

Labor in Love

September 4, 2021, Jeremiah 18:1-11 and Luke 14: 25-33

“Holy and Merciful God, we have come to hear your word. Help us to bear it. Break down in us all that resists your will and plant in us a willingness to turn, for we would live; that we would be your disciples. By your Holy Spirit, come to us, now, in ancient texts, in everyday visions, in the needs and the hard work of our neighbors. We pray in the name of Jesus, our light.

On this Labor Day Sunday I am grateful to be among the prayerful workers of our church. I am also thinking about all the workers in and out of church who have passed on before us and the children growing up in our midst, wanting to be as malleable as clay in the Great Potter’s hands. Molded as vessels of love and grace.

Jesus’ words are, as we have been saying for weeks now, sometimes comforting, and at other times startling. We don’t know if he really meant that if we do not hate, yes hate, our families that we cannot be his disciples. That sound so harsh, so extreme.

Was he exaggerating, as he often did to get our attention? Did he really mean don’t put your family before God?

And don’t you hope he was exaggerating when he said, “None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” All our possessions?

What we know for sure is that it is hard to bear the Word of God that we hear in Jesus and see in all of Creation. And by bear, I mean accept and carry within us; maybe like carrying a cross.

This week I received a meditation from the Episcopal priest Suzanne Guthrie. Suzanne was wrestling with the hard work of daily taking up her own cross. She found inspiration from a friend who also struggled. This is what Suzanne said.

“A nun friend of mine, having put off the decision to make her final vows for as long as she could, made her choice based on this old thought/imaging exercise.

Imagine you are on your deathbed. What do you regret not having done?

When put this way, her decision was obvious. She would regret not having chosen a vocation as a nun. She's still faithful nearly fifty years later. (Not always happy, but profoundly grateful.)

Take up your cross and choose life seem opposed to one another. But when are you most fully alive? Probably when you are taking up your cross, that is, putting your life toward something larger, more meaningful than your own comfort.

In these times of rising seas, burning forests, soil degradation, of whole cities losing their water sources; these times of mass migrations, people fleeing from war, violence, genocide, and extreme poverty, what am I going to regret on my death bed? What cross will I mourn not having taken up for the sake of life?"

I am grateful that Suzanne puts today's Gospel right into our fractured world. She is helping me see that Jesus' word "hate" as in "hate your family, hate your life, hate everything that gets in the way of following Jesus" is not an exaggeration. What I am hearing today is that to try, with God's help, to follow Jesus, is to put everything and everyone that we dearly love under the burning light of Christ so we can discern what is larger and more meaningful than our own comfort.

As I lean toward retirement from church ministry, I know that Potter God is working with and through me. My labor of love is not over, even as I leave you and move to all that awaits in Amherst. Surely there are ways that God and God's world is already helping me to respond to Suzanne's friend's questions.

As I live my life, I can imagine that I am on my death bed. (Just imagining mind you!) I imagine praying on what I have done and what I may regret not having done. This meditation will help me on this next stage of my journey of life. It will help me as I put everything that comes forward into the light of Christ. So I can choose, not always the familiar or most comfortable, but the most meaningful.

Now I wonder if this could be "transition prayer" for Trinity Church as you start to move forward in the transition between pastors? Because for sure, Trinity Church and all of us are a work in progress, laboring in love.

Don't get me wrong. Trinity is not, not, not on its death bed, just as I am not on my death bed. We are all very much alive, as the nun was very much alive and answering questions about her own life.

And so, starting right now, in deep faith, hope, and trust that Potter God is working on and through you, might you *imagine that our church is on its death bed? What would you as church members regret not having done?*

Let me close today with a labor day prayer from our United Methodist Church partners in this week's daily prayers.

Divine Artisan,
you who calls forth life from the dust,
you who creates beauty and diversity,
you who delights in the dwarf willow and the giant sequoia,
the pigmy shrew and the African elephant,
reassure us that we, too, are your lovingly fashioned creations.

When our life together becomes misshapen,
when we have disappointed ourselves or others,
 (or worst of all, you)
when our selfishness,
 our carelessness,
 or wrongdoing
have marred the image of Christ in us,
remind us that we are still a work in progress.
 Remind us that –
 like clay on the potter's wheel –
 We will not be rejected or discarded,
but continue to be formed and reformed as seems good to you.

 Master Potter,
help us to remain as malleable as clay in your hands,
so that our heart bears the imprint of your fingers,
and our life assumes the shape that you design.
 With your great wisdom and artistry,
 mold us into a vessel for your love and grace.