

The Estimated Bill

Jeremiah 18:1-11, Matthew 14:25-33, Philemon 8-16

First Presbyterian Church

September 8, 2019

Introduction to the Philemon reading

Before reading out Gospel for the day, I want to read a few verses from Paul's letter to Philemon. When Paul writes his letter to Philemon, he is old and he in prison. Now, prisons were different in Paul's day in the sense that meals and beds and clothes and health care and books were not provided to the prisoners. So, if you were fortunate you had someone on the "outside" who could care for you while you were locked up – a family member or friend to bring you food, a blanket, or just provide you some companionship.

Onesimus was that person for Paul. The thing is Onesimus was the slave... the property... of a Christian man named Philemon. It is possible, even likely, that Onesimus had escaped from Philemon and while on the run somehow met up with Paul... and through Paul met the Lord and became a follower of The Way. And now, Paul is sending Onesimus back to his "owner" Philemon bearing this letter asking him to receive him NOT as a slave, as his brother in Christ.

Philemon

For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back for ever, no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

Introduction to the Luke reading

Now, just one quick word about our Gospel reading, when you hear the word "hate", remember that there is nothing of the emotion we experience when we hear someone say, "I hate you." "Hate" as Jesus uses it, is a Semitic expression meaning to "turn away from," "to detach oneself from." In other words, we're not supposed to take what Jesus says, but we are supposed to take it seriously.

Luke 14:25-33

Now large crowds were travelling with him; 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. ²⁷

Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. ²⁸For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, ³⁰saying, "This fellow began to build and was not able to finish." ³¹Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³²If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. ³³So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

Sermon

Until recently I drove only old cars. A ten-year old car was barely broken in... fifteen years was about average. Now, one thing about being an old car driver is that you make good use of AAA... you visit the repair shop with some regularity... and you're on a first name basis with the service staff. And you learn that there's a routine you go through standing there at the service desk... you tell the service rep what's wrong... he or she brings some numbers up on their screen... and then out of the printer comes the dreaded document known as the "estimated bill." You give your OK the "estimate" before you leave... knowing that if it looks worse after they open the hood or get it up on the rack, you'll get a call about noon with the even more dreaded "revised estimated bill." Jesus, it seems, approved of estimated bills.¹

In this morning's Gospel passage, he is at the peak of what the world calls "success" – large crowds are flocking to be hear him... drawn by his power to heal and his ability to speak with authority. His social media platforms are exploding... everyone wants a selfie or an autograph... a souvenir or a story to share. The powerful want to be seen with him... the suffering wants to touch him. And at that point Jesus must have been at least a little tempted to just throw open the door and get all those folks while the gettin was good.

But oddly enough, Jesus, being Jesus, does just the opposite. He deflects the attention... he directs the adoration to God... and he makes clear that his path is not one of worldly glory, but the way of sacrificial love and costly service. And in what has to be described as "very disturbing language," he tells these adoring masses that before they follow him even one more step, they'd better add up the cost of being his disciple. "I'm on my way to Jerusalem," he's saying: "So think about what you are doing... and decide if you are willing to stay with me all the way." It's a killer of an estimated bill.

¹ Michael Lindvall in his sermon "The Estimated Bill" preached September 4, 2005 at Brick Presbyterian Church, New York

Now, let's take a moment to remember that when Jesus REALLY wants to drive home a point, he sometimes exaggerates a little. Actually, he uses a rhetorical device that was common to the rabbis of his day – it's called radical hyperbole – you make such a dramatic overstatement that no one can miss your point. And who could miss this?

First, you have to hate your father and mother, your spouse and your children, your brothers and your sisters, and your own life itself. Second, you have to take up your cross – and everybody knew where that would lead. And finally, at the end of the passage Jesus adds one last item to the estimated bill – you have to give away all of your possessions.

Then he asks the crowd two rhetorical questions. "If you want to build a tower, you figure out what it's going to cost you BEFORE you lay the first stone, right?" Or... "If you were a king setting out to do battle with another king, you'd count your troops and estimate your losses BEFORE rather than after the battle, wouldn't you?" So, it is for you who would follow me. Before you take the next step, take a good look at this estimated bill: detach from your family... turn away from your earthly possessions... be willing to give your life.

Clearly, Jesus intended these words to hit hard... he meant for them to snap us to attention...because he wanted to make absolutely sure that the final bill did not exceed the estimate! So.... if Jesus is exaggerating to make a point... if he doesn't literally want us to alienate our closest family or throw ourselves into poverty or die an early death... what DOES he mean?

More than anything, he means that among the many loyalties which all of us have, he must take precedence. He must come first - before all else. There is a venerable old story I may have told you before. It comes from missionary priests in France who were working to convert a particularly ferocious Germanic tribe to the Christian faith. These warriors were very reluctant converts; especially because this new religion was one that preached peace and they loved making war.

So as the story goes, when they were at last convinced to be baptized in some river in France, the men of the tribe waded into the water, carefully holding their swords above the surface...symbolically refusing to yield that part of them to Christ, the Prince of Peace. It's no different for you or me when we want to hold something out of the water... when there is some part of our lives that we are reluctant to place under God. And Jesus' point is that you just can't hold anything out of the water.

Well, I want you to know that whenever Jesus goes to exaggerating to make a point, I get very uncomfortable... and frankly, I want to push back. Is it OK for a preacher to want to push back? I think about myself... I try to be ethical. I want my values to align with those of scripture. I try to have a servant's heart and to love my neighbor at least as much as I do myself. Kris and I have taught our kids to share and be mindful of others... to be grateful for their many blessings... and to stand up for those who are vulnerable and forgotten.

But I hear Jesus today and wonder is that enough? It doesn't sound all that radical... and certainly doesn't equate with Jeremiah's conversation with God the potter. Have I been radically reworked... transformed... made a whole new vessel as a result of my commitment to Christ? Well, I'm pretty sure the answer to that is, NO!

Which is why I wanted to tell you the story of Paul and Onesimus and Philemon this morning. You see, Paul's letter to Philemon represents a test of the real-life impact of being a follower of Jesus Christ. Because in Philemon's real life what it means to be children of God and brothers in the Body of Christ is literally bumping up against the culturally-accepted practice of slavery. And Paul is calling on Philemon to act differently... to be different... to make choices counter to his own self-interest and to live in contrast to the ways of the prevailing culture. Paul reminds Philemon that our relationship to Christ... it changes our relationships to each other. Our discipleship reworks our real, lived priorities.²

So, maybe we could start with Philemon and use him as the lens through which to see Jesus this week. And we can ask: What real-life scenarios are we facing that call us to be different... that call us to choose things that look to the interest of others... that require us to give up something in order that someone else will benefit... that reshape our relationships, loyalties, and priorities so as to reflect God's love for the world and every creature in it?

What real-life decisions will make us stop and question our willingness to do the work... to pay the price... take the time... make the sacrifices needed? For all his radical hyperbole, I think these are the questions the Lord would have us ask this morning.

Well, I suppose I might end the sermon here (and surely some of you would welcome that), but it strikes me that there's still one important question to be asked: If the estimated bill for following Jesus is everything, then what exactly do we get in return?³

Well, to attempt to answer that question I want to harken back to Heather's sermon last week...because this question as to what we get in return is subtly answered in the passages that come before... where Jesus tells three stories that are all about the same thing – banquets. All three stories are about banquets.

So, what do you get when the estimated bill is everything? You get the feast of a lifetime. Because the core affirmation of the Christian faith is that when you place everything... absolutely everything under God... you get it all back. Not the same, but even better for the very act of placing it before God. You place your career – you place your goals, your professional life – you place all that under God, and it comes back, but it's raised to a higher purpose. You place your family life – your relationships with your mother and father and spouse and children and sisters and brothers – you place those under God, and they come back, somehow tempered in a deeper love.

² Jill Duffield in her essay this week on these lectionary texts in the Presbyterian Outlook.

³ Lindvall again.

You place your hobbies, your activities, your satisfactions, your loves, your frustrations, your sorrows and joys, your money and possessions – you place all of it under God, and so offered up it comes back to you... but it's all re-shaped, re-created... higher and deeper, because you were willing to put it in its place under God. The “estimated bill” is everything, Jesus says, your very life. But when you offer it up... when you place it all under God... all of it... what you get back is so much more than you gave.

Life becomes a great banquet of love... a feast of deep meaning and purpose... a table piled high with the things that make for life abundant.