

**13 Pentecost
September 4, 2022**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

It is my practice to write my sermons on Saturday, then early on Sunday morning I preach it to an empty church. I listen to my words to see if they make sense ... and if necessary, I do a rewrite of portions of the sermon. This morning my first impulse was to rewrite the entire sermon ... I just didn't have time.

The reason is that much of my sermon is about who I see God is, and describing God is an impossible task. Nothing I say ... or anyone else says ... can fully describe this force-beyond-ourselves. God is too big ... too complex ... so multidimensional that we can only explain our individual experience of this sacred, holy entity in very limited language.

As a kid my folks bought a set of Childcraft books that contained the story of the blind beggars in India encountering an elephant. In this old fable each person is holding onto a different part of an elephant, and describing his and her experience of this animal. No one experience captures the whole of the elephant, and the elephant is actually much more than the sum of the descriptions. Likewise, our relationship with that mystery of the holy and sacred which we call God is described in the stories of the Bible, but they only point to a greater mystery.

So, here is the sermon I wrote ... offered with a prayer that it is understood. It begins with the story we heard read in Luke's gospel.

*²⁵Now large crowds were traveling with [Jesus;] and he turned and said to them,
²⁶"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."*

Elsewhere in Luke's gospel Jesus says,

"Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on, five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

Wow! This is from the same Jesus who said, "Love one another as I have loved you." And "love you neighbor as yourself." And "treat others the way you want to be treated." However, here he is saying that one cannot be a disciple unless one "hates" their mother, and father, and brothers, and sisters, wife and children ... even life itself. I think this needs unpacking.

What might cause this kind of dysfunctional family relationship? What does it mean to “hate life itself?” What does Jesus mean by “disciple?”

This gets at the very heart of my faith and theology. It has to do with my understanding of who ... or what ... God is. It has to do with Jesus’ understanding of who God is ... and who he ... Jesus ... is. And my understanding ... although I am not alone in this ... is significantly different than most people of faith. So, here goes ...

Let me begin by looking at our first reading this morning from the Book of 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 his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. 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; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. 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 and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Now, by the time that the Book of Deuteronomy was written, wise people already knew that if they lived an individual life that took into consideration what was in the best interest of the community, the community would thrive. If ... on the other hand ... an individual acted on only their personal self-interests, the community ... as a whole ... would suffer. Wise people saw this as an observable fact. So, these wise people from different parts of the world and different cultures consolidated all the behaviors that contributed to the best interests of the community and called them “laws” ... in the reading from Deuteronomy they are called the “Commandments of God.” These wise persons also articulated all the selfish, self-centered behaviors which were not in the best interest of the community ... those behaviors that were at odds with the “Commandments of God” and led to the destruction of the community.

The author of the Book of Deuteronomy sums it up with:

“I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.

So, what does this have to do with the reading from Luke’s gospel? Let me begin with what I believe Jesus ... Jesus the Jew ... meant by “disciple?” I don’t think he was talking about people in his entourage ... those that actually traveled with him. I believe he was talking about “choosing life” and in the process one becomes a “disciple.” I believe he was talking about

taking seriously what he ... Jesus ... took seriously ... about “choosing life.” And as Jesus made perfectly clear, sometimes “choosing life” has consequences ... consequences such as putting one at odds with one’s own family.

Now, my understanding of God begins with the Big Bang. You know that I am not a Biblical literalist, and for that matter, I’m not a scientific literalist. The Big Bang is humankind’s scientific understanding of how our universe came into being. However, one has only to look at the new images from the Webb Observatory to know that some things we thought we knew are now being questioned. So, the Big Bang ... maybe there is another explanation for the beginning of the universe we inhabit. But, for the time being, I’m going with the Big Bang.

According to most scientists, before the Big Bang there was nothing. Nothing. Then, this infinitesimally small extremely dense “nothing” exploded and shot forth stardust that became the building blocks of everything we know. Everything we can see ... and even that which we can’t see ... is built upon that stardust.

Our world today is built on that stardust. You and me ... each of us ... are made of stardust put together in an amazing way that we call “life.”

Anyhow, whatever caused the Big Bang is one of the ways I understand God. Did God exist before the Big Bang? Is God the Big Bang? Is the Big Bang God? I don’t know. However, I do believe that what we call God ... of what I call God ... is part and parcel of the Big Bang ... the beginning of our universe ... the beginning of time.

The Webb Observatory is informing us about the origins of the universe as far back as we can see. We know that stardust gathered together to form galaxies ... galaxies with stars ... and stars with planets orbiting them. Our planet circling the sun is just one tiny speck in this vast universe.

Yet as life came into being on this planet some things contributed to supporting life, while others did not. As intelligent life evolved families joined together to form tribes. Some families ... and some tribes ... flourished, while others imploded. Those with wisdom recognized what contributed to those families and tribes that flourished, and they also saw what behaviors and actions caused destruction.

Now this is an over-simplification of the beginning of religion ... at least the way I see it. Those early wisdom people saw some force-beyond-themselves ... something that they experienced as holy and sacred ... and they gave it a name ... God. Different peoples in different cultures and geographic regions of the planet had different interpretations of what this force-beyond-themselves was and how it was to be described, but essentially they were all talking about what we, today, call God.

And these wisdom people wrote stories about God and about their relationship to this holy force-beyond-themselves. That is where the sacred writings of our many religions came from ... including our Bible.

So, what does this have to do with Jesus, and especially what he had to say in this morning's gospel reading? For me ... and I'm not trying to change anyone's belief system if it works for you ... but for me, this force-beyond-one's-self ... this force that we call God ... is the source of what the Jesus story calls "Christ."

That stardust with which we are made contains everything that God is ... and that exists in all of us. Jesus found that in him ... and in that divine entity within him he "chose life. That is, Jesus chose to fully live into that holy force-beyond-himself. Jesus chose to live so fully into that life that others saw God alive in him. Jesus was the Christ.

And ... just like Jesus ... God is alive in each of us. We are made of that same stardust. And we too, can live into that Christ ... that holy force-beyond-ourselves. We can "choose life."

We can choose life, but it has consequences. It means giving up any and all of our life that is self-centered, that fails to contribute to the best interests of the greater community, whether that be our families, our tribes, our church, our city, our state, our nation, our world.

The consequences of "choosing life" while a member of a family is the example Jesus used. When we grow up in families we become defined by certain expectations. Some of those expectations are consistent with who we are, but not always. When we begin to discover that sacred force-beyond-ourselves ... that force that is also alive in each of us ... we begin to define ourselves. To me, this is the process of becoming a disciple ... living fully into the image of God ... that force-beyond-ourselves that is also alive in each of us. When we "choose life" it means that we are at times at odds with those around us who do not "choose life," and this shows up in the family Jesus described.

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We want to embrace a Christianity that doesn't involve costly choices. We would rather drift along as we always have. However, you have to hand it to Jesus ... he believes in truth-in-advertising. He doesn't sugarcoat his message in order to sell it. He doesn't cut corners, and he doesn't soften the blow. He tells it like it is.

And how is it? Using the metaphor of a cruise ship it's like this ... if we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously ... we have to relinquish once and for all the fantasy that, "It's my cabin. I paid for it." There is no "my cabin." We are on God's ship now, and everything we do ... every choice I make ... every tribalism we cherish ... every idol we worship ... every possession we hoard ... affects the entire vessel. There is no "us" or "them" on the ship of faithful

discipleship. There is only “we” ... a holy, God-ordained “we,” more inclusive ... enormous ... consequential ... and fragile than I can possibly wrap my head around. If I become a disciple ... if I choose life” ... I am responsible for that “we,” whether I want to be or not. God’s claim on my life is radical and absolute ... it relativizes every other claim. Every other claim. Period. Full stop.

To say this teaching is hard is a laughable understatement. Jesus knows it’s hard, so he advises his listeners to stop and count the costs before they sign up to be his followers. A careful builder, he says, never breaks ground without taking a good, hard look at the budget. A wise general doesn’t declare war unless he’s sure his troops are equipped and battle-ready.

The life of faith should be no different. Discipleship is not a weekend hobby or a vacation destination. It’s a full soul ... full body ... full mind endeavor that requires renunciation of our self-centered tendencies. And it means surrender. And a reordering of our identities, and our priorities. It requires “hating” what is too narrow ... too exclusive ... and too inward-looking, and learning instead to love what is broad, inclusive, and boundless.

“None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all of your possessions,” Jesus tells a large crowd in our reading. “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” If those two warnings aren’t dire enough, he issues a third ... a real zinger: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”

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