

# Stretching Toward Sunday

Thoughts, readings and reflections  
based on this week's lectionary readings

September 8, 2019

Proper 18C / Ordinary 23C / Pentecost +13

The readings this week:

- Jeremiah 18:1-11
- Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18
- Philemon 1-21
- Luke 14:25-33

[Click here to read this week's Scriptures](#)

## Estimating the Cost

We do it all the time, of course, perhaps sometimes with a higher level of consciousness than others. We estimate the cost, weighing one option against another, trying to decide if we have enough or want it enough or need it enough. We do it with our budgets and we do it in our relationships and we do it with our lives.

Jesus offers a couple of examples today. Everywhere I look this week it seems I see yet another, some more profound than others.

For instance, my attention was captured early in the week when I heard the news story about a subway line in Brooklyn being shut down because of two kittens playing on and near the third rail. Having dealt with a few kittens in my life, it was certainly entertaining to watch the workers try to corral them! (If you missed the story, you can find it [here](#).) Think though, with me, about how those in charge of such decisions had to weigh the cost to the commuting schedules of perhaps hundreds of people, not to mention the economic impact, against the lives of a couple of kittens. As you can imagine, there was all sorts of commentary floating around about this decision in the days to follow as others estimated the cost differently.

Throughout this week, along with all of you, I have also found myself thinking about how our leaders are estimating the cost of continued diplomacy, calculated strikes, or all out war on Syria. Regardless of where you stand on this, the process is much the same. Is there enough? Enough cause? Enough weaponry? Enough political capital or will? Enough?

And I have been wondering at how this same way of thinking must have played in the story of Antoinette Tuff. Perhaps you've heard this remarkable story by now of how this woman stayed calm in the face of great danger as she talked down a heavily armed gunman in her school office. If you haven't yet, take half an hour and listen in on the 911 call. (If you haven't had the chance yet, you can find the link [here](#).) In those moments fraught with threat and fear, she continued to speak calmly to him, connecting with him on a profoundly human level, resulting in him finally laying down his weapons and giving himself up. I know she was 'estimating the cost' in that hour --- at one time contemplating the possibility of making a run for it -- but did not, realizing this would put her at even greater risk.

I am more interested, though, in how Antoinette must have been 'estimating the cost' for decades before this, day after day, making one choice over another in order to form the kind of strength and character which would come to bear when she needed it most. Indeed, this remarkable woman spoke of how she had learned this in church --- specifically, how to 'push through the pain' --- how to stand strong and prevail even in the midst of pain. No, this does not happen over night, but only after a lifetime of choosing one thing over another: prayer over going it on one's own, perhaps. And yes, gathering with others of God's own for worship and mutual instead of opting for any of the other myriad of choices which are always available to us. Antoinette Tuff's life has not been easy. I expect she has paid a price for her faith, as Jesus indicates we all will in today's Gospel. Indeed, I can't help but believe she must have, else she would not have found herself with what she needed in that critical hour just last week.

We do it all the time, estimating the cost as Jesus reminds us now. We do it when the stakes are high and we do it, too, when the stakes seem not nearly as high but when piled on, day after day, promise to make a difference one way or another.

We do it all the time --- and yes, we are reminded today that we are also called to do this also in our lives of faith. Knowing that this will cost, too --- in our relationships, perhaps, and also in how we live our lives in relationship to what we own. We 'estimate the cost', believing, sometimes against all evidence to the contrary, that this choice over another one will somehow make a difference. Indeed, it seems to me that the big moments when we know it matters are those which build upon all those small decisions along the way --- times when we estimated the cost and perhaps, didn't even know we were doing so. Or at least we didn't know what a difference it would make one day...

~ Rev. Dr. Janet H. Hunt, [Dancing with the Word](#)



# Reflecting on the Word



## \_\_\_ 1st Reading: [Jeremiah 18:1-11](#)

Have you ever made pottery or used clay? What was that experience like? Does a potter simply make things spontaneously on the fly, without a plan? How would you say that a potter approaches his work? Does he take an assembly line or mass-production approach? Who is the clay? What are the basic ingredients of clay? What might they represent? How valuable is clay just by itself? Can clay mold itself? What is the wheel? How does it ultimately relate to both the potter and the clay? Keeping to the potter/vessel theme, what is wrong with the vessels as described in v. 4 and expanded on in v.11-12? What does it mean to us that instead of throwing out the clay and beginning again with a new lump, the Potter re-makes the clay again? What does that say to us? [Walk with the Word](#)

## \_\_\_ Psalm Reading: [Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18](#)

How does the extent of God's knowledge make you feel about Him? About yourself? Are you more comforted or troubled by God's knowledge of you? Why? How does the gospel impact how you view being known by God? How have you experienced the goodness of God in guiding and holding you? How should God's presence as a loving Father for all Christians impact how we view and relate with other believers? How should God's presence as the righteous Judge of all unbelievers impact how we view and relate with them? How do you feel about God knowing all the days of your life? Does that truth prompt any questions? [Gospel Project](#)



## Praying Toward Sunday

Like clay in the potter's hand,  
so we are to you, O Lord!  
You take the ordinary  
and often imperfect,  
and make something beautiful,  
molding us into the people  
you envisioned us to be.  
In your hands we are made new,  
perfected Lord, by you.  
In your hands we are made useful  
in service Lord, for you

~ John Birch, [Faith and Worship](#)

What are possessions? Just my stuff? Or, do my possessions include more intangible things to which I cling - ideas, prejudices, opinions, the filters through which I see the world? Are my relational obligations my possessions? And does my family possess me body and soul? What does it mean to carry the cross? What is my cross? Is my own life my possession, my world's possession, or God's possession?

In this week's Gospel Jesus sounds as uncompromising as Moses. *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! Love God and live! Choose life! See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.* (Dt. 30:19)

But sit down and count the cost. It will cost everything! It will cost the crucifixion of Jesus and the taking up of whatever cross the world opposed to life gives you to bear, not only on your own behalf but for Life itself!

Choose life. What does it take to be alive? That answer is as specific and particular as each of our lives.

Jesus calls his followers to Life. The things we cling to make us as dead as our possessions. Likewise, our narrowly self-referential ways of seeing impede our embrace of Life. Life is in continual flux. Finally, renunciation opens to generous living - true freedom, grace, the human person fully alive.

~ Suzanne Guthrie, [At the Edge of Enclosure](#)

## \_\_\_ 3rd Reading: [Philemon 1-21](#)

What challenges around privilege lie in this text for us, personally and communally? How deeply embedded are our assumptions and sense of place, in our daily lives and in the global context? What type of attitude did Paul project toward Philemon? How did Paul describe himself? Who is the subject of Paul's appeal to Philemon? For what future event did Paul hope? How do we lovingly and sensitively call one another to faithfulness, as Paul exhorted his beloved friend Philemon? [Weekly Seeds, DE Lessons](#)

## \_\_\_ 4th Reading: [Luke 14:25-33](#)

What do "large crowds" have to do with Jesus' teaching in this passage? How can we rightfully honor our father and our mother, and at the same time not water down Jesus' command to hate them? What does "carrying your cross" having to do with "hating your own life"? What do Jesus words about "giving up everything he has" have to do with owning a house and car? With purchasing a refrigerator? With seeking an academic degree? What does saltiness represent in 14:34? Should people be able to tell that you are a Christian? How? How can we walk the fine line between being a witness and coming across "holier than thou"? [Jesus Walk](#)