

RCL YEAR C, PROPER EIGHTEEN, September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2007  
*Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 1; Philemon 1-21; St. Luke 14:25-33*  
 St. Edmund's Episcopal Church  
 The Reverend George F. Woodward III

The Ohio State Buckeyes started their season with a win over Youngstown when I was back in Ohio last wee, and our chief rival Michigan lost to some never-before-heard-of college team called "the Appalachians;" not that Ohio ended it's potential championship season last year so as to leave me any bragging rights! But it made for a good time to be in Ohio! It was a comfortable enough 80 degrees back in Columbus while 112 degrees here, which just goes to show you that when the Rector leaves town, the Devil moves in!

Christians who are at all involved in church-life are accustomed to hearing what the Church ought to do to make itself attractive to new members. We slip pretty quickly into marketing language, and conversations about adequate signage, and how the parish can compete with the soccer field, appeal to a variety of musical tastes. We need to be entertaining so we can hold the attention of congregants, who, after all, have a variety of other uses to which they might put their Sunday mornings! These are useful discussions, and we have them at St. Edmund's with some frequency.

Today's lessons, though, and particularly our Gospel, offer us a counterpoint. Rather than making our ultimate concern what we think will please; what meets our needs and fills and diverts and entertains, we are counseled to remember that we are creatures in relationship to a Creator, and that the Creator makes demands of us. Our lessons are about choice, obligation and duty and about what Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor who objected to the ways in which the Church accommodated National Socialism in Germany; about what he referred to in his writings as "The Cost of Discipleship."

There is a cost associated with our decisions small and large, isn't there? Live in California and you're going to pay more for your house. Chose Iowa and you have to put up with the cold and the presidential candidates. The kids can run free in Iowa, but they have greater opportunity in L.A. Robert Frost's "road less traveled" refers to those forks in the path that we always come to, and the recognition that a choice with inevitable consequences must be made. Most of those choices are, at heart, spiritual in nature, involving our values and commitments and fundamental beliefs. Often there are two equally right choices, and that is where we most need fine-tuned hearts to choose well.

We are wonderfully free creatures, predestined to live and die, to bear a certain genetic code and cultural stamp, but wildly unencumbered otherwise to shape who we may become. Our lessons are about how we make wise and holy decisions in the midst of the sometimes fearful freedom we indwell. They teach us that, in Christ's view, the greatest freedom follows the choice to become encumbered to God; a choice which thereafter informs every free choice we have to make.

This is what Jesus is saying to those large crowds....not that they must literally hate mother, father, wife, children, brothers and sisters...He is employing hyperbole...not that Jesus and the Church become the only thing in our lives. He is not enjoining fanaticism or the relinquishment of all possessions. He is saying that our primary allegiance and ultimate commitment must be to God, and that consequences will

inevitably follow from such decision; consequences that will affect every aspect of our lives, our most intimate relationships, and our use of our material goods. A decision for Christ is that fundamental, and it will prove costly. The one who follows the way of Christ can not expect to avoid the burdens of the Master they have freely chosen to serve.

When I was in seminary, my focus was Philosophical Theology, and the professor who taught that discipline was W. Taylor Stevenson. He was known as a difficult professor, and he had a wall-eye that seemed to follow you everywhere. I recall trying to break the ice with Fr. Stevenson after the first day of my first class with him at Seabury. I told him that the priest in Chicago that I was working for on Sundays had told me that he had been one of Fr. Stevenson's students. Taylor Stevenson fixed me with that eye of his, and said of the priest: "He may have attended my lectures, but he was not one of my students." At that moment, I knew I had my work cut out for me with W. Taylor Stevenson!

A great many crowds were following Jesus on the day He made the statements we've read in St. Luke's Gospel, and a great many people bandy His Name about today. I wonder to how many of them, and to how many of us, He isn't saying something very like W. Taylor Stevenson. "You may have heard my words, but you are not yet among my disciples."

Samuel Candler, Dean at St. Philip's Cathedral in Atlanta, defines leadership as "*the practice of growing people through change.*" As we look at our calling at St. Edmund's, we could do worse than to adopt this definition. There is much bad religion afloat; much fundamentalism, politicized religion, sheer emotionalism. Too few churches offer sane and sound religious leadership. Leadership, like prayer or good exercise habits, is a discipline and a practice and something learned. It is focused on the development of people who are trying to navigate life in a period of great social flux and change. If such people come to church, they may be happy for signage and likeable music, but I'd bet my last dollar they're really hunting for a candle to light the way. They are ready for costly discipleship if they are asked, for a commitment to Christ which will offer them a perspective which informs their most intimate and difficult choices. Our first task is to sustain, not to entertain; to offer a thoughtful Gospel at its demanding best.

That Gospel isn't much different than the one proclaimed by that great prophet of Anglicanism Richard Hooker preaching and writing in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. In that period of Queen Elizabeth's reign and not long after the refutation of bloody Queen Mary's attempt to re-establish Roman Catholicism in England, Hooker argued that believers in the Roman ways shouldn't be demonized; a stance which placed him in considerable danger. His main battle was with the Puritans, those who insisted on a too literal interpretation of the Bible, and who would go to any lengths to destroy emerging Anglicanism in favor of a more radical Genevan Presbyterianism. He challenged the destructive forces of his time, and left us what his biographer Philip Secor calls: "*a legacy of order, reason, toleration, and compromise—a pragmatic and tolerant middle way between the tempting dogmatisms of his day.*" (Richard Hooker, by Philip Secor, pg. xiii). That isn't a bad summary of the core values of this parish.

Our times are replete with the press of change, and leadership is needed. Puritans abound. Churches seem bent on making themselves havens of entertainment. Many have their doubts about Christianity, and for good reason. We are to be a place where quiet commitments are made and kept; those that inform our most intimate relationships,

and our choices about everything else, where the cost has been counted and assumed, and the dogmatism of our day weighed and found wanting in favor of a reasonable and serious discipleship.

Moses knew that choosing life can be difficult. The temptation to find our identity through family, self-fulfillment and possessions is strong, and so Jesus warns us to pay attention to the cost of discipleship. Whether buildings or wars, marriages or organ projects, it is important to consider what we are getting ourselves into, and to determine whether we can make a sustained commitment to our choices freely made.

It might be easier if we could count the cost once, make the sacrifice and get it over with. But the price of discipleship is ongoing, and faithfulness requires tenacity that does not give up in the face of challenge. Faithfulness involves laying down our lives in little pieces, through small decisions, over and over again, because we have chosen to take up our Cross, and follow Christ. Amen. GFW+