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*St. Andrew’s Episcopal Cathedral*

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

It is hard for me to tell you this, but…I have never been to an SEC football game. I’ve lived in Mississippi for almost twenty years – some of them even in Oxford, right after we got married. I’ve spent lots of time on campus. I’ve been in the Grove on game day. But I’ve never been to an actual game, in Oxford or anywhere that the missing members of southeastern congregations probably are this morning. I don’t have anything against football – in fact, I really like it. I don’t always understand what’s happening on the field, but watching football with family or friends, even with strangers when a game is on TV somewhere we’re eating out, is more than just entertaining. Watching the game, I feel like I’m *part* of something, like I’m somehow connected with everyone else who’s watching or playing or coaching or cheering.

I actually was a cheerleader at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee. It wasn’t exactly SEC level football, but the Sewanee Tigers to this very day remember with pride the season they went 12 and 0, defeating among others Texas, Tulane, LSU, and Ole Miss…in 1899. I have no idea what their record was when my family lived there while my dad was in seminary. The elementary school’s Tiger Cubs played on part of the university field, and in third grade, I was a cheerleader. We learned our cheers in my best friend’s backyard, along with a few almost-coordinated claps and kicks, and at every Tiger Cubs game, and once even at a real college game, we shouted our encouragement to the players and fans. The ponytail ribbons and paper pom poms are long gone, but I still remember our cheer, “Victory, victory, that’s our cry, V-I-C-T-O-R-Y!”

Our readings this morning seem full of encouragement, full of cheer leaders and coaches, full of the possibility of victory. *Choose life, and you will have length of days,* Moses encourages the people of Israel, with the promised land in sight*. Choose righteousness, and be like trees planted by streams of water,* the psalmist shouts. *Choose love,* Paul encourages Philemon, praising him for his faith and generosity and joy. Each of the readings urges obedience to all that God has commanded, for the win.

*Choose discipleship,* Jesus says to the crowd, to his eager fans then and now. They had seen what he could do out on the field, spectacular plays against illness and injustice and exclusion, and they want to be on the traveling team. So he encourages them… *Hate your family! Carry your cross! Give up all your possessions!...*and it does not sound at *all* like victory as our worst fears tackle us and our defensive lines step in, sounding like the characters in the parable that precedes today’s gospel passage. It was the parable of the great banquet – a tailgate party, perhaps! – to which all are invited, but one by one the guests decline because they are too busy, too important, too obligated to other people. And anyway, it was sounding less and less like a good time or a winning team, just a field full of outcasts and sinners.

*Choose life, choose righteousness, choose love, choose discipleship…*choose God, our readings are all saying, and it isn’t only in the gospel that the stakes are high. Moses is speaking to those for whom choosing God would mean wandering wearily in the wilderness, where they would fumble their faith again and again. The book of Psalms is filled with the prayers and laments of those who found that playing fair made them vulnerable to fouls in an arbitrary world, and they wonder whether they or even God have lost sight of the goal. For Philemon, choosing God will mean giving up his privilege and considering a slave his brother, as equally beloved and invaluable a member of God’s team as he is.

Jesus would have us out there, too, on that ragtag team. It’s just that choosing discipleship, choosing to follow him is about more than being a *fan* of what Jesus does. It’s about leaving the sidelines and being *all in*. It’s about putting God first, so that our relationships to every*one* and every*thing* *else* in our lives derive their meaning from God’s love revealed to us in Jesus Christ. It’s hard. And in the world, it doesn’t feel like winning. We’ll have to choose as our sisters and brothers not just those who are bound to us by blood but everyone God loves, which is to say, everyone. We’ll have to choose as our vocation not just salary-earning but cross-bearing, becoming vulnerable for the sake of those for whom vulnerability is not a choice. We’ll have to choose as our possessions nothing, committing all to *God’s* glory, not our own, and understanding that God is glorified when not only are the needs of the poor and sick and excluded and oppressed met but when systems that perpetuate need are defeated.

This morning’s gospel doesn’t sound like encouragement, but Jesus is being honest because his invitation is both earnest and urgent – he wants us to choose discipleship, to choose life and righteousness and love, to be all in on the action God has always been about, healing and reconciling and welcoming and providing and being merciful and having compassion. *Whoever does not do these things cannot be my disciple*, Jesus says, not because he will not have us but because anything less is simply not discipleship. We can stand by and cheer Jesus on with all our heart and spirit, or we can throw our whole lives in with him, and let following in his way, keeping his commandments, being a Christian, define and shape *everything* else we do, *every* relationship, *every* decision, *every* action.

After all, we’re already on the team. *Sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever*, we were received into the household of God right then and there, and even before we were saved, we were loved. Baptisms are beautiful, but buried in the language by which we bless the water is the hard truth – we are baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection, into vulnerability and victory. And according to our vows, we’re all in: *Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers? Will you persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you fall into sin (not if, but when), repent and return to the Lord? Will you proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ? Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?*

In the waters of baptism, we don’t just become nicer people – we become a new creation, and still over and over and over again in our lives, day by day, sometimes minute by minute, we are given a choice: will we, or will we not, be disciples? I don’t think we’re afraid of hard work, and we make sacrifices all the time – we put in more hours at the office, we get up earlier to exercise, we invest in extra lessons, we save up for long term goals, we forgo the newspaper and a leisurely cup of coffee to serve breakfast here on Tuesday mornings, to worship here on Sundays. But how different would our lives look if we *chose discipleship*: if instead of making time for our faith, our faith determined what we make of our time?

It’s hard, and like the Israelites we will fumble, and like so many psalmists, we’ll feel the opposing team has the upper hand, and like Philemon, we’ll have to give up a world view that has benefitted us at another’s expense. It’s hard, and so in another letter, Paul urges Christ’s followers to encourage one another, to cheer each other on. We do that in our baptismal liturgy, when all of us are asked, *Will you who witness these vows do all in your power to support this person in her life in Christ*, and we answer, *We will*. Then together, for we are a team, sisters and brothers, the Body of Christ, together we renew our vows, remembering that we are not called *out of* relationship but *into it*, with Christ, with one another, with all that God has made. When the water and white gown are long gone, we still remember our cheer, *I will, with God’s help.*

It’s game day, and we are called to follow Jesus to the field. Though it will sometimes seem, in the world, as though we are losing ground, every time we choose life, choose righteousness, choose love, choose discipleship, every time we choose kindness, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, generosity, joy, reconciliation, we are gaining the kingdom. Let us encourage one another, holding the Christ light for each other, for we are part of something so much larger than ourselves, larger than our fears, more than fair weather fans. In the words of poet Henri-Frederic Amiel, which Anne has brought us as a blessing, “Life is short, and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who walk this way with us. So be swift to love, and make haste to be kind.” To God be the glory, and the victory. *Amen.*