

The Perfecter
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – August 14, 2022

PLEASE READ:
Hebrews 11:29-12:2
Luke 12:49-56

A true story from Russia in the tenth century tells how Russians were forced to adopt the Orthodox faith. It is particularly relevant at this time because it helps to explain the current disaster of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Prince Vladimir I was a pagan with a consuming ambition to unify the Russian tribes into a single nation. He considered several possible approaches to integrating the state and eventually decided the best way to achieve his goal was to use religion.

He sent out special emissaries to explore three possibilities. The first was Roman Catholicism. Although there were no doctrinal issues that concerned him, he concluded it would be dangerous to subject his country to the political intrigues and power struggles of Western Europe. He also looked into Islam and rejected it for similar reasons. Actually, this process of deliberation was more pretense than real because conversion to the Greek Orthodox faith would enable him to marry the beautiful sister of the Emperor of Constantinople whom he desired.

In 988, Vladimir forced all ethnic Russians to be baptized into the Orthodox faith at sword-point along the banks of the Dnieper River. One man's lust decided the religious fate of an entire nation. Over the years Russian Orthodox Christians came to believe that only they practiced religion in a manner acceptable to God. This claim is remarkable considering the fact they could have become Muslims if the Muslim ruler during Vladimir's search had had a beautiful daughter.¹

If the truth is known, many of us are like those Russian tribes. I am Presbyterian because my father and mother were visited by a Presbyterian pastor the first week after they attended worship at the church he was serving. If one were to reroll the cosmic dice, I could easily have been a Mennonite, or free church member in Lancaster Country, PA.

The point is that although we have the illusion of always choosing what it is we really believe, a lot of what we believe is given to us, even forced upon us, from our families... at least until we are free to really think about it.

¹ Referenced August 9, 2022 online: <https://progressivechristianity.org/resources/the-etiology-of-religious-belief/>

Both of our texts this morning challenge us to go beyond a comfortable faith. In fact, both text put upon us a more radical discipleship... Here we are on a lazy summer afternoon in August and some of us have plans to see family, and Jesus gives his disciples some instruction on family values: "I came to bring fire on earth... Do you think that I have come to bring peace...? No, I tell you, but rather division!...father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother,..." Believe me, this is not my first choice of a sermon text as we're getting ready to visit my in-laws next week!

In fact, I love both sides of our family very much, and I believe many of you do too. I'm sure one reason many of you are in church today is that you believe the church is conducive to good family life. We are searching for an Associate Pastor for Youth and Children's Ministries because we care about our families. As a pastor I know that a major reason many people give for joining a church is support of their family.

So, let me from the outset make one thing perfectly clear. Jesus did not say, families *should* be divided against one another, he says they *will* be divided. That's an important distinction. Let no one leave here this morning thinking that somehow Jesus taught us to break up our families! Rather, what Jesus was getting at is the radical nature of choosing to follow him, about making the sometimes very unpopular decisions to live according to his teachings. He was talking about the almost inevitable consequences of faithful Christian discipleship.

Discipleship means decisions, sometimes decisions that are natural and of common sense, then others that fly in the face of the moral, ethical or political mood of the day. God knows that many Thanksgiving dinners have been awkward because of political divisions in families over recent years. I would like to think that some of the reconciling work in families is because of Jesus and his call to self-giving love, because of his radical welcome and inclusion and his command to forgive.

In our lesson from Hebrews, we find a litany of those who passionately lived their faith in God. But let's be clear here also. Passionate faith does not mean obnoxious bullying faith... In this list of historical examples, there is sacrifice and pain which comes as a result of faithful action. True faith *endures* suffering. True faith does not *inflict* suffering. That's the irony of the origins of Russian orthodoxy. It was put upon the people in a way that is antithetical to the gospel.

Jesus' way is always a volitional act, a way freely chosen. The way to God's love and justice will involve suffering but is freely chosen. Following Jesus means confronting the idolatry of our lives. It means choosing Jesus' call to love not only

above material goods, job security, or financial well-being, it means putting Jesus even above our most treasured loyalties, which for most of us are with family. Someone has said that the true conflict, in our attempts to follow Jesus, is not conflict between what we love and what we ought to hate, but rather the conflict that arises between our loves. It means putting the claims of Christ on our lives above the traditions of our families, sometimes even above our most beloved parents and generations who have gone before us. We are to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, because out of that primary relationship will come the strength, joy and commitment we need to fulfill his law of love.

This is a paradox, isn't it? But this is true of so much of our faith. We give, only to find that it is more blessed to give than to receive. We lose our lives in order to find them. We die to ourselves, so that we can truly live. The first and the last, the greatest and the least, the master and the servant are all turned upside down with Jesus. And we are called to love God more than anything else so we can love others, better than anything else.

I thank God that Jesus is a patient Lord. He is the one who is there for us, who forgives us when we fail, but always calling us forward to be our best selves, loving the unlovable, forgiving as we have been forgiven. This whole perfection of our faith is on him, really. We just need to look to him, and practice with him.

As any runner of a race knows, you train with extra weight, but when the race is on, you wear only the bare minimum. If we choose to pursue Christ's love, then we are called to lay aside anything that might hinder or weigh us down. Jesus gives a strong, public declaration, in words fierce and fiery, that following him is no tame, domesticated, peaceful affair. There is fire, division, and conflict. Our word conflict comes from the same Latin root as our word "conflagration" - a fire. When two conflicting values - such as discipleship to Jesus and loyalty to family - collide, there is friction, and sometimes even fire. Jesus says that he comes bringing fire on the earth...

I'll never forget the privilege I had in Paris of baptizing a Muslim woman who had escaped her Iranian village because she had converted to Christianity and her family threatened to kill her if she was baptized. It was a big decision for her, and when I asked her to kneel, she lay completely prostrate on the floor, the Muslim position for yielding prayer. She knew what Jesus meant when he spoke, "I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is complete!" He was talking about his death, his cross. Any would-be followers must acknowledge at some point along the path of discipleship, we are called to follow the way of the cross.

So, discipleship involves losses, letting go non-essentials. If nothing else, there is the explicit renunciation of worldly values and the ordering and privileges of birth. In the kingdom of our Lord, the first shall be last, the last shall be first, and the least of these have special priority. The family values of the kingdom of God upset and overturn any assumptions we may bring from our experience in this world. Rather than get even with our enemies, we are to love them and pray for them. Rather than protect ourselves when assaulted, we are to turn the other cheek. We are called not to be served, but to serve. And in this passage, our faith is not so much an escape from the conflict and raging violence of this world, but a point of entry into it. This thing called discipleship with Jesus is costly.

I think of those in public life today who are choosing to stand for what is good and true, even at personal cost. I think of politicians like Liz Cheney, Mitt Romney, and Cassidy Hutchinson in this country, or Christians in Afghanistan, China, India, Nigeria, and Pakistan, who are persecuted and even killed for their faith. I think of the French during the Nazi occupation who risked their lives to save Jews. I would like to think I would be so courageous, but who knows?

If you're like me, I am humbled by Jesus' call to discipleship, and my tamed domesticated response... I have good days and bad days, for sure. The good news is, Jesus calls us to receive the truth and grace of his love, and to share his love without compromise. And although he doesn't promise to save us from adversity, he does promise to save us in adversity.

Jesus' Gospel is probing, transforming, deep, and demanding. And so I invite you to reflect on your life - are you simply going along with the crowd, looking at what everybody else is doing and just going along "party lines"? Ask yourself, "Is what I'm doing or saying healing and just for others? Do I measure my thoughts against what is true? Do my words and actions give life or take life away?"

Friends, Jesus, the Perfecter of our faith calls us to question what you've inherited and the assumptions and values of the cultural mainstream. When we talk about family, we're talking about that great cloud of witnesses of centuries past, present and future. Nobody's forcing you, but I encourage you: Look to Jesus, who calls you to give and sometimes give up everything for God's love and justice for all.

In the name of our Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, indeed the Perfecter of our faith. Amen.