

For our Wednesday night programs this Fall, we pastors are leading study sessions on the foundational, doctrinal questions – of Christianity in general and the Presbyterian and Reformed faith in particular. It has been challenging to prepare for these. To cover the Doctrine of God in 45 minutes is a pretty quick tour. So I have been reading, and re-reading, books that have been sitting patiently on my shelf since, oh, about the day I graduated from seminary. That’s my confession, since I begin this morning by saying I picked this title awhile back, when I was reading Reinhold Niebuhr. I knew this passage from Philemon was coming up, and I thought Niebuhr’s twin poles of freedom and responsibility, in living out human life, were what Paul was asking Philemon to exercise (from our epistle lesson today).

To briefly recap that story, Paul befriended and converted a runaway slave, Onesimus (whose name meant “Useful.” It turns out that Onesimus was “owned” by another Christian, Philemon, in the congregation at Colossae. Paul wrote a letter, which on the surface purported to turn Onesimus back to Philemon, and asked Philemon to do the right thing in granting him his freedom.

It is only just conceivable that Philemon would have done anything except what Paul asks, although by Roman law he could have punished Onesimus or even killed him. However, Paul wrote the letter to the whole Christian community at Colossae, dropping the name of other church members. That is, he made it a public issue, so whatever Philemon did he would have to do in the full light of day. Paul, who was in prison at the time, did not plead or write as an equal, but pulled rank, writing as an Apostle with authority. He said to Philemon, “Welcome him as you would welcome me.” He promised to repay Philemon for any expenses incurred by Onesimus, but is clear that he wants something out of this as well – Onesimus himself. He told Philemon that he was confident of Philemon’s obedience, and knew that his fellow Christian would “do even more than I say,” and put a little more pressure on at the end of the letter by saying that he hoped to be out of prison soon, and would come to Colossae to Philemon’s house; “get the guest room ready.”

Freedom and responsibility. Philemon legally had the freedom to do what he chose. But he had the responsibility of his higher relationship to the Christian community. Paul did everything in his power to make it easy for Philemon to do the right thing. Paul could have arranged for Onesimus to be hidden, but saw in the whole affair, it seems, a teachable moment, and the chance for the redemption of Philemon and the whole congregation at Colossae. We don’t know what Philemon did. But interestingly, some dozen or twenty years later at nearby Ephesus, there was a Bishop named Onesimus.

For whatever reason, God left Philemon and you and me with a wide range of human freedom. We have the freedom to act, and to contemplate on the character of it. Reinhold Niebuhr says that when we contemplate on our actions, we discover that there is a degree of conscious dishonesty in every act. Sin, he says. We can’t help it, it’s who we are. Philemon may have done the right thing and freed Onesimus, and may have even been *glad* to do so. But in the back of his mind, may very well have been saying, “What else can I do? Paul has me dead to rights (and I *mean* “dead to rights”) on this one.” So (in Niebuhr’s view) while God gives us freedom to act, there is no action we can take that sin does not taint. Sort of a paradox.

There’s a limerick the then-Archbishop of Canterbury wrote, after Niebuhr had been lecturing in Swanwick, England.

At Swanwick, when Niebuhr had quit it,  
Said a young man: "At last I have hit it.  
Since I cannot do right,  
I must find out tonight  
The best sin to commit – and commit it!"

We have the freedom, but are responsible for it. Niebuhr said, "Basically love means...being responsible, responsible to our family, toward our civilization, and now by the pressures of history, toward the universe of humankind."

Jesus asked something of the same of the crowds following him, says our Gospel passage. They had great enthusiasm, but did not understand him. They thought they were on the Messiah's Victory Tour. Or was it a funeral procession? Jesus knew, or anticipated the cost. This language: Whoever does not hate father and mother, wife and children, cannot be my disciple, doesn't mean quite as it sounds to the modern ear. It was the Semitic way of describing a preference or priority, to say it in extremes. So to say to hate father/mother/child is to say value being Christ's disciple above all else. That even kinship ties can get in the way of our commitment to God.

Then he told two short parables, one rural – a farmer building a tower to watch over herds and vineyards, the other royalty preparing for war. Rich or otherwise, the issues the same. "Who does not first sit down and count the cost?" He said it not to deter anyone from following him, but asking that they consider the cost of doing so at least as much as you would entering business or politics.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is considered the main commentator on this Luke passage, and indeed titled his most famous (perhaps) book after it – *The Cost of Discipleship*. Bonhoeffer was one of the leaders of the Confessing Church in Germany who opposed Nazism. During World War II he had a chance to stay in the United States, but chose to return, saying "I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share in the trials of this time with my people." He was imprisoned in a concentration camp for his vocal beliefs, and was executed following his participation in a failed plot to assassinate Hitler. It was a meaningful moment for me, in 1999 when I was able to stand in the ruins of the cell in which he was held at Auschwitz.

Bonhoeffer warned against "cheap grace" that promoted belief without obedience, forgiveness without repentance. How, he said, could the grace that came at so tremendous a cost as the cross ask so little of us? "Christianity without the living Christ is inevitably Christianity without discipleship, and Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ. It remains an abstract idea, a myth."

And yet, and yet, we have a way in our culture of insidiously corrupting things, watering down the original meanings. *Everybody* today wants to make a darling of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to cite him as an authority and in doing so always to support a position of their own. Bonhoeffer was a German and a Lutheran, and we have to respect him for who he was, not try to now turn him into a Southerner and a Baptist, an American and a Presbyterian, Mennonite or whatever. Where we now take the "cost of discipleship" (which Jesus asks us about) to mean "It'll cost everybody else to think like *me!*"

My daughter, from studies in her field, introduced me to the concept of *Simulacra*.<sup>1</sup> “Simulacra” is a term describing a copy without an original – that is, “a copy of a copy which has been so dissipated in relation to the original that it can no longer be said to be a copy.” Plato first used this term to describe a *false* copy. French social theorist Jean Baudrillard uses it to describe “hyper-reality” in a post-modern world - where our simulations and representations become what is most real to us, in fact create and become their own reality. (There's no “there” there.)

There is a Mayan pyramid in Central America, portions of which have been replaced and repaired over time, to the point where archaeologists say nothing of the original may be left. As the process continues, it becomes a copy of a copy.

It happens in myth and literature, e.g. every time the Disney Corp. turns an archetype-laden Grimm Fairy Tale into a cute morality play and a marketing opportunity. The Little Mermaid Ariel stands alone as her own reality, ever separated from the Undine of myth. I used to get paid to create simulacra, back when I wrote advertising copy. We created symbols and signs that were a reality more real than real, more perfect than reality, and then we sold it. But it was a copy of a copy; nothing like those ads exists in human life. It is a created reality.

Baudrillard warns us: “But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say, reduced to the signs which attest his existence? Then the whole system becomes weightless; it is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum: not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself...”

American popular culture has created a simulacrum of the Christian faith. In doing so, it has ignored the tradition, teaching and practice of the Christian church. Absent is the God who loves us enough to turn the world upside down, the Christ of redemption and grace who is yet so dangerous to the idols of our societies. And yet, it is the very definition of what even the press now calls “Christian”. A false copy, invented by Hollywood and Madison Avenue. American popular culture has birthed a post-Christian religion, and stolen our name. It is a simulacrum.

And it comes down to this: Southwestern Seminary, in Fort Worth, has a new program in Biblical Homemaking, for women only, where they are taught to be subservient to their husbands and to sew and cook and clean (according to the Birmingham News, and a friend of mine in Fort Worth who went down there to try and enroll. They wouldn't even give him an application!). And while I know some teenagers who could stand to learn how to clean up a little, I find it preposterous to claim, as the seminary's president does, that this will be the salvation of our homes and even our nation. One of the teachers explains that she “offers the sweaty FedEx delivery man at the door a cookie.” “I don't do that because I have gone to a homemaking program and been trained,” she says. “I do that because of certain things that God has done in my life, which makes me want to reach out...”

(To be fair, many Baptists are questioning this whole development: Robert Parham, of the Baptist Center for Ethics notes: “Water boils, spoons stack in kitchen drawers and sewing machines sew the same way for Christians and non-Christians.”)

But is this a sample of what 2,000 years of Christian history has come down to? Why martyrs were made? Why Bonhoeffer dared to return to Germany and there to die? So we can offer the FedEx guy a *cookie*? Has the greatest repository of Christian thought in our country become the Hallmark card shop? And is it really the case that Norman Rockwell painted the pinnacle of

Christian life, that if we could just get back there, everything would be okay? As we used to joke in the town I moved here from:

Q: "If it's 10am in Denver, what time is it in Roswell?"

A: 1958."

What have we done in this country, with a religion and a Savior that asks of us our very lives in service to him and to each other?

Here's where this comes together for me, with our passages this morning. We may be far afield in this country from the faith that is so dangerous that Jesus asked, "Are you real sure you want in on this? Count the cost." Far afield from the practical example Paul gives us in Philemon. What did it cost Phil to turn a slave into the Bishop at Ephesus? We have freedom to decide how to act in this life, and with that comes great responsibility. But how will we know where to turn, if much of the messages that pass for faith are a simulacrum? A copy of a copy, watered down?

I don't entirely know; I think we always have to wonder and question. But resources at hand for us are the collective memory of the historic Christian community going back in time generation to generation; a faith community with deep historical roots; the Scripture and good scholarship to go with it; and the sacraments, where we encounter both the Holy Spirit and Christ with us.

Counting the cost of the Christian faith needs to be a question close to home: what is the cost of discipleship for me, personally? For us as a particular congregation, in a particular place and time? At the end of the month we are going to ordain and install Elders who you have elected to ponder regularly that question, on behalf of all of us.

I take some comfort from having seen this: A few years ago Lou Ann and I took a group of teenagers from rural New Mexico to the Taizé community in France. There were 1thousands of youth there from different cultures over the world. Three times a day we were in worship where simple songs claimed images thousands of years old, where we sat in long silence in the presence of God, where the Gospel reading provided the only punctuation necessary. Later, we shared a common, but simple meal. (Afterwards we washed the spoons together.)

We all bring our own cultural "lenses" to any experience. But when that's enriched by the common life of a multi-racial, multi-cultural, multi-national, multi-generational community, the Spirit has room to move. There may have been 20 different languages spoken that week. But when the Taizé brothers broke bread and poured one cup, everyone in that vast hall knew what it meant.