



Pentecost 13

September 7, 2025

St. Timothy Lutheran Church, Portland, OR

**THE LESSONS: Deuteronomy
30:15-20; Psalm 1; Philemon 1-21:
Luke 14:25-33**

**THE SERMON: “Heading... In the
Right Direction?”**

Grace and Peace to you in the NAME of GOD: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

With football season beginning, it made me think that often in life something that starts out good turns out to be bad. A case in point is the 1929 Rose Bowl game when the undefeated California Bears were invited to play Georgia Tech in Pasadena. Just before the end of the first half, Georgia Tech fumbled the ball and the Bears' center, Ray Riegels, picked up the loose ball. He got bumped by one of his teammates and got turned around. Disoriented, he ran 60 yards to the end zone. To his dismay, Riegels discovered he had run 60 yards the wrong way and was tackled in the California end zone and Tech got two points for a safety. Despite a second half touchdown and the one-point conversion, Cal lost the game 8-7, the difference being Riegels "wrong way" run. Instead of being a hero, Ray Riegels became known in football history as "Wrong Way" Riegels. Life is like that sometimes. How often I've prayed for God to give me something and, then, later realized that it wasn't that good after all. Like "Wrong Way" Riegels, I got turned around by life and ended up where I shouldn't be.

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

But, that's the problem with God giving us free will. We know that humankind's problems began when Adam and Eve chose to eat the forbidden fruit when Satan deceived them to think they could be like God. Why did God give us freewill anyway? Why didn't God just have us do God's will all the time? But, as we learned in Confirmation, we

can't have love without choosing to love. Even in cultures that promote arranged marriages, when the couple chooses to love each other, then the marriage blossoms. When I was in Japan as a short-term missionary, I saw many happy and loving couples in which that was true. But, when the couple failed to make the decision to love each other, then you could see the coldness and distance. Moses knew that God gave us the opportunity to choose; so, he said in our first lesson, "... I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God... then you shall live... and the Lord your God will bless you ... I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live..." God doesn't force us to love God. It's a choice and the message throughout the Bible is exactly what Moses said, "Choose God, choose life, and choose blessings; OR, choose the world and self, choose death, and choose curses." The Bible repeats this theme over and over. When the people of God choose God, then peace and harmony follow; but, when we choose the world and ourselves, we have what we're experiencing today: division, anger, fear, oppression. Moses' words still apply: "I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity... I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you... may live..."

Psalm 1

The Hebrews scholars who put together the Book of Psalms probably had this in mind because our psalm today echoes Moses' words: "Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked... Their delight is in the law of the LORD... They are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season...everything they do shall prosper..." But, unlike the "prosperity preachers" on TV, the Bible doesn't promise that, if you follow God, you're going to be rich and life is going to be "smooth sailing." As the Book of Job, the prophets, and the New Testament attest many times bad things happen to good people. Then, why should we believe? We don't have to. God gives us the freewill to choose. But recent polls consistently tell us that people who have a religious faith tend to be able to cope with adversity and trials better and are happier than those who have no faith. So, it seems

many Americans are making the wrong choices and, like “Wrong Way” Riegels, those people are running in the wrong direction.

Philemon 1-21

Obviously, Paul knew that bad things can happen to godly people and, as his letters tell us, his faith helped him to cope with beatings, stoning, shipwrecks, and imprisonment. Despite all of that, his letters have a deep sense of confidence and peace. Today’s letter to Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus shows us Paul’s peace and conviction as he asks that they receive their runaway slave, Onesimus, back into their household as one who has been reformed and changed as a result of knowing Jesus Christ as his redeemer and savior. That’s why Paul could write, “Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me... Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back for the long term, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother - especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.” I can identify with Onesimus because, like him, I was estranged from my father in my 20s. But, when Christ became a part of my life, my relationship to my father was transformed. Knowing Christ didn’t magically make me a perfect and devoted son but, instead of being useless, I became a much more productive and reliable helper on our farm. Knowing Christ and experiencing God’s love and forgiveness made me more tolerant of my Dad’s idiosyncrasies and his volatile temper. I didn’t have to argue and question everything he asked me to do. I think that was the kind of change that happened in Onesimus. Unlike Roy Riegels, Onesimus got his life turned around by the Holy Spirit so that his life was running in the right direction.

Luke 14:25-33, The Call and the Challenge

In our gospel lesson it seems that Jesus is wanting the crowds who are following him to go in the right direction. But, his words seem pretty harsh and not what we would expect from him when he says, ““Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.” Hate? This doesn’t sound like Jesus. But, maybe if your family is like the Jewish comedian Rodney Dangerfield’s, then you’d be

justified because he joked, “When I was a kid I got no respect. The time I was kidnapped, the kidnappers sent my parents a note that said, ‘We want five thousand dollars or else you’ll get your kid back.’” But, we know that, often Jesus uses hyperbole, exaggerated examples, to make a point. I think he’s saying to the crowd, “If you want to be my disciple, then you’re going to have to learn how serve God and others more than you love your families.” Then, he tells us to count the cost. That’s what his examples of building a tower and a king thinking about attacking a neighbor are about. Would you start building if you knew you didn’t have enough money to finish? Would you wage a war if you knew you’d lose? So, what is the cost of your discipleship? Would you still want to be a disciple if it meant alienating your family or giving up your worldly possessions? We Americans really can’t identify with that. But, remember Jesus is speaking in the first century when Judaism was the only religion for the Jews. It would be like a Muslim converting to Christianity in Iran or in most of the Islamic countries. It was like that for one of my students in Japan who took a train 40 miles on Sundays so she wouldn’t shame her family. The cost of discipleship and following Christ can be hard. That is why I am so happy that we have some members of our Synod Council with us this morning. These are people who are making sacrifices to serve the Oregon Synod and us and I thank God for them and their service and their partnership in ministry with St. Timothy and all the congregations of the Oregon Synod. Thank you for being God’s Hands and doing God’s Work. Unlike Roy Riegels, God calls us to run the race in the right direction towards God’s future. So, we choose to show God’s love by serving God by serving our neighbor. The late actress, Audrey Hepburn, supposedly said in talking about her work with international relief projects, “Love is action. It isn’t just talk...” So, as our hymn proclaims, We continue to do God’s work and are God’s hands by working together, building a future, and repairing the world.