

Proper 18, Year C

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Psalm 1

Philemon 1-21

Luke 14:25-33

A few weeks ago at the end of my sabbatical, my family and I worshipped at Trinity Cathedral in Columbia, South Carolina. The preacher that day was the Very Rev. Timothy Jones, dean of the cathedral. The Olympics were still in full swing, so Dean Jones spoke a bit in his sermon about his own experience running track and field as a young athlete. “The high hurdles,” he said, “were my main event.”

Now I have never jumped a hurdle in my life, nor do I ever wish to, but it was fascinating to hear Dean Jones’ description of how he and his teammates trained. He said:

[It was] pretty challenging. You had to jump, jump, jump, all the while keeping your pace going. Every day after school we practiced, and you wanted to get as close as possible to that crossbar with your leg—especially your trailing leg coming over—because for every inch you got closer, you might gain at the finish line a fraction of a second. You wanted that kind of efficiency of motion in your jump.¹

He says that when they trained, they would place nickels on the crossbars of the hurdles. As they ran, their objective was to jump so low and with such precision that they could knock the nickel off with their knee without hitting the hurdle itself. He says:

A nickel! That’s the margin we were after. Of course, one of the problems is you increase the risk of actually hitting the crossbar with your knee, causing you to fall. And as the hurdle goes down, you tangle up with it on the ground. That happened to me. It hurt. But that’s what it takes to run: hard work. Even sacrifice. Even pain.²

Can you imagine? Can you imagine how much training it would take to develop that kind of muscle memory? How many times he and his friends must have miscalculated, jumped too low, and tangled with those hurdles over and over again? You can just see the scraped knees, the raw elbows, the cuts on the chin that would naturally result from that kind of perseverance.

Knockin’ nickels off of hurdles.

The point of his story that day was that things worth doing are *hard*. Whether training to run the hurdles or training to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, the most worthwhile things in life are *hard*. Why would we ever think they would be easy?

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¹ Jones, The Very Rev. Timothy. Untitled. The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost. Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, Columbia, SC. 14 August 2016. Sermon.

² Ibid.

This deep and unsettling spiritual truth is exactly what we find in today's readings.

In Deuteronomy, the people of Israel have been wandering, wandering, wandering in the desert for forty years. They *know* that following God is not easy; they've been knockin' nickels and trippin' hurdles all along the way. Finally, though, they have reached their destination. The Promised Land is just over the ridge, just out of sight. They can almost taste the land flowing with milk and honey when, all of a sudden, God says, "Hold on! Stop! I need to talk to y'all for a minute."

Through his man Moses, God summons the people and says, "Listen y'all. I have brought you this far. I have brought you to the land of my promise, to the land of your destiny, and you are about to enter in and take it. But before you do, you need to know under no uncertain terms: *it will not be easy*. For you this is an opportunity, but it is what you *do* with it—who you decide to *be* within it—that will determine the difference between blessing and curse, prosperity and adversity, life and death."³

Turns out, getting to the Promised Land is easy. Being the promised people is hard.

Then, fast forward a few thousand years to Jesus in today's Gospel reading. We come to a point where Jesus looks out over the massive crowds following him, and he realizes what they are looking for. They are looking for the *easy* way: an easy meal ticket from the man who can feed thousands on five loaves and two fish; easy miracles from the man who can cure whatever ails you; easy answers for a life that is filled with daily difficulty, uncertainty, and pain.

Yet Jesus looks out over all of these people and says, "Listen y'all. If you are going to follow me, you need to know under no uncertain terms: *it will not be easy*. I am going demand of you things that are going to make your mama angry; that are going to make your daddy hate you; that are going to make people look at you, scratch their heads, and say, 'Huh? Why in the world are they doing *that*?' You need to know," says Jesus, "that while following me leads to trust, new life, and resurrection, it does not come without a cost. That trust you seek comes only from living with uncertainty. That new life you crave comes only from a willingness to sacrifice. And that resurrection? It comes only from the suffering and shame of hanging on a cross."⁴

Why would we ever think that being a Christian is easy?

For many of us, the difficulty of following God is somehow easier to understand when we look at it as individuals. What I mean is, anyone who has ever actually tried to follow Jesus—who has ever "put a hand to the plow" without looking back—knows that discipleship is hard.⁵ You know the difficulties, the traps, the hurdles that you and God continually work on in your life. I know the hurdles that continually come up in mine: both the ones where I'm finally knockin' the nickels, as well as the ones that are still knockin' me. We all know that, for each of us, discipleship is hard. So we keep at it, and keep at it, and keep at it . . . and meanwhile, we ask for buckets and buckets of grace, hoping no one other than God will ever see our lesser moments.

³ Deuteronomy 30:15-20, paraphrased.

⁴ Luke 14:25-27, paraphrased.

⁵ Luke 9:62

But what about a group? What about a group of disciples, a congregation, a church? What does it mean for a church to follow *together* in the hard way of Jesus? To attempt the hard things? To knock a few nickels, to trip a lot of hurdles, and to do it *as a team*? Well, to be honest, I think that's a lot harder, and I think it takes even more grace.

So, let's talk about the thing that's on everybody's minds.

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Exactly one year ago, our church moved from one worship service on Sundays to two. Let me be clear: we were not “told” to do this. There was no mandate from the Bishop, the Diocese, or anyone else (though it should be noted that Bishop Benhase and his staff did provide helpful information when we called and asked for advice). Instead, the move to two services arose out of a simple reality: our attendance was steadily climbing, and we needed to look for a way to make some room. Our fundamental “problem” was a *good* one, one that any church would want. As it turns out, there are more and more people in our community of Tifton who are desperately searching for what we have—what *God* has—at St. Anne's Episcopal Church.

And so, after *five years* of keeping an eye on this—*five years* of talking, watching, praying, and discerning, of knowing full well that this is one of the hardest things a church can ever attempt—your Vestry made the decision to give it a shot. I say “your Vestry” not just because you elect them, but because they are your neighbors and friends whom you know: Alan, David, Bam, Syd, Libby, Pam, Shelly, Mike, Kim, Troy, Art, Rich, and Josh, not to mention the sixteen others who served the Vestry in previous terms over the past four years, all of whom have been a part of this process of discernment. They *knew* it would not be easy. How could anyone ever think it *would* be? But your Vestry looked at me last January and said, “Fr. Lonnie, we know that going to two services may not work, but if ever there were a time in the history of this parish to give it our best shot . . . this is it. St. Anne's is strong. Our love is strong. Our leadership is strong. Our God is strong. We say, ‘Give it a try.’” And so, here we are.

It has not been easy, I know. Your Vestry knows, too, because—thank God—you trust and love them well enough to tell them how you feel. You know that verse that says, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am in the midst of them”⁶ These days I think we could easily change it to, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, they're definitely going to talk about the two services at St. Anne's.” This is *the* conversation among St. Anners . . . on lunch dates, at foyer groups, in coffee klatches, and on the golf course. Now that a full year has passed, it's time once again for it to be the topic of conversation here, with *all* of us.

There seems to be an assumption floating around that this is somehow verboten, that all this is set in stone and can never be discussed again. *Of course not!* Did we need to give the two services ample time so we could fully understand what we're looking at? Yes, absolutely. Will we need to give it more time? Maybe; we don't yet know. But should we pause and pray, listen, talk, and reflect on it? *Of course we should.* And we will. Along with the cost of discipleship, Jesus also talks today about the spiritual necessity of strategic planning. “You don't build a tower

⁶ Matthew 18:20

without first counting the cost,” he says.⁷ I would add, you don’t *keep* building it without checking in on it along the way.

Last Monday, I asked the Vestry, “So, are y’all ready to make a firm decision on whether to keep the two services for all eternity?” (It was a rhetorical question.) “NO!!” they replied as one. “Good!!” I said, “You *shouldn’t* be. But tell me *why* you’re not ready.” “Because,” they said, “we don’t yet know enough.” Then they spent the rest of the night praying, thinking, and talking about what it is they still need to know, and how they might go about learning it. To that end, over the next few months they will be putting together a process for deep listening on this topic, pulling the conversation off of the golf courses, out of the coffee klatches, and into our life together here at St. Anne’s. They will listen to God; they will listen to data; they will listen to you. It will not be *quick* or *perfect* . . . discerning the will of God never is. But with your prayers and participation, it will be *good*. Frankly, at this moment I have no idea whether it will result in a continuation of the two services, or a move back to one. But I can absolutely guarantee you that we will learn a heap about ourselves—and about our God—along the way.

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Discipleship is hard—as hard as learning to run the hurdles—and following Jesus is hard, especially if you’re going to do it as a group. So how do you persevere, and train, and get better *together*?

1. **You commit to loving each other.** A wise monk once told me, “You know you’re living in real community when you start to tick each other off.” Real community takes active love: a love that is patient, a love that is kind. That’s something that has always run deep in the veins of St. Anne’s Episcopal Church.
2. **You give each other grace.** We all crave grace in our individual lives, and we especially need it in our life together. When I asked the Vestry last Monday, “What do you most want the congregation to know as you enter this next phase of discernment?” Bam Pirkle gave a wise response: “We want them to know we love them. We want them to know we are trying to discern the will of God, and that it’s not easy. We want them to know we could really use their prayers.” That, my friends, is an appeal to grace.
3. **You remember that nothing worth doing is ever easy.** Sometimes we’re knockin’ nickels. Sometimes we’re trippin’ hurdles. There’s grace and growth in both.
4. **Above all, you remember that God is in charge.** For all I’ve said today about the difficulty of discipleship, look at what God says just *before* today’s reading in Deuteronomy:

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, “Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, “Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so

⁷ Luke 14:28, paraphrased

we may obey it?” No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.⁸

Even when we struggle to know the exact way ahead, God is here—*right here!*—dwelling among us and showing us the way. But that requires a little thing called faith and another called trust, both of which require lifelong practice.

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Folks, we may not yet know for sure the plans God has in store for us on the topic of one service vs. two, but we do know this: We ... will ... be ... *fine*. Why? Not because of anything we think we are, but because of everything we know God to be.

So come on. Get up. It's time to knock a few more nickels. It's time to trip a few more hurdles. It's time to keep running with patience the race that has been set before us.⁹

Amen.

⁸ Deuteronomy 30:11-14

⁹ Hebrews 12:1