

# Sermons at Christ Church

## Arise, for the task is yours, take courage and do it.

Pentecost XIII

The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

From the hundred wants that tug at us. From the thousand voices that hound us. From every fear that haunts us.  
From each confusion that inhabits us. Deliver us, O God, and draw us into your relentless peace. Amen

My heart brims with joy and my spirit cannot contain within itself the sacred words that pours from the mouth of the psalmist “I will thank you because I am marvelously made; your works are wonderful, and I know it well.” It is good to know the thoughts of the psalmist, it is equally good to also know that in spite of those words, we are a work in progress, more like the clay on which the potter keeps working. For this reason, we should never give up on each other and ourselves, nor should our brokenness consign us to a base of life that accepts mediocrity and feels discomforted by the new purpose-the purpose of discipleship to which God calls us.

At my high school was a pottery with several potters’ wheels. Two facts I remember about the place; one, it was always fascinating to see a pound of clay on a wheel, and the potter’s work in designing the clay into what he wants it to be. Second, the place was never clean. It was always dirty. Discipleship, like a clay on a potter’s wheel is messy and incongruent. It takes a lot from us. It demands of us to see life as it can be, and to pursue that life, rather than wallowing in the comfort of our distorted sense of self. Discipleship was never meant to break us, because in the end, we come out on the other side, as God had always designed for us to be. Discipleship is about carrying a cross, it doesn’t presume that we are able or fully formed, but that it is through the gift of obedience-of staying on the wheel that we become fully formed. And for the sake of the process, we do give up on ourselves.

In light of this obedience that Paul reaches out to Philemon about his slave Onesimus. Paul is sending Onesimus back to his master Philemon. In a culture where slavery was sanctioned and where the slave owner had every right over the slave, even to kill the slave without cause, Onesimus was in trouble, but Paul is sending him back.

The circumstances surrounding his departure from his master Philemon isn't clear, but it doesn't matter. What matters is that Paul knows that in order to save the life of Onesimus, he had to appeal to the better angels of Philemon-his discipleship. And what better way to do that than to invoke the faith that both Paul and Philemon now share with Onesimus the slave.

In his letter, Paul doesn't command or coerce Philemon to accept Onesimus back. Even though he could. He rather appeals to the common brotherhood of faith in Jesus Christ.

That common brotherhood we all share is an invitation to a kind of discipleship which demands costly obedience to the cross. Paul, like Jesus, understood that being a disciple was not an easy task, but it is worth it, and so for Philemon the cross he would have to carry was looking at Onesimus in the eye and not only forgiving him for what he did, but to look at him with the same eyes that Paul does, and then call him his brother.

Discipleship is about choice, and Paul was aware that Philemon was free enough to reject his request, but the cost of discipleship to which Paul invites Philemon is understood to mean that to be free to make any decision is to be answerable to something or someone. And in this case, both Paul and Philemon, and in fact Onesimus, were all answerable to the one who through faith had called them to be his disciples.

Discipleship is about brotherhood. The kind shown in the radical nature of Paul's letter in which he dared to call Onesimus a brother. The Paul whom Philemon treasured and adored as a father was now calling a slave his brother. The question for Philemon then was, if Paul calls Onesimus a brother, what then is Onesimus to him? He also is a brother to Onesimus. And the brotherhood they share is not determined by anyone of them but by the shared faith in Jesus. It is through Christ that this universal brotherhood is made possible, and for Paul to call Onesimus anything less than a brother would have given legitimacy to the authority and ownership claim that Philemon had over Onesimus. The fact that Paul calls Onesimus brother not only undermines any claim of ownership that Philemon had over Onesimus, but it questions and any claim of ownership that a human being has over another.

The psalmist points to the basis of this brotherhood when he says you fashioned me-yes, you and me, created our inmost parts, knit us in our mother's womb. Such knowledge is too wonderful for us. Yes, such knowledge can only be wonderful for you and me if like Philemon and Onesimus you don't feel like you have lost something but that you have gained a new status as brothers and sisters who are answerable to God. Paul's appeal to Philemon and to us is a new kind of invitation that is based on our new status as people who was answerable to God. St John of the Cross in one of his Spiritual Canticles captures this new status this way:

There He (God) gave me His breast;  
there He taught me a sweet and living knowledge;  
and I gave myself to Him,  
keeping nothing back;  
there I promised to be His bride.

Discipleship is about holding nothing back, because the ability to give up possessions for something deeper is indeed the test of discipleship that we have to meet. Although Paul sends the runaway slave Onesimus back to his "master/owner" Philemon, the true test of Philemon's discipleship will be his ability to lose Onesimus as a possession but also to gain him back as a brother. This was more than the re-ordering of the social and religious ethos-it was about helping Philemon embrace the person that he had always wanted to be.

The test of discipleship that Jesus shares in the gospel story is indeed difficult for many of us to keep. As enriching as the gospel may be, we do not want to hate those we love nor do we desire to hate life itself for the sake of the gospel. Many of us want to do right. Many of us want to find the right balance between the obedience demanded of us as disciples, and the possessions which often consume our attention and affection. We cannot abandon our faith midway because of the challenge of staying obedient, nor can we abandon our faith midway because of the lure of possessions. Although there is no comfort in carrying our individual crosses as disciples, the reality is that the burden of carrying the cross is freeing. It is so because our ability to carry the cross is the one time we recognize and appreciate our own sacredness. The flipside is our rejection of the cross ultimately leads to a less satisfying and empty life.

The human capacity to rise from a less satisfying and empty life to one of fulfillment, purpose and sacredness is what led Emile Durkheim, a notable French sociologist to refer to human beings as being homo duplex or the two-level man. The lower level as the level of clay, profane, common or ordinary-this is the level where we work to satisfy individual goals, desires or simple pleasures. This is the level where no one else matters but ourselves, where we wallow in our brokenness and resent ourselves as being unworthy-that was where Philemon was. The second level is the level of the sacred-the level where we lose all self-interest, subject our interest to that of the community and embrace the cost of being a disciple. This is the level where we feel we become nobler, better, more compassionate and simply good. That is the level where true discipleship rest, where we find incredible meaning and purpose to life-that was where Philemon was called to be.

In all of our religious experiences, the most profound has been one of finding the means or the ladder through which we can climb from the profane and ordinary to experience life as extraordinarily sacred and full of meaning. That's the level where we become one with the divine because we share in His nature.

The Psalmist argues that the person who has finds the ladder to the second level is the one who is like a tree that sits beside streams of water brimming with life and goodness.

The cross may be too much for us to bear. The desire to keep ownership over Onesimus may be tempting. But nothing compares to the delight in finding the ladder that leads us from the level of the ordinary to the sacred. We are God's work in progress-that is what discipleship is about. But always remember that our capacity for self-transcendence is part of being human, and so to live, to have life, meaning and purpose is to climb the ladder that leads you to the sacred. That ladder is available here at Christ Church, our task is to find it and climb it. Amen.