

September 7, 2025
Proper 18 – Year C
Season of Creation, Week 1
Trinity, St. Louis
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Psalms 1

Philemon 1-21

Luke 14:25-33

In the Name of God: the Creator of all that is, seen and unseen. Amen.

In today's Gospel, we hear Jesus engaging in what we might call truth in advertising. It's not like what we're used to today – either those lines of teeny-tiny type at the bottom of an ad, or the rapid rattle of a radio announcer... “results may vary” or “terms and conditions may apply.” Jesus' truth in advertising is of an entirely different order.

In today's story, we find a multitude of people following Jesus, probably some of them are attracted to the mundane benefits of the kingdom he has been proclaiming. You know, peace and goodwill, stuff like that. Now he stops, turns, and talks directly to them, about the costs, the sacrifices that come with following him.

It's easy to imagine why sacrifice might have been on his mind. Jesus' journey is to Jerusalem and the final confrontation with a system so threatened by his message that those in power would kill him. In undertaking this final trip, Jesus is choosing, every step of the way, to act in accordance with what he knows about God, and who he knows himself to be.

Our own lives constantly present us with the opportunity, and the obligation, to make choices. And wherever there are choices, there are sacrifices. After all, you cannot have your cake and eat it, too. At the very least, by choosing one course of action we sacrifice the possibilities that come with the other options we have just let go.

Parents make sacrifices to give their children a good life. Many of us gave up things to further our education. Choosing to get married or start a family requires giving up other life choices. Discretionary purchases are swapped for building up a down payment on a home. Deciding to gather with a faith community in the worship of God on a Sunday morning means the New York Times, or an early tee time, may just have to wait. These are sacrifices we make, often with a sense of joy.

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Much of my time is spent with folks who are struggling to make choices. Often, they are stuck because it is clear that there are no options that don't entail some kind of sacrifice – and the risk of some pain. In such cases, one could flounder around in a

fruitless search for a risk-free, pain-free choice; or one could accept that the only decision to be made is which pain is most likely to lead toward something meaningful and potentially life-giving.

Meanwhile, the culture in which we live places the individual, the ego, at the center of deciding if and what to sacrifice. I will sacrifice for what serves my interests, for what makes me look good. The measure is “me first” and if, somehow, I manage to look beyond myself, it is too often to put my class, my gender, my race, or my nation first no matter what this may mean for the whole human family, or the planet.

Here's a parable that speaks to this quandary. It could be from the Talmud.¹

“A large, multi-cabined ship sets sail across the ocean. A passenger whose cabin is on the lowest level of the ship decides to dig a hole in the floor of his cabin. Sure enough, the ship begins to sink. When the other passengers realize what’s happening, they rush to the man’s cabin. “What are you doing?!” they yell. The man looks up from the hole and says, “It’s my cabin. I paid for it.” And down goes the ship.”

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Our readings this morning resound with the theme that choices must be made. Moses says to the people, “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. [Therefore,] choose life...”

Today, we begin the Season of Creation – a season that is all about choosing life...for all. To help us focus on our relationship with the Created Order as God’s initial gift and first mode of self-revelation, each of the five Sundays has an emphasis: Pray – Learn – Act - Advocate – Bless.

In addition to special prayers and hymn texts for the season, we will also be supported and challenged by words from theologians and activists at the intersection of Climate Care and Racial Justice.

The art installation over the aisle reminds us that our origins, both as human beings and as Christians, are in water; and that streams of water lead us to be fed at the banquet that God has prepared for us at the Altar.

It promises to be a season of richness and growth in our ability to make choices that are for the good of all of God’s creation.

To help lay a foundation for our praying about creation as God’s gift and the choices we make about stewarding that gift, I want to introduce you to Thomas Traherne, a 17th century (?1637-1674) theologian and poet. Most of his work disappeared from public view until the early 20th century, and he has never made it to the Top Ten list of Anglican Writers, like some of the better-known metaphysical poets such as John Donne and George Herbert.

¹ Related by Rabbi Amichai Lau-Lavie. <https://onbeing.org/programs/amichai-lau-lavie-first-aid-for-spiritual-seekers/>

Perhaps this is because his writings, particularly about the natural world, are exceedingly florid. The images tumble over one other, not unlike Kelly Latimore's icon of the Mustard Seed that you see at the foot of the Altar.

It's worth remembering that Traherne was raised at a time when England was torn apart, politically, socially, and physically, by religious disagreements and the violence of war and death. It's small wonder that he recommended retreating to the fields to consider the heavens, the work of God's fingers (Ps. 8:3) as a meditative practice.² Then, with some judicious pruning of Traherne's language,

"Your enjoyment of the world is never right, till every morning you awake in heaven: see yourself in God's palace: and look upon the skies and the earth and the air, as celestial joys, having such a reverend esteem of all, as if you were among the angels...

"You never enjoy the world aright, till the sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars: and perceive yourself to be the sole heir of the whole world: and more than so, because other people are in it who are ever (*also*) one sole heir, as well as you. Till you can sing and rejoice and delight in God, as misers do in gold, you never enjoy the world."³

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Decisions must be made – and they are all about relationships. Whether it's about which God we will serve – or, as the Psalmist declares, how to persist in relationship with the God who made us all, which, over time, makes us like trees planted by streams of water.

Of course, sometimes we screw up. In the Epistle, Paul's appeal to Philemon on behalf of a debt-slave named Onesimus, is based not on law, but on relationship – ultimately the relationship that all three have in Christ. It is the bitterest of ironies that this letter was often used as a justification for the enslavement of people in this country.⁴

Today's lesson from Luke gives us two little parables, almost fables, unique to Luke, that are about making decisions, calculating the real cost of choices that will be permanent in impact. But that's complicated.

² This is Traherne's "literal setting."

³ Adapted from Traherne's *First Century*.

⁴ Frederick Douglass had this to say: "Between the Christianity of this land and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of the one is of necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ; I therefore hate the corrupt, slave-holding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason but the most deceitful one for calling the religion of this land Christianity..." See <https://time.com/5171819/christianity-slavery-book-excerpt/>

One of my illustrious predecessors, Jennifer Phillips, writes, “Estimating the cost involves prudent foresight and self-restraint based on reliable data about resources and potential.” She continues, “a balancing of social, economic, political, and ecological goals – *competing objectives* – is required to reach a desired end. Human needs tend to be assessed subjectively. Sustainability reflects a concern for the generations that will follow us, and for maintaining some equity of resource use; it recognizes the immorality of some living well at the expense of others living poorly.”⁵

As disciples of Jesus, what are we called upon to give up for the good of God’s creation? Possessions? Privileges? Comforts? Wealth? Closer to home, how can we help in the healing of our community so recently ravaged by tornados? How do we rethink the place of trees on Washington and Euclid? What might we do about recycling now that the City has changed its policy? What might we do about composting food waste?

How do we have these conversations? How do we practice discipleship in a culture that insists, “It’s my cabin; I paid for it?” We begin, I think, in prayer. In slowing down to consider the heavens. Go and lie in a field, or on your roof, and ponder the vast magnificence of creation as gift to all.

And as you’ll read in the bulletin from Nigerian writer Báýò Akómoláfé, even when there is fire on the mountain, we are called to slow down:

“The call to slow down works to bring us face to face with the invisible, the hidden, the unremarked, the yet-to-be-resolved. Sometimes, what is the appropriate thing to do is not the effective thing to do. Slowing down is thus about lingering in the places we are not used to. Seeking out new questions. Becoming accountable to more than what rests on the surface. Seeking roots. Slowing down is taking care of ghosts, hugging monsters, sharing silence, embracing the weird.”⁶

In closing, let us pray for God’s help, that we might continue to make choices that order our lives and our loves in alignment with God’s dream for us and for God’s entire creation. Let us pray...

Lord of beauty, throned in splendor
shown in earth and sky and sea.
burning sun and moonlight tender
hill and river, flow’r and tree;
lest we fail our praise to render
touch our eyes that we may see.
Amen.⁷

⁵ Jennifer M. Phillips, *Preaching Creation throughout the Church Year* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 2000), p. 220.

⁶ Báýò Akómoláfé, "A Slower Urgency", <https://www.bayoakomolafe.net/post/a-slower-urgency> (2022).

⁷ Cyril Argentine Alington (1872-1955).