

Proper 18 / Year C
Reading the Fine Print
Jeremiah 18:1-11; Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33

4 September 2022

Imagine you are idly scrolling through your favorite social media site, or flipping through a magazine, or reading a newspaper, when you come across a full-page advertisement for a job. You're not even looking for a job, but for some reason the ad catches your eye, so you glance at it and read:

Position Available Immediately . . .

- Full-time, meaningful work you can do anywhere!*
- Benefits start immediately and last a lifetime!**
- Meet interesting people and travel regularly!***
- Inquire now to get in on this grassroots opportunity!****

You think: "that sounds intriguing" - and wonder where you can get more information. Then you notice there are asterisks at the end of each statement that are matched to small, almost minuscule, font at the bottom of the ad. Now, being a person of great wisdom, perhaps having had a bad past experience because you didn't read the fine print, you take a closer look.

The first asterisk says: *You will be working day and night everywhere you go because you are required to follow a man named Jesus who is bringing about the reign of God here on earth. This is a lifestyle, not a diet.

The second one declares: **Once you go through the ritual of baptism and join your new family of Jesus-followers, you may perish by a number of means, usually being ridiculed and tortured first, and then being nailed to a cross (or stoned to death or imprisoned unto death or countless other ways). However, you will also be resurrected and have eternal life at some point... hopefully sooner rather than later.

Next, it says: ***In following Jesus, you will be required to travel - perhaps literally, definitely mentally and emotionally – to meet people where they are, and virtually all of those people are not in your family or friend group.

You probably will not like most of them because they are different than you, but won't that be interesting?

And finally, the fourth asterisk reads: ****There is not a phone number or website or address of any kind to aid you in your inquiry. Instead, look around your town to see if anyone is behaving oddly (compared to what you are used to), especially in any of the above ways, and ask them about Jesus.

As usual, there is a lot of important and clarifying information buried in that fine print! Now, our advertisement illustration is a little bit tongue in cheek...or is it? In today's reading from Luke's Gospel, Jesus explains to the crowds traveling with him that they must come to discipleship with their eyes wide open. The demands he makes seem extremely harsh - hating your own family, even your own life; carrying your cross; giving up all your possessions. And the message is crystal clear: discipleship is not easy, even dangerous. It changes lives. It changes families and communities, and hopefully, the world. The examples he uses about building a tower and waging war are sobering considerations for someone who is considering following Jesus. And this warning to the first disciples - to really think about what you are doing in joining the Jesus Movement - continues to be just as timely and sobering today, in our modern world, in this modern time.

In the early centuries of Christianity, it took more than just walking into a church service and hearing the Good News of Jesus Christ to become part of a church community. Oftentimes, catechumens (people who were studying to become Christians) would be required to undergo up to three years of instruction before they could be baptized and allowed to participate in the Eucharist. Because of the stringent requirements and strict consequences of being a Christian, there was no such thing as a part-time or half-way Christian. Early members of the church understood that they would have to entirely change their manner of life in order to be a disciple, so much so that it limited both the types of jobs they could hold and restricted their activities in other ways.

- If you were a Christian soldier, you could not swear allegiance to the Emperor (a bit of a problem when you are working for Rome). And you had to refuse orders to kill (another problem for a soldier).

- A Christian sculptor could not make idols, locking them out of a lucrative trade.
- A Christian teacher could not teach pagan myths and philosophies. In a society where that was the traditional way of teaching and learning, this was a difficult choice to make.

To make things even more difficult, if you made the decision to change your manner of life, you were then set on a path of instruction which only gave you information a little bit at a time as you proved yourself worthy of possessing this knowledge of the faith. You were only able to participate in the first half of the Sunday service, made to leave at the beginning of the Peace, since, because you had not been baptized, your kiss was not considered holy by members of the church. And you certainly would not have been allowed to participate in the sharing of Communion.

Finally, after you had gone through three years of learning about Jesus and really understood what it meant to be a Christian, it came time for you to be initiated and accepted into the church through the sacrament of baptism. For three long years this has been the goal you had prepared for, yet you have been given no clue what to expect. You have no idea what is about to happen. In the dark, early hours of Easter morning, you, along with others seeking to be baptized, are led to a room or a nearby water source where there is a large, full pool of water. After prayers by the priest to bless the water, you are told to strip off all your clothes; and then, while you stand naked, shivering in the cold morning air, prayers are offered, Scripture read, and the chrism oil is blessed. After that, you undergo an exorcism, renouncing Satan and calling out any lingering demons from within you. At that point, you are escorted into the near-freezing water. Then a deacon places their hand on your head as the priest asks you if you believe in God the Father. When you affirm that you do, the deacon suddenly and unexpectedly dunks you beneath the water. Emerging from the water, gasping for air, you are asked if you believe in God the Son. You say, "yes"; they quickly dunk you again. Finally, the priest asks you whether or not you believe in the Holy Spirit - and then you are dunked for a third time!

The most dramatic part of the baptism finished, you are then anointed with oil of chrism, and a prayer of thanksgiving is said by all present. Only then can you get out of the pool, dry off, and put on a white robe. Then you are led into the church for the next part of the service, where the bishop lays

hands on you, anoints you again, and for the first time in three years, exchanges a holy kiss of peace with you. The whole congregation prays together, the peace is exchanged, and you would finally be able to participate in the Eucharist.

In your years as a catechumen, the way you lived was scrutinized closely to see if you were really following in the way of Jesus and ready to make a lifelong commitment to being a Christian. The early church created this lengthy process so that people would truly appreciate and fully embrace the effort and resources and sacrifices that it took to become a disciple of Jesus. How does this compare to the way you came to follow Jesus in an age and society where we no longer have to live and worship clandestinely for fear of persecution? What would it be like to do the catechumenate in the ancient way - dismissing unbaptized people at the Peace, and having your every move scrutinized by your church?

For good or bad, entry into the church and becoming a disciple is not nearly as rigorous as it once was. But following Jesus is still not a whimsical response to a moment of inspiration or feeling, but rather a deliberate, life-changing decision with life-long repercussions, like planning for war or taking a new job. We may respond immediately to Jesus' call of, "Come, follow me," but it will take a lifetime for us to see just how that decision plays out. And if we did not read the fine print, we may quickly fall away from the path. To be a true and faithful disciple is a more serious decision than many of us may realize, and each of us don't really know what we will be asked to do and asked to sacrifice in order to do it fully and with conviction. Like the early catechumens, we are called to put our complete faith in a process that is relatively unknown to us, and which may take immense courage to follow through. Discipleship – then and now - is a life-long life-long process, not an instant transformation.

Thankfully we are not alone in making it happen. God is with us, revealing to us and beckoning us to read the fine print and respond with the entirety of our lives to experience something more than we can ask for or imagine. And there is only one guarantee: that we will be transformed - and hopefully, through us, so will our families, our communities, our nation, and the world.

Amen.