

“I Have Set Before You Life and Death”
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As I have newly assumed the role of Dean of the Divinity School, I have found myself thinking, on more than one occasion, of Bart Giamatti. The late A. Bartlett Giamatti is perhaps most widely known as the Commissioner of Baseball who banned Pete Rose from the game for life—and more recently, he may be known to some of you as the father of the actor Paul Giamatti, whose major roles include the part of John Adams in the popular HBO miniseries. But before Bart Giamatti was Commissioner of Baseball, he was the President of Yale University. And even before that, he was an English professor at Yale, a brilliant specialist in Renaissance literature. But by his own account, when Giamatti was appointed as Yale’s president, he found himself not knowing what to do and casting about for a strategy—a *policy* to set the tone for his leadership of the university. Then he had an inspiration. Here is how he describes it in his book, *A Free and Ordered Space*:

One night . . . crouched in my garage, as I was trying to memorize the Trustees’ names, . . . it came to me, and I wrote, right there between the lawnmower and the snow tires, a memo. On July 1, 1978, my first day in office, I issued this memo to an absent and indifferent university. It read:

To the members of the University Community:

In order to repair what Milton called the ruin of our grand parents [Adam and Eve], I wish to announce that henceforth, as a matter of University policy, evil is abolished and paradise is restored.

I trust that all of us will do whatever possible to achieve this policy objective.

Now, as the Dean of the Divinity School, I have considered promulgating a similar edict. But there is one thing stopping me: my position entails a certain structural anomaly, for as Dean of this school, I take my orders not only from President Brodhead and Provost Peter Lange—they would probably be quite happy if I would effectively announce the abolition of evil in the Divinity School—but I also take orders from Jesus. And in the passage we have just read, Jesus does not seem to think evil has been abolished and paradise restored. Instead, he warns that those who follow him must be prepared for opposition, renunciation, and death.

Perhaps the large crowds following Jesus had been attracted by his healing powers, by his kindness to the poor and downtrodden, or by his eloquent, incisive teaching. But most of all, they were attracted by his keynote message about the Kingdom of God. In the world of first-century Judaism, to speak of the coming of God's Kingdom was to proclaim a subversive, *apocalyptic* message. Many people in Israel were devoutly hoping that God would act dramatically to drive out the Roman imperial powers, to restore justice in a world gone wrong, and even to raise

the dead and usher in a new world where suffering and crying would be no more. So when Jesus came talking about the Kingdom of God, a great crowd followed him, expecting him to be the leader who would bring the new world they were hoping for. They were hoping that he would enact in all seriousness the policy that Bart Giamatti whimsically announced: abolishing evil, restoring paradise.

We talk a lot about “leadership” around here. And so it’s interesting to watch how Jesus exercises his leadership role in this situation. He does not promise the people a bright future. He does not offer them a strategy to meet their needs. Instead, he seemingly tries to scare them away by painting a grim picture of what lies ahead: he speaks of tough choices that will divide disciples from their families, and even the prospect of a shameful death—death on a cross—at the hands of the Roman overlords. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer observed in *The Cost of Discipleship*—a work written in the midst of resistance to the Nazi regime--“When Jesus calls a man, he bids him come and die.”

So let us ponder this sobering word. When Jesus, whose face is set on the road toward Jerusalem, wheels about and gets in our face with this challenge, what is going on here?

Jesus’ challenge is a salutary warning against facile misconceptions of the Christian life as a path to ease and success. This takes two slightly different forms in our time. One is the so-called “prosperity gospel,” in which slick preachers

promise the faithful that God will reward them with great material blessings—particularly if those faithful believers will just write a check to support the preacher’s TV ministry. Most of us here immediately recognize this message as a counterfeit, indeed a scam. But there is another, subtler form of misconceiving discipleship as a path of ease. I refer to the unreflective expectation that we all somehow have a right to live a comfortable, tranquil life—that God would never expect any *real* sacrifice of us. I’m afraid that view is pretty widespread in contemporary American Protestantism, perhaps particularly in United Methodism.

You may have heard how Jon Stewart skewered Methodism on *The Daily Show* after Chelsea Clinton’s recent wedding to Marc Mezvinsky. The groom was Jewish, and Stewart, who loves to have fun with his own Jewish identity, was making jokes about the Jewish customs that were featured in the day’s ceremonies. Then, observing that Chelsea was a Methodist, he wanted to make fun of some Methodist practices, but professed himself unable to think of any. So he shrugged and remarked, “Being a Methodist is easy! It’s like the University of Phoenix of religions.” (John Wesley must have turned over his grave!) But of course, if being a Methodist means following Jesus, it must not be easy. It must mean surrendering not less than everything.

It’s not hard to see, though, how Jon Stewart could have a misimpression, because often our churches have in fact acquiesced to a lowest-common-

denominator religion that offers faith without discipleship, inclusivity without transformation, and blessing without mission. Even where we find examples to the contrary—and if we look for them, there are many such examples—we are often surprised, inappropriately.

Three weeks ago, six Americans working for a Christian organization called the International Assistance Mission were ambushed and killed in Afghanistan by Taliban fighters. One of those was a Methodist layman named Daniel Terry, who had been serving in Afghanistan for more than 30 years under the auspices of the United Methodist General Board of Global Ministries. After receiving the terrible news, the chief executive of the Board issued a public statement, which read, in part, “It is almost beyond belief that Dan Terry would be murdered in Afghanistan. . . . He loved the country with a passion and worked tirelessly on behalf of its most marginalized communities.” Of course, that chief executive was giving expression to his own personal grief and shock at the death of a valued colleague. But surely no one who has been formed by the Christian story—especially by today’s Gospel text—should think it “almost beyond belief” that a follower of Jesus might be killed in the course of loving the poor and working on their behalf. Dan Terry’s death is in fact precisely the sort of thing Jesus predicted, and—even more to the point—it corresponds precisely to the pattern of Jesus’ own life and death: loving

the world with a passion and giving his life tirelessly on behalf of its most marginalized communities.

And so, if that is the pattern Jesus calls us to follow, here is the main thing we should hear in today's Gospel text: count the cost and make a decision. Are you in, or are you out? The Jesus we encounter in Luke 14 has no time for waffling or compromise. If you're going to build a tower, calculate the budget carefully before you start. (This is advice that Provost Lange no doubt would endorse.) If you're going to war, assess the strength of your troops before you commit yourself to a potentially disastrous conflict. (This is advice that perhaps coach David Cutcliffe would do well to heed before Duke plays Alabama in a couple of weeks!) And (here's the point) if you're going to follow Jesus on the road to Jerusalem—or if you're going to embark on the serious study of Christian theology in this place, be prepared to pay the price. Not just the price of your tuition, though that's challenging enough, but the price of wholehearted devotion to a cause so compelling that it will demand your whole life. What Annie Dillard says about the writing life is true also of the life of discipleship: "One of the few things I know about writing is this: spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later place."

Earlier this summer, I ran across a quotation from the venerable rocker Tom Petty. He was telling the interviewer that a career in music isn't just about making

money but about following an unquenchable passion. Therefore, he said, any young wannabe considering a choice between law school and electric guitar should head for the legal library. “If you have a choice, you won’t be able to do this. It will beat you up so bad. You need that love of music in your soul, or you won’t survive.” I think I hear in Tom Petty’s counsel to young rockers an echo of Jesus’ words. Are you in, or are you out? If you’re in, it will beat you up so bad. But it will be worth it, because love compels you and leads you to places you never could go otherwise. And here is the surprise: in following that passionate love for the one thing that matters, you will find life.

Our reading this morning from Deuteronomy poses the same challenge. Moses is speaking to the people of Israel as they stand on the brink of entering the promised land of Canaan. He has renarrated the long story of God’s grace towards Israel in the wilderness and set forth God’s life-giving commandments. And now he offers them the one crucial choice: “...I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life for you....”

The key to understanding Jesus’ strange teaching in Luke 14 lies here. Jesus is echoing Deuteronomy’s call for radical obedience, its demand to make a decision for life or death, but he also hermeneutically transforms it. He transforms

it by paradoxically identifying the way of life with the call to carry the cross—the very action that he himself performs on the way to his execution. Here lies a deep mystery. The life promised by Moses now lies on the other side of a self-emptying obedience unto death. Why? Because beyond crucifixion lies the resurrection, with its life-giving, life-transforming power.

In the final words of our text, Jesus draws the conclusion implied in his parables about building a tower or going to war. And English translations of the passage often lose its real force. Here's what it says: "So, likewise, every one of you who does not say farewell to all your possessions is not strong enough to be my disciple." The key verb here is *apotassetai*, which doesn't mean "give up;" instead it means "say farewell." I'm tempted to catch the force by translating like this: "Every one of you who does not kiss your possessions goodbye is not strong enough to be my disciple." Kiss it goodbye. Let it go, in service to the one thing that matters.

So, students and colleagues, as we begin a new academic year, paradise has not yet been restored. Instead, in a world where evil still haunts us, we stand before a choice between life and death. That may sound melodramatic, but those actually are the stakes in the choices we make. Day in and day out, we are either choosing life or choosing death. I'm not talking about making a one-time profession of faith in Jesus. It's a matter of putting our bodies on the line and

following Jesus, devoting our time and energies to the things that ultimately matter.

It is a matter of presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice to God.

So, at the beginning of my term as Dean, here is my policy memo to the members of the Divinity School community: “Spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time.” If we do that and follow Jesus on the road, we will finally find life.

I trust that all of us will do whatever possible to achieve this policy objective.