

**“Decision and Commitment”**

**John 3:14-21**

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**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent**

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We are not good at making decisions at my house. Every choice comes with pros and cons, pluses and minuses, costs and benefits, and we are adept at arguing for and against. With the right mix of rhetoric and finesse, extreme sides of any pressing household issue can be diminished, dulled, and reinterpreted. Nothing has to be black and white.

I suppose this could be seen as the natural result of two preachers living under the same roof – people trained to how to say in 15 minutes what could be said 30 seconds, but I suspect our sophisticated waffling has more to do with overall education. We have been well schooled in recognizing the ambiguities in life in all of its shades of gray.

Jesus doesn't seem to be as attracted to nuance and ambiguity. There are those who believe and those who do not. Those who have been saved and those who have condemned themselves already. Those who perish, and those who have eternal life. Those who love darkness and those who love light. Those who do evil and those who do what's true. You're either with us or against us in John.

Many of us are tired of that kind of dangerous binary rhetoric. We know the hateful speech that it can cultivate. We know the exclusion that it has fostered. We know the violence that has been authorized by this kind of insider/outsider speech.

And yet, my preference for nuance and ambiguity are not without their own sorts of problems. We haven't painted over the pink walls of the bedroom because two years of discussion hasn't led us to make a decision on the right color. We drove a car, dangerously in need of repair, for months because we could not decide how or with what to replace it. Every year we procrastinate vacation-planning until the last possible moment because the pros and cons of where to go, and what to do, never seem to lead us to an easy decision. We agonized and agonized over where to send our child to school because we could not identify a solution free of hypocrisy, judgment, and costs of many kinds.

The downside of nuance and ambiguity is that we are reluctant to make a decision, afraid to commit. Jesus must have sensed the same danger within his own community. Wise people, using their intellect to rationalize avoiding a commitment. Confusing discussions *about* God with obedience to God; using talk *about* God's way in the world as a substitute for practices enacting it. The writers of John's gospel must have sensed the same danger within their own community. People attracted to talking *about* Jesus, *about* his significance, *about* his teachings, *about* his life and death, instead of committing themselves to him and his way. And the church in our time is plagued with similar kinds of temptations, especially those of us within churches that value mystery and complexity and ambiguity above certitudes and simplistic affirmations.

But there's no way around it in John, Jesus requires a commitment from those who choose to follow. Not a Sunday morning commitment. Not a when-I-feel-like-it commitment; but an all or nothing commitment. I bristle at that kind of talk in the church. Maybe I bristle

because it usually takes place in a stewardship sermon when everybody knows that the appeal, the ask is coming next. Maybe it angers me that the church often confuses a commitment to its programs with a commitment to Christ. Maybe it offends my sense of autonomy, or triggers my distrust of people in authority. Maybe it reminds me of all the either/or people who have used Christ as a weapon against people not like them. I bristle at talk of commitment to Christ.

And I must not be the only one, because a lot of inclusive-minded churches in our time seem almost afraid to mention the word commitment. Desperate for bodies or relevance or easy comfort, we are reluctant to be honest about Jesus or the cross that he tells his followers to take up. This is striking since just about every other organized entity makes clear its requirements. The kids' soccer league manages to sign me up expecting that we will rearrange our schedule to conform to its needs. The library makes clear what's asked of me before they'll give me a card. School clubs and organizations spell out what will be required of me should my children wish to participate. Yet the church, too afraid of sounding exclusive or intolerant is reluctant to be clear that Jesus expects some things from his followers.

He expects our faith; a faith that will be expressed in our deeds – in what we do, in the way that we live. The choices that we make to arrange our lives to feed the hungry with our voices, our money, and our votes; to live lives of peace with our choices, our actions, and our votes; to re-arrange our world in ways to value those who have been left out of the economic system with our voices, our choices, and our votes; to worship our God with our actions as well as with our words. Jesus requires a commitment from his followers.

I was bristling at this kind of commitment this week until I ran into a member of this congregation, a little weary from his entanglement with child he mentors. This member of this church has walked with this child through middle and high school into his senior year. He's tried every stick and carrot imaginable to give this kid a chance. He's suffered over this child because he loves him. I had not known that this member of our community had taken on this commitment. He doesn't advertise it. The only reason I found out is that I caught him a little exasperated after he had dragged the kid out of bed that morning, taken him to school, been on the phone with a principal who knows his name. I didn't know he was so committed. But I wasn't surprised to find this out. It's the kind of commitment that Jesus expects of his followers.

Jesus promises that this commitment is what will save them, bringing them eternal life. Those of us who have been beneficiaries to that kind of commitment know how it can deepen and even save us. The aunt or uncle who raised you when a parent abdicated their responsibility. The teacher who changed your life by encouraging you to follow your heart's passion instead of someone else's expectations. The spouse who stuck with you even when you didn't deserve it. The sibling or parent who did not abandon you even when your life veered from their expectations. The church that supported you when you needed it the most. It is those kinds of commitments that do save us and bring us life. It is those kinds of commitments that change the world.

And if we have been deceived into believing that a choice to follow Jesus is a choice to condemn others who do not, a choice to judge our neighbors instead of serving them, a choice to hate our enemies instead of loving them, we only need remember the heroes of our faith – Martin

Luther King, Mother Theresa, Oscar Romero whom Salvadorans will celebrate this week; those heroes and others not so famous – all are people who made that commitment to follow Christ. and not one of them used that commitment to hurt other people.<sup>i</sup> They made a commitment to Christ and then arranged their lives to enact their commitment in their living.

If I am honest about my wariness to a full commitment to following Jesus, I am not wary because I am worried about hurting other people. Jesus makes it clear with his life that God loves the whole world. God privileges those already made vulnerable by our world. God rejects violence. God honors difference. I am not wary because I am concerned that my commitment will hurt other people. It is the cost of the commitment that troubles me. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who opposed Hitler and was later executed for conspiring against him, wrote about that cost. Grace is costly, he wrote, “costly because it calls us to follow, and grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a person his life, and it is grace because it gives a person the only true life. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of God’s Son. . .and what is costly for God cannot be cheap for us.”<sup>ii</sup>

That cost is hard to gauge. It’s measured in suffering that comes from relationship, in hurt that can happen when you give yourself freely to another, in suffering that comes from accompaniment. And yet it is in this way that Christ promises we will find life that last – the means everything. We are invited to evaluate that commitment during Lent and make the necessary adjustments with the assurance that God does not ask of us anything that God has not already given to us. It is God who first made the commitment to love us and redeem us. It is God who holds fast to that commitment even when it leads God to places of heartache and loss, and love that bleeds. It is God who comes to be with us, to share our pain so that in every kind of suffering, God might be the first to shed tears and to dry them. God has made that commitment to us. And we are invited to do the same.

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<sup>i</sup> After delivering this sermon, a parishioner brought to my attention some more troubling accusations that have been leveled against Mother Theresa including charges that she accepted money from Charles Keating and the Duvalier family of Haiti. Perhaps Dorothy Day would have been a clearer example.

<sup>ii</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), pp. 43-46.