Brockman” baby a couple of weeks ago, even though Rose’s last name was not Brockman! “Family” tells us who we are, and perhaps tells others who we are. And “family” also defines and carries certain obligations. “Family” is where they have to take you in. The Hebrew scriptures were full of references to family and to the allegiances and duties bound up there. Honor your father and mother. So when Jesus says we cannot be his disciples without hating all those persons, without hating even our own lives, what is he saying?

Can Jesus be serious when he says, “None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions?”

Ah... there is the key. Possessions. It is always “*my family,*” “*my spouse,*” “*my life,*” – as if we *possessed* those things, those people. It’s the possessiveness that we’re invited to let go of today. We think of our “possessions” usually only in terms of *things – objects*. But in reality, we think of *people* and our own lives in that same way. And Jesus is telling us to give that up.

Possessions are ours. We can do with them what we choose. We are the *subject* – and those possessions are *objects*. We accumulate them. We count them. How many friends do you have on Facebook – or followers on Twitter? In church circles, what is your average weekly attendance? I saw a bumper sticker that said, “The one who has the most wins.” That’s the worldview surrounding us. And it’s the worldview Jesus is continually calling us out of.

Jesus is telling us, essentially, that we can only be part of the kingdom of God, will be able to enter fully into the presence of God, when we let go of our possessiveness – when we stop *possessing*. There is a cost to this, of course. IF something is no longer *mine*, then do *you* have equal access to it? If something is no longer my possession, can I make rules about who may use it? If I no longer *possess* someone – my relationship with that person changes. We experience this sometimes in wonderful ways. It happens the first time you see *your son* or *your daughter* not as *yours* but as a person in their own right. Or when – at your father’s funeral, you find that he “belonged” to so many others, had relationships with people who did not ‘possess’ him but with whom he shared himself in ways you did not know.

This is part of what we see Paul inviting Philemon to experience in today’s epistle. We heard the whole “book” of Philemon today, by the way. It is a text that has been used to support the Fugitive Slave Act, which said slaves are slaves in perpetuity, and to support abolition. This is a letter certainly written by Paul, not to a church community but to an individual, Philemon. Paul is in prison, and has met there a certain man named Onesimus, who is most likely Philemon’s runaway slave, Philemon’s *possession*. The purpose of Paul’s entire letter is to ask Philemon to enter into a different relationship with Onesimus, to see Onesimus not as his property, but as a brother, a fellow follower of Jesus. “Welcome him as you would welcome me,” Paul says. Philemon would certainly not presume to *own* or *possess* Paul – and Paul is thus asking Philemon to relinquish his possession of Onesimus as well. We do not know how this came out. But if Philemon answered Paul’s request, then his relationship with Onesimus was certainly changed.

We heard in last week's Gospel that, if we invite the *dis-possessed* to our banquet table – if we include *those we don't own*, those who are not in our circles – the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, the stranger – then we will be blessed – we will be repaid “at the resurrection of the righteous” – or in my own strange understanding – we will be repaid by the *resurrection*, *by the* coming to life again of our right selves, of your true selves. That is what we are hearing in that first reading from Deuteronomy. “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in [God's] ways... then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you.” “But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish.” God never says God will do anything here. God is simply saying that if we choose God's way – that is the way of Life – the way of Love.

It's all of one piece. By living out the grace and love of God, we are living our true selves, our *right* selves. That means welcoming everyone to the banquet of our lives. It means letting go of our need to possess. It means treating others - all others – as persons, not objects, not possessions I can treat in any way I wish.

Many people have commented, regarding today's letter to Philemon, that they wish Paul had made a clear statement against slavery in general. That would have been nice. But perhaps we can get a bigger picture by seeing his plea to Philemon to engage in *right* relationship with Onesimus. And what I mean by that is this: Paul is asking Philemon to base his new relationship with Onesimus on their *common* origin as followers of Christ, as children of the one God who made is all. If we could all keep that in mind as we look at others – those we love, but especially those we find hardest to love or to care about – things would change.

Mitzi Smith, New Testament Professor at Columbia Theological Seminary, says this in her commentary on today's readings: “I do not believe God justifies enslavement or views God's self as an enslaver. But following God can and sometimes does interfere with putting family above compassion for the most vulnerable in society and above the justice and love of God.” In other words, this gospel challenges us to stop saying “me first” or even “America first.” She continues: “We are a society that encourages greed over giving, hoarding over sharing, and overabundance as a marker of social status over the elimination of poverty. What humans have created, we can eliminate by daily recommitting ourselves to the God who loves compassion, mercy, and justice and hates poverty, greed, inequity, and injustice.”¹

Greed, hoarding, overabundance – those are all words involving *possessions* – about what we choose to do with possessions, about our deep-seated desire *to possess*. We *choose* to possess. But as Mitzi Smith has reminded us, “What humans have created, we can eliminate...” We can change the way we look at the things and people in our lives. We can choose to see creation not as what we were given to possess, but as an expression of God that we are to steward. We can look at the people at the border as ourselves, our neighbors, not objects to be guarded against.

We can stop trying to possess everything, from our certainty about what’s best - to having the best of everything – and rest in the awareness that the best prayer we can make may be that we be possessed - by God. The truth is, we are. We just don’t always recognize it.

Amen.

[Deuteronomy 30:15-20](#)

[Psalm 1](#)

[Philemon 1-21](#)

[Luke 14:25-33](#)

¹ Mitzi Smith, New Testament Professor, Columbia Theological Seminary https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4164