



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Pentecost 13 – Proper 18 Year C

#### Fine Print

**[RCL]: Jeremiah 18:1-11; Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33**

Imagine you are scrolling through your favorite social media site or looking at an article and you see an advertisement for a job. It catches your eye with its savvy fonts and colors, so you glance at it and read: Full-time, meaningful work you can do anywhere!\* Benefits start immediately and last a lifetime!\*\* Meet interesting people and travel regularly!\*\*\* Inquire now to get in on this grassroots company!\*\*\*\* You think that sounds intriguing and wonder where you can get more information when you notice there are asterisks at the end of each statement that are matched to small, almost minuscule font at the bottom of the ad. Being a wise person, you know you should always read the fine print. And so, you take a closer look.

The first one says: \*You will be working day and night everywhere you go because you are required to follow a man named Jesus who is bringing about the reign of God here on earth. This is a lifestyle, not a diet.

The second one declares: \*\*Once you go through the ritual of baptism and join your new family of Jesus-followers, you may perish by a number of means, usually being ridiculed and tortured first, and then being nailed to a cross (or stoned to death or imprisoned unto death or countless other ways). However, you will also be resurrected and have eternal life at some point... hopefully sooner rather than later.

Next, it says: \*\*\*In following Jesus, you will be required to travel—literally, mentally, and emotionally—to meet people where they are, and virtually all of those people are not in your family or friend group. You probably will not like most of them because they are different than you, but won't that be interesting?

And finally, the fourth one says: \*\*\*\*There is not a phone number or website or address of any kind to aid you in your inquiry. Instead, look around your town to see if anyone is behaving oddly (compared to what you are used to), especially in any of the above ways, and ask them about Jesus.

That is a lot of fine print! Our advertisement illustration is a little bit tongue in cheek...or is it? In our reading from the Gospel of Luke today, Jesus explains to the crowds that were traveling with him that they must come to discipleship with their eyes wide open. The demands he makes seem harsh—hating your

own family and your own life, carrying your cross, giving up your possessions—and they are also crystal clear: discipleship is dangerous. It changes lives, communities, and the world. The examples he uses about building a tower and waging war are sobering considerations for someone who is considering following Jesus. This warning to really think about what you are doing in joining the Jesus Movement continues to be sobering today, in our modern world, in this modern time.

In the early centuries of Christianity, it took more than just hearing the good news of Jesus Christ to become part of a church community. Oftentimes, catechumens (people who were studying to become Christians) would be required to have one to three years of instruction before they could be baptized and participate in the Eucharist. They understood that they would have to change their manner of life in order to be a Christian, so much so that it limited both the types of jobs they could hold and restricted their activities in other ways. Imagine if you were a Christian soldier. You could not swear allegiance to the Emperor (a bit of a problem when you are working for Rome) and had to refuse orders to kill. A Christian sculptor could not make idols. A teacher could not teach pagan myths and philosophies. In a society where that was the traditional way of teaching and learning, this was a difficult choice to make.

To make things even more difficult, if you made the decision to change your manner of life, you were then set on a path of instruction which only gave you a little bit of information at a time. Could you imagine being only able to hear the Liturgy of the Word and then being asked to leave at the beginning of the Peace, as, since you had not been baptized, your kiss was not considered holy? And you certainly would not have been allowed to participate in the Eucharist. Maybe some of you want to leave early at the Peace, but there is a difference between having a choice and following a requirement. The early catechumens had no choice but to follow the requirement.

Finally, after you had gone through three years of learning about Jesus and really understood what it meant to be a Christian, it was time for you to be initiated through baptism. You have no idea what is about to happen. You go to a room or a nearby water source where there is a full pool of water that has been prayed over by the priest. You are asked to strip off your clothes, and then the chrism oil is blessed. After that, you are exorcised, renouncing Satan and calling out any demons from you. Then a deacon places their hand on your head as the priest asks you if you believe in God the Father. When you affirm that you do, the deacon dunks you. You come up for air and are asked if you believe in God the Son. You say yes; they dunk you again. Finally, the priest asks you whether or not you believe in the Holy Spirit—and then you are dunked again!

The baptism finished, you get anointed with oil of chrism and say a prayer of thanksgiving. Only then can you get out of the pool, dry off, and put on a white robe so that you can go into the church for the next part of the service, where the bishop lays hands on you, anoints you, and exchanges a kiss of peace. The whole congregation prays together, the peace is exchanged, and you would finally be able to participate in the Eucharist. As time went on, you would receive further instruction from the bishop about the sacraments and other elements of faithful living.

In your years as a catechumen, the way you lived was scrutinized closely to see if you were really following in the way of Jesus and ready to make a lifelong commitment to being a Christian. The church created this process so that people would truly appreciate and fully embrace the effort and resources that it took to become a disciple of Jesus. How does this compare to the way you came to follow Jesus in our modern age when we no longer have to live and worship clandestinely for fear of persecution? What would it be like to do the catechumenate in the ancient way—dismissing people at the Peace and having your every move scrutinized by your church?

Following Jesus is not a whimsical response to a moment of inspiration or feeling, but rather a deliberate, life-changing decision, like planning for war or taking a new job. We may respond immediately to Jesus' call of, "Come, follow me," but it will take a lifetime for us to see how that decision plays out, and if we did not read the fine print, we may fall away from the path. It is a more serious decision than many of us may realize, and each of us knows what we must sacrifice in order to do it. We are called to put our faith in a process that is unknown to us, which takes immense courage in a time where we have more information than we know what to do with and often feel like we are in complete control of our lives. Discipleship is a process, not an instant transformation.

Thankfully we are not alone in making it happen. God is with us, beckoning us to read the fine print and respond with our lives to experience something more than we can ask for or imagine. The only guarantee is that we will be transformed and so will the world.

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