

Sermon: “Who are we – really?”

Scripture: Jeremiah 18: 1-11 & Luke 14: 25-33

“Christian discipleship demands personal sacrifice and a commitment above all commitments, so we should count the cost before signing on.” These are the words of Richard Donovan, found in preparatory notes in Sermon Writer (a resource for preachers) for this Sunday’s sermon.

I feel called to use the Jeremiah reading as well as the Gospel reading for our meditation this morning. But first let us pray: *May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight O God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

The Jeremiah story demonstrates the relationship of God to the people of Israel before the coming of Jesus. The Gospel message from Luke shows us how that relationship has evolved.

In Jeremiah we read how difficult it is for the people to maintain a covenant relationship with God. How easily they fall away – back to their old ways of doing things, and how discouraged Jeremiah, their prophet of 40 years sounds at times. (read verse 12)

The coming of Jesus the Christ signals a very new stage of their relationship with God. Now they have an example – a flesh and blood example – a role model to follow. Now there is someone who can make it all real for them – whose self-sacrifice is made graphically clear to them on the cross, and whose single-minded devotion and obedience to God never wavers and is never in doubt. And all this is

done by a real man – a person who breathes and eats and feels pain – just as they do.

Relationships develop over time. People's consciousness develops over time. Most of us are not born with any sense of the needs of others, for example. We are born feeling ourselves to be the center of a universe that includes our own needs and the parent who supplies those needs – to the exclusion of all else.

As we grow and develop, we learn that there are other people in the world – siblings, aunts and uncles, schoolmates, teachers. We learn about animals, pets, and other growing, living things. We learn what is called **empathy**. We learn to see things from the perspective of another. We learn to care about and for others. Eventually we learn that our parents are people too – people with feelings and needs and regrets and desires.

So our relationships with our parents change over time. At first we are totally dependent on them. Later, they are our protectors, our guides and teachers. They set the boundaries of acceptable and safe behavior and enforce them. We learn to obey for our own good. As we mature, wise parents give us more and more responsibility, while helping us to understand that there are consequences to the choices we make – and that some choices are healthy and life-affirming, and some are not healthy at all.

As we move out into the world as young adults, we become friends with our parents. We look to them as elders with experience and wisdom. We respect the sacrifices they have made for us and honour and care for them as they age. We love them and want to serve them at this stage.

Israel's relationship to God changes over time also. The people expect to be cared for and protected by God in Jeremiah's time. The covenant initiated with Abram, and outlined more clearly in the Ten Commandments given to Moses, is about God's expectations of them to listen to God's word, and to be obedient to God's will. In exchange, like young children, they will be protected and will prosper.

But in the time of this reading, the people of Judah react like rebellious teenagers: instructed by God through Jeremiah, to *Straighten out your lives – turn back from your doomed way of life*. The people responded: *Why should we? What's the point? We'll live the way we've always lived, doom or no doom.*

Turning away from God, the people of Israel have in fact "forsaken the fountain of living water." (17:13) And there were consequences: in 587 BC Jerusalem was invaded, the Temple was destroyed, and the exile to Babylon began. The people had forsaken the fountain of living water – they had turned away from God.

"What's the point?" said the people of Judah to Jeremiah. They didn't understand **why** they should look to the leadership of God – rather than the leadership of other men.

At this point in their developing consciousness, they could not see that the leadership of their peers was like the proverbial "blind leading the blind" – it must inevitably at some point lead them both into the ditch!

Leadership that calls forth the "good" or the "God" in us can come only from a higher Source – can only come from the Holy One. Bringing forth the good in us and through us is God's dream for the world.

Through the covenant of God with Abram and Moses and Joshua, the people had come to expect and feel entitled to prosperity. But here in this reading they are reminded that a covenant is a two-way street. If the people of Judah are faithful – then they will prosper. If they are unfaithful – then they will suffer. It all depends on their choices.

Choices – responsibility – the process of maturing consciousness. Accepting responsibility for our choices and the consequences they bring to us – the development of high ethical and moral standards based on God’s Laws – these are steps in the growth of consciousness that God demands of us.

And one thing I have learned is that God is very patient with me! Let me share with you a little story about this teaching in Jeremiah. In my last year at the United Theological College in Montreal, we had a class in which we were offered some choices about what we wanted to experience. I chose the clay modeling mini-workshop. We were instructed to take a piece of slimy, wet, red clay and start working it in our hands to prepare it for making something. I made a very simple shape with my lump of red mud. After a few minutes of working the clay, the instructor told us all to smash our work and start again. I started making something a little more ambitious this time. Again, the instructor said: “Destroy your work and start again.” After about five times breaking down my work and starting again, I started to cry. I understood deep in my being. Do **you** get it?

This is how the potter works to get only the best pots. The weak or misshapen pots will always be destroyed, and recycled until a good pot is thrown. This is how God works with the people of Israel – and this is how God works with you and me.

I cried for love – for love of God who so patiently demands the very best of me – of all of us. Who will be satisfied with nothing less. Who will keep on working with me – and with you – until we get it right.

But most of Jeremiah's people didn't get it. They were stubborn and willful and persisted in their unfaithful ways.

Which brings us to Luke's gospel reading for this morning. Jesus the Christ is discussing discipleship, and he is being very clear and uncompromising about it. He is looking for people who can follow his lead. He wants people who understand that their first allegiance and commitment must always be to God. Not to their husband, or their lover, or their mother, or any human teacher. He is not saying we do not make commitments to other relationships. What he is saying is that no human relationship must ever come before our obedience to God. In fact, all our human relationships should be modeled on our relationship to God.

Jesus is looking for people who can take the perspective, as he can, of being able to see and feel for suffering humanity, and who are willing to do something about it – to sacrifice the **self** – as he will on the cross for us – for the needs of others. He pulls no punches. The cost is high. Open your eyes before you do this, Jesus says. Figure out what you personally may be asked to give up – it may be a promising career, a family, an attachment of some kind. Also look at your own resources – your health, your wealth, your time... Do you have the personal strength and maturity to undertake the difficult path of discipleship?

This self-reflective perspective-taking is an even more advanced level of consciousness. Can we look at ourselves from a higher perspective, and reflect on who we are, and what we have learned, and where our strengths and weaknesses lie?

Having counted the cost – completed our self-examination – can we put our hand on the plough and not turn back till the work is done? The cost **is** high. But the rewards are great – for Jesus has called us “friend”, and has gone to prepare a place for us.

In a few moments we will celebrate Holy Communion. This sacrament binds us together as Christians, as followers of Jesus Christ. At the last supper he enjoyed with his disciples before his crucifixion he called on them to share the bread and the wine in remembrance of him. He blessed the bread at the table, invoking the presence of God in his actions. He broke the bread, dividing it up amongst all who were gathered. The act of breaking also acknowledges our need for God’s healing presence in our lives. And Jesus gave his disciples the bread and wine. The act of giving is a sharing, of course, but is also symbolic in his case of his self-giving, his sacrificial acts of love.

We have been following loosely the trail of the relationship of God to God’s people. We have been comparing it to the development of human consciousness. We have arrived with our celebration of Communion at the introduction of the New Covenant. At that same Last Supper, Jesus said of the cup of wine, “this is the new covenant, drink from it all of you to remember me.” We remember that Jesus said in John 15, v.12: *This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I*

command you. And in Matthew 22 (34-39) Jesus said pertaining to the Greatest Commandment: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

The new covenant puts spiritual love – love for God and for what God loves – above all the rest of the Law. This is another step in the development of human consciousness. To be able to place oneself in the light of God’s love, and then to reflect that light back into the world as love of neighbor – this is the fulfillment of God’s dream. You are children of the Light, Jesus says. Don’t hide your light under a bushel! Let it shine for all to see. Make it shine in all the dark corners you can find, for we are called to express God’s love in the world today.

And there is much work to do. A broken and suffering world calls out to us. If we are ready, let us pick up our cross and follow Jesus. He knows the way and will lead us – for he has promised to be with us to the end of time, and he is faithful – as God is faithful. People of God, followers of Jesus the Christ, love is the law, and we are the beloved children of a loving and faithful God.