The Rev. Eugene LeCouteur
Emmanuel Episcopal Church
Middleburg, Virginia

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
10:00 a.m.
September 7, 2025

"The Choice is Yours"

Let me begin with a rhetorical question. It is something I want you to ponder and not respond to immediately. Could you give up everything for the sake of God, Jesus, and the Gospel? When I say everything, I mean everything—family, friends, possessions, housing, money, reputation, and any other thing that you hold dear. It is a demanding question that I ask. Yet, Jesus commands that we do this in today's Gospel.

I daresay most people, even devout believers, would have a tough time answering "yes" if they really thought about it. We are too afraid. We are afraid of loneliness, poverty, shame, hunger, homelessness, danger, the wildness of the land, and of the street. This goes beyond living life on the edge. Indeed, this kind of all-encompassing poverty is over the edge and down a sheer mountainside.

Modern societal structures, with all of their various "isms," such as capitalism, socialism, communism, to name a few, are based to some extent on all people having access to the basic needs of life. We can argue about what comes under the term "basic needs," as it appears to change as societies become more affluent. Even autocrats want to provide the basics lest they have rebellions on their hands.

The one "ism" that all of these "isms" are concerned with is consumerism. Merriam-Webster defines consumerism as "the theory that an increasing consumption of goods is economically desirable, *also***:** a preoccupation with and an inclination toward the buying of consumer goods."[1] Whether the system creates shortages or surpluses, encourages or discourages production, builds up private capital or centralizes it, encourages entrepreneurship or squashes it in favor of state-made decisions, these systems all seek to satisfy consumers' needs and wants and even to create consumer desires and expectations. While Karl Marx wrote that religion was "the opiate of the masses," what all economic systems have done is make consumerism the opiate not just of the masses, but of everyone, poor, middle class, rich, and ultra-rich.

We live in a world where the more stuff we have, the more satisfied we are **supposed** to be. We have been told this for so long and with such creativity that societies have come to embrace consumption as the real religion of the world. Even Christianity has succumbed to this way of thinking. The evangelists of the so-called "Prosperity Gospel" such as Joel Osteen, Benny Hinn, and the appropriately named Creflo Dollar preach that "that financial blessing and physical well-being are always the will of God for believers, and that faith, positive scriptural confession, and giving to [their] charitable and religious causes will increase one's [own] material wealth."[2] Not surprisingly, the ones who seem to become wealthy are the preachers of this spurious theology. Jesus worked to discredit this false prophecy in his own time by setting the example of poverty and mendicancy.

Jesus, in today's passage, talks about giving up everything that a normal person would think is important. He says, "None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." Be clear, he did not say some of your possessions or most of your possessions, but **ALL** your possessions. I think of how many of us are

[1] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/consumerism accessed September 6, 2025
[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity_theology accessed September 6, 2025

doing our best to downsize and dispose of the superfluous things in our lives. No matter how good our intentions are, we are not even close to what Jesus calls for.

But he does not just stop with possessions; he also says we must give up "father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters." Indeed, he says we must come to "hate" them. He adds that we must also hate "even life itself."

These are outrageous demands, and he knows it. Jesus is doing what he does so well. He is using hyperbole to get our attention and to make a point. He is saying that as long as we hold onto anything more dearly than we hold onto God we are lost. We must set aside all other wants, desires, needs, and attachments and become completely and utterly invested in God to be saved. But saved from what exactly?

The salvation he speaks of is being saved from a life of futility. That is, futilely chasing after financial and consumer prosperity, when the only real and true prosperity is a life lived for and in the love of God. Jesus knows that no matter how many cars we have, we will always want another one, that no matter how many entertainment systems we have, there will always be a new one, and that no matter how many homes we have, another will be more attractive. It went this way in Jesus' time, and so it goes now. Abundant life is not the accumulation of material things. An abundant life is one filled with love for God and for each other. To get there, we have to get the glittering distractions that make false promises of security out of the way. Otherwise, we are always blinded to God's truth.

Remember when you were a student. Were you able to concentrate in class if you were passing a note to the cute classmate in the next row? Were you able to pay attention to the teacher if your tryout for the team or squad was coming up? Were you able to study for the next exam if your parents were fighting? Similarly, the pursuit of material abundance keeps us from being attentive students (and disciple is the Greek word for student) of Jesus.

When Jesus uses hyperbole, he hopes to get through to our distracted minds and bring us back to what is important. It is like the teacher who senses the student whose mind is wandering and calls on her. As she fumbles to come back to the present, the entire class cringes because they know that it could have been them. Or the greedy preacher who is brought back to reality when his wife leaves him. Then he realizes his wealth, house, cars, and jets are only the façade of an abundant life, a mirage of success.

How many of you are fans of the TV show "NCIS"? In that show, one of the ongoing tropes is how Jethro Gibbs gives a dope slap to the back of the head of one of his clueless subordinates. This passage from Luke is Jesus providing us a verbal dope slap. He is signaling that it is time to wake up and get our heads in the game. Life is serious business. We can live it chasing after meaningless stuff, or we can live it as God intended. That is, loving and caring for all people and for all creation while obeying God's commands.

To paraphrase what Jesus said in the Gospel of Matthew, Don't hoard treasure down here where it gets eaten by moths, broken, or stolen by thieves. Focus on God and the gifts God has given you. God's gifts cannot be destroyed by moths, ruined by

rust, or stolen. Awaken to the reality that where you put your trust and love is where you will be focused.[3]

We have choices in this one life we have been given by God. Will we waste it on what the "isms" have tried to convince us is important, or will we focus on the Good News of God in Christ Jesus? I pray that the answer is self-evident, but the choice is ours to make. As Moses told the ancient Israelites, "Choose life, and blessings." Why wouldn't we? There is so much more at stake than money can buy. And all of those money-bought things, as the saying goes, "You can't take it with you." God's love, on the other hand, is eternal and the only thing that will see us through the chaos of this world.

[3] My paraphrase of Matthew 6:19-21