

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

September 8, 2019

Year C, Revised Common Lectionary

Jeremiah 18:1-11 The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: "Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words." So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him. Then the word of the LORD came to me: Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the LORD: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.

Psalms 139:1-6, 13-18 O LORD, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them -- they are more than the sand; I come to the end -- I am still with you.

Philemon 1-21 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus.

I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother. 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 forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother--especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

Luke 14:25-33 Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, "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. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For 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? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or 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? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

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Reflections on Today's Scriptures

Today's lectionary texts challenge us to prayerfully examine our lives as both **disciples**—those who are called to follow Jesus Christ and live out the good news of the gospel, and as **stewards**—those who are called to live in gratitude and care for the good gifts God has entrusted to us. These are themes we will explore more in the coming weeks.

The Book of **Jeremiah** is a collection of oracles, an extended lament, alternating from the perspective of the Lord and the prophet, Jeremiah. In both cases, the lament concerns Jerusalem being besieged by Babylonian invaders as a form of the Lord's own lament at Israel straying from the Lord's commandment to love. The lament is being compared to the essential work of a potter who finds imperfections in the mold of clay that has been fashioned and must now, despite the investment of time and energy already expended, be further refined on the potter's wheel, or started all over. The potter knows the cost of molding and shaping the piece of clay into a practical vessel or fine work of art.

The question that **Luke 14** asks is: Do we know the cost of following the Lord? Just like the potter's clay, we have been and are continually being fashioned after the image of God, in the likeness of God's heart. We can't fully grasp what the Lord our potter has done. Like the potter in Jeremiah, the Lord does not take the easy way out with us—does not give up on us—but continues to reshape and reform us. That is a costly endeavor!

Jesus reminds us of that cost in his preaching, teaching, and in death and resurrection. With great hyperbole, Jesus calls us to consider the cost of pursuing him. God's call on our lives should call us to radically re-order our values and visibly re-shape our actions. He knows it's hard and even impossible at times, but it's our call all the same.

Paul illustrates this perfectly. He is writing to his friend and coworker, **Philemon**, with a request. This tiny New Testament book has one purpose: to ask Philemon to release a slave, Onesimus, and to receive him as a brother. This is no small favor; it's about as huge as they come! He appeals to love and faith. He is asking that Philemon remember what God has done for him and choose to live differently—to choose something that looks to the interest of others, even if it costs him money, power or social standing—even if it threatens his way of life.

As you reflect on these texts this week:

1. Have you ever watched a potter work? Can you imagine God re-shaping you and your community into something God can use? What might that vessel look like? What purpose will it serve?
2. What circumstances in your life or in your congregation or in your community is God asking you to change in ways that reflect your commitment to Jesus Christ?
3. Have you calculated the cost of discipleship? What does your discipleship cost you?
4. Is our Christianity too comfortable? Why or why not?
5. How is this text from Jeremiah good news? What about the reading from Luke, how is it good news?
6. Read the news through the lens of Philemon this week. What does your status as a follower of Jesus Christ require of you to do about the issues reflected in the headlines?

