

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (c)
Deuteronomy 30:15-20 Philemon 1-21 Luke 14:25-33
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
September 4, 2022 [Traditional]

Swimming was a big sport at my high school. We had a dynasty back in the 70s and 80s, and it was all because of our coach, Joe Ruberg. His son was one of my best friends, and when I was over at their house, Mr. Ruberg was one of the nicest men I knew. But as a coach, he was General Patton. If he was a coach today, there would be lawsuits. He drove us to the limit. Practices before and after school. Weight training. A diet regimen. Non-stop, year-round training, winter and summer.

Mr. Ruberg was a character. He'd fly into head-exploding rages. He'd play Jonny Cash songs on the PA system during practices and sing along with them. Lately there's been a commercial online with that song "I've been everywhere, man." And I wince every time it comes on.

Every year, almost half of the youth who signed up for swimming quit the team within two weeks. But for those who stuck with it, Joe performed miracles. It wasn't just athletic accomplishment. He changed kids' lives for the better, forever. Young men who at the beginning of the year could barely look you in the eyes when you talked to them became confident go-getters by the end of it. We loved the work and the discipline, we followed our drill sergeant, because we knew in our bones that the payoff was going to be amazing. And it was.

When we think of Jesus, we usually don't think of a tough general. But really, if you take seriously practically anything Jesus says in the gospels, you realize he is demanding a much higher sacrifice from you and me—his followers—than any army general ever would or could. Today's gospel is just one among many in which Jesus is warning us about the cost of being his disciple. He turns around and sees a lot of people following him. He's starting to gather these big crowds. And he knows that these people don't understand what they're getting into. Probably most of them are just doing the typical religion thing, looking for something to build themselves up and make them feel good in the short term.

So when he lays out the cost of discipleship today, he only talks about the sacrifice. The complete and utter negation of ourselves. He spells it out: "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....and by the way, give away all your possessions." To follow Jesus is to hand over our lives. And here's the thing, in today's gospel, he makes no mention of any payoff at the end. As it stands on the page, there is no comfort, no softness, no escape hatch to be found in today's gospel lesson. He tells us we need to count up the resources we have to follow him; and the answer has to be: *we have nothing of our own* to barter with in front of God.

As a salesman, my old swimming coach had Jesus beat by a longshot, because the coach speaks in terms we recognize and live with every day. You put in a certain amount of sacrifice, and you will receive a reward equal to your effort. Jesus on the other hand, calls us to a sacrifice which is incalculable. You can't just give 40-50-60 hours a week to me, Jesus is saying, because that means you're still holding back part of your life.

This is God sending a message to us to us right now, that should hit us like a bullet. This isn't just about you and me making one more choice in life, to follow this man or that woman, to get involved in this or that activity. This is the difference between one life, centered in self, and another centered in God's grace. Following Jesus is to see that just the fact that you and I are here together in this room in his name is a miracle. It's to see that an infinite price was paid just so we could wake up this morning. An infinite price was paid so that you and I can have a future. Yes we have to admit we're totally broken people living in a broken world. We have to acknowledge, that living in this broken world means we're adding to a bill that sooner or later is going to arrive in the mail. And we're not going to be able to pay that bill. But we can more than live with that, knowing the One who has saved us.

In a lot of what Jesus says in the gospel lessons like today's, it's like he's presenting us with the final bill. And he's saying, it's better if the full cost gets paid today, because tomorrow is too late. A lot of people turn away from Jesus when he speaks in these extreme terms, when he makes it clear what that full bill is going to be. We try to turn away from looking at the bill, from looking at our weakness, our brokenness, our death. We don't like the idea that we can't somehow pay our own way out of this situation, that we can't justify our own existence. The world tries to escape from that reality, that Jesus points out...the reality that when it comes to our power as human beings without God, all the doors will eventually shut on us.

But you and I know that to run away from that reality, is to miss the power of the resurrection. The One who brings you and me the bad news about our bill, is also the risen Lord who has, once and for all, paid all our debt. And all the rewards of his discipline and faithfulness to his Father has come straight to you and me: a secure future, faith, hope in God, a joy that's bigger than our defeats and sorrows, peace with God, a life built not on our sacrifices, but on what Jesus has done for us.

God is definitely working through tough coaches. In this life, we live on both sides of the line. On the one hand we know we always have to work and sacrifice and calculate the cost in order to receive rewards. God is working through good coaches, and friends, and family members, and fellow church members, to challenge us (we hope), to push us when we need it, to lovingly challenge us out of our laziness and selfishness. We Lutherans call that the power of law. We're so blessed to know through Christ that it's God, pushing us for our good--because he loves us. But there are millions who don't know that's God. There are people all around us, close to us, who see nothing in their lives but the hand of the taskmaster. They feel that challenge to give up their lives, to let go of their fears and to get up and serve and live and love, but they don't know where it's coming from. They don't know that push is coming from a Father who adores them and

who gave his only Son, so that they can be his sons and daughters. They see nothing but the sacrifices they're putting in every day. And as the doors shut one by one, until the coffin closes, that life of thinking we can pay our own way just seems more and more sad and unfair and wrong, as all we feel like we're saying is goodbye to everything we love and have worked for.

But here, in Church, we get the picture straight. Here we see the general for who he really is. Through the blood of the only Son, He makes us his own family. He bows down and pays the bill for us, once and for all, and every day. What a difference it makes, when we realize we can't pay for this life we're living, but understanding that we're God's own flesh and blood children. We can trust him. We can stop swimming to stay alive. God doesn't want us to swim for our lives. We have our payoff already; our amazing Lord Jesus is with us; he's given us the future. All God wants is children who love him, and who discipline themselves and rise up to the challenge and who fight the good fight for the glory of God, who pour their lives out in love for the world. Children who swim their hearts out for the sheer joy of it.