

**The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith**

**Holy Comforter**

**Richmond, VA**

**September 4, 2016; the 16th Sunday after Pentecost**

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

## **The Closeness of God**

I can imagine some people in the crowd or even Jesus' closest friends, daydreaming a bit while he was talking. Thinking they knew what he was going to say.

...conflict with family because of Jesus...carry your cross...laid the foundation...complete the tower...wage war or terms of peace...

“So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.”

“Uh? What did Jesus just say?”

“What? What was that?”

“Did he say what I think he said?”

Perhaps some of us were caught by surprise by that last line of the reading.

After some theoretical examples of what is necessary to follow him, Jesus gets very direct.

Jesus knows his friends, those who want to be his disciples...and are starting to be...Jesus knows us.

God is closer to us than our own breathe it is said.

Jesus in the world, God-with-us, was all about God

wanting to be close to us...coming close to us...God

wanting to communicate with us in ways that we can understand.

So Jesus talks about family, Jesus talks about building a tower, Jesus talks about a king considering war, and

then he says, to be my disciple, you will need to  
give up your possessions.

What?

Does Jesus mean our actual possessions?

The things we have; the things we like?

Sometimes...sometimes it is an actual thing that we need  
to give away...something that might be holding us  
down or holding us back.

But in every case, the spiritual journey and spiritual  
growth involves letting go and holding everything  
more loosely ...opening ourselves to the  
movement of the Spirit in our hearts and minds even  
when that means we have to let go  
of what we have long held...it could be a belief, it could  
be a way of living...it could be an idea about  
ourselves or the way things are supposed to be.

As we age, we come to understand more and more that  
life is about letting go...we feel it in our bodies...for some of us that  
comes early in life, because of an illness or a situation that is  
difficult.

But for every single person who has ever lived, lives now,  
and will live...life will teach us the great spiritual  
truth...we are not in control and everything we  
have is passing away.

Everything we have is passing away; but, what God has is  
not passing away...and God holds us and all of life  
that matters, like love...love never ends.

Because Jesus knew his friends, and knows us, he talked  
in ways that would get their attention...and taught

what they/we need to know.

Jesus needed his disciples to get that as soon as possible so that they could follow him no matter what that would entail.

To give up what we possess may sound like a great demand, but as we consider it, it is really about detachment. ...not being owned by what we say we possess.

When we are detached, not in the sense of not caring, but in the sense of holding all things gently, loosely, even our ideas, we are freed to attach more closely to God, or, even better than that, to notice how close God is to us right now, in this moment.

Silence, Centering Prayer, Meditation, helps with this. What some call meditation, we in the Christian tradition call Centering Prayer...because in the silence, we find our center, and we find our center in God...it is just there...

God is just there...always there, and in the quiet with the focus, our intention that we bring to centering prayer, helps us know the closeness of God that is beyond logic, beyond understanding.

Five years ago, I was on sabbatical, and as part of that sabbatical, I went to Snowmass CO, to the Thomas Keating people, the source from which all the Contemplative Outreach groups around the nation come.

I went on the 10-day Intensive Centering Prayer Retreat. We did five hours of Centering Prayer a day...not all at once.

I recommend this to reboot one's mind and spirit.

It was the most intense prayer experience I have ever had,  
and it challenged me; it changed me.

As thoughts arise on one's mind during Centering Prayer,  
one is to imagine those thoughts going by on a river...you just let go  
by...yes you notice them but you  
don't hold on to them...

and you return to your sacred word or phrase, what is  
often called a mantra, repeating the word or phrase  
in your mind.

More thoughts come up....you let those float by...and  
while it is hard to understand how this works or why  
it works,

doing such meditation, centering prayer, makes it easier,  
or one might say possible, to let things go in day to  
day life.

Prayer and spiritual practices, such as centering prayer,  
make it possible to "give up all our possessions."

Because without God and without spiritual growth, even  
"giving up possessions," can become a possession.

I almost joined a convent.

People asked me, "How are you going to give up your possessions?"

But that's not my thing.

Giving up possessions, actual things, is not hard for me.

I realized that for me, and what I might need to do to best  
serve God did not involve giving up things...but rather  
learning to embrace somethings...giving up the  
fear, fear can be like a possession for us,  
whatever that fear maybe.

Beyond a certain point, we tend to hold on to what we  
possess, because we fear what life will be without it

or what it does for us or brings to us.

Even good things can become possessions that we do not need to hold so close, such as work.

In one of the commentaries I read in preparing for this sermon, Emilie Townes notes that “overwork can become an addiction that keeps us from nurturing our relationships with our families, friends, and God.

Overwork itself becomes a possession that we can hoard...”<sup>1</sup>

I was struck by that commentary for two reasons; one, I’ve been in a personal recovery program for this addiction for some time...and just this past week a new 12-step program has started to be offered here, in the Lodge, called WA, Workaholics Anonymous; this is the only WA group being offered in Richmond; it is meeting here on Thursdays from 10:30am to 11:30am.

Work, like drugs or alcohol, or accumulating things, can be something we possess, that actually possess us. With help, like a 12-step program, and being around people who love us and appreciate us for who we are, not what we do or what we own, and connecting with God more and more, we can be the disciples Jesus calls us to be.

Giving up what we possess is not so hard when we know at the core of our being that God possess

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<sup>1</sup> David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol., 3*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, Epub., Emilie M. Townes, “Theological Perspective.” Loc 1817 of 12899.

us...chooses us, holds us close, is with us in this process of life, like a potter who shapes and molds the clay, and if there is a problem, does not give up on us, but continues to shape and form us. So close to us.

The author of psalm 139 knew of this closeness of God. Praying with this psalm is a good idea.

“Lord, you have searched me out and known me; you know my sitting down and my raising up; you discern my thoughts from afar.

You trace my journeys and my resting places and are acquainted with all my ways.”

The One who created us, knows us, is close to us.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for us...such knowledge helps us to possess all that really matters and all that will last...our knowledge that God is close and will never let us go.

Knowing who we are for God in this way, who God is for us, gives us the freedom, the courage, the desire to be a true disciple, one who follows in the Way of Jesus. *Amen.*