

## Sermon for Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Robert W. Bertram

Psalm 10:12-15. 17-19

Proverbs 9:8-12

Philemon 1 (2-9) 10-21

Luke 14:25-33

Today's Gospel seems so lacking in promise and cheer and so bent upon "hating" family and spouse and self that it is no wonder the lectionary-pickers make amends with an Old Testament Lesson and a Second Lesson which seem to compensate for the Gospel, as if to explain, It's not as bad as it sounds. The truth is, the Gospel is as bad as it sounds, and there is no way to hear its good news except right through the middle—not around but through—its bad news.

Granted, if Jesus' demand that we must hate kith and kin inspires fear, (and it is meant to) then we may take some comfort from hearing that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." (Proverbs 9:10) "Reprove a wise man, and he will love you." (v.8) Consolation: by Jesus' Gospel we stand reproved, frightfully, therefore we must be wise. Are we grieved by our Lord's call to "renounce" all we have, even our nearest and dearest? Then Paul's word to Philemon concerning his lost slave Onesimus may apply to the husband or father you have "lost" for the sake of Christ: "Perhaps this is why he was parted from you for awhile, that you might have him back for ever . . . ." (v.15)

But let us not run too soon to the neighbors for help—in this case, to the Second and the Old Testament Lessons—before exhausting what the Gospel Lesson itself has to say, both bad and good.

At first glance Jesus seems to be saying our trouble is that we have too much of something—too many attachments to parents and children and siblings and spouses and self—and that, if we are going to follow him, we shall need to unload this excess: "Whoever of you does not renounce all that he has . . . ." (v.33) Our problem, so it seems, is our distracting overload.

But look again. There is a Jewish saying, "Where there is too much, something is missing." Isn't that what our Lord is saying here, something is missing? The trouble with one's family and friends, with "all that one has," especially one's "own life," is that there is something essential they do not have enough of. It is, says Jesus, like setting out to build a tower or to mount a war, only to discover halfway through that you have run out of bricks or troops. Something is lacking. So it is not that my marital and family and occupational responsibilities are too much for me, and so need to be cut back, though that is what I prefer to imagine.

On the contrary, it is what my responsibilities do not have, what they cannot give which needs to be exposed. They cannot, though I always imagine they can, make life ultimately worthwhile. And the illusion that they can, that they can make me into somebody—that is what needs renouncing, hating. It is not my job which is my cross. What is it my assuming that the job is the key to my survival. It is that false assumption—say, about my marriage—and not my marriage itself which I need to bear as my "cross," (v.27), for which I need crucifying.

But what about those crosses, which, I repeat, are not our spouses as such or our egos as such but our spouses and our egos painfully, mortifyingly stripped of their messianic expectations? (And in that demoted form they do hurt). What to do with them? Discard them? On the contrary, bring them along, says Jesus. Each of us, bearing our own crosses, is to "come after me." And why after him? Because he has a way with crosses, ours as well as his. What distinguishes Jesus as the Christ and his invitation as Good News is not just that he will tolerate no rivals for our loyalty but that he alone can accommodate those rivals and can transpose them for us from burdens into joys or, as Paul tells Philemon, from slaves into brothers and sisters.

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