

Sermon September 4, 2022

Luke 14:25-33

“The Cost of Discipleship”

This morning’s reading from Luke is certainly perplexing and bound to lead to a little head scratching. The things that Jesus says seem so out of character for him. If you go to Matthew’s version of this statement, he begins by saying, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword.” How do you square that with the fact that he is often referred to as the Prince of Peace, and in the Sermon on the Mount he says, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God”?

Then in today’s text he says, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple”.

Really? This from the man who earlier quotes the commandment, “Honor your father and mother...” - who teaches and lives a life of mercy and compassion. He even insists that we love our enemies yet expects us to hate our family members. And what about hating life itself? Didn’t he once say that he came to give abundant life! His exact statement from the Gospel of John - “I am come so that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly”.

Then he ends this morning’s reading by saying, “So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all of your possessions”. Does he really expect all of us to lead ascetic lives - to live like the Desert Fathers of the early centuries of the church - or like Francis of Assisi, who cast aside his family’s wealth, and chose to live a life of poverty? What are we to make of all of this?

We might think he is talking specifically to his twelve disciples - that they are called in a unique and special way - but the reading begins by saying, “Now large crowds were traveling with him, and he turned and said to them...”. In other words, he is addressing any and all that would follow him, and I assume that includes us.

Well, I think we can begin by recognizing that Jesus did have a habit of speaking hyperbolically, and keeping that in mind, it would appear that we cannot take this literally, but, instead, symbolically. For example, when he says that he did not come to bring peace, but a sword, he is not talking about an actual sword, but he is referring to the divisions that will come as a response to the gospel - and, certainly, that is precisely what happened in the early years of the church - not to mention that it still takes place today. I recently read that in Africa, where the church is growing at a rapid pace, there are deep divisions between friends and family between those who accept the good news and those who don’t. This is not to mention the broad divisions within the church itself, often concerning interpretations of the faith as well as ethical

concerns. Fundamentalists see the Bible as inerrant, others do not. Some Christians support a woman's choice concerning her own body, while others are adamantly anti-abortion. These are the swords of division - and today those swords seem to be getting sharper and sharper!

As for hating family members, I believe he is really pointing to matters of loyalty and priorities. Are you willing to place following him above all else? The ironic thing about that is that truly following him can only lead to a deepening of love for family and friends - or, even enemies! We are called to love him but loving him means so much more than having deep affectionate feelings for him. To truly love him is to try to live according to his example - to also be merciful, forgiving and compassionate - to reach out to the sick, the dying, the hungry and naked, the tax collector, the alcoholic, the prisoner and prostitute - to seek true justice, and, yes, peace within our families, our communities, our nation and our world. That's what it means to follow him and to love him, by loving others!

In verse 27 he says, "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple". As I mentioned last week carrying the cross is not something that befalls us. It is something that we voluntarily pick up, and what we choose to pick up is our willingness to follow him - which can lead to the pain of division. Such pain can be a part of the cost of discipleship - but it can also lead to renewed life and joy!

Finally, Jesus ends today's discourse by saying, "So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions". Does he really expect all of us to give up all that we own, or is this more hyperbole? A few days ago, I was watching a documentary on the life of the great Lakota leader, Sitting Bull, and it spoke of his astonishment concerning the white man's obsession with accumulating possessions, and we have to admit that within a market driven society seeking more and more can be obsessive. Sitting Bull points out that the Lakota's primary motivation for gaining wealth is to have the ability to help others in need.

It is well to remember what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount - "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." I think the word slave points to what Jesus is getting at. It's not that we shouldn't own things, but that we cannot allow the need for more and more possessions to dominate our lives. We cannot allow ourselves to be slaves to the things we own.

So, again, it's all about setting priorities, deciding whether or not we choose Jesus to be the guiding light for our lives!

Amen.

**Let us pray:** Lord, we thank you for this day, and for this beautiful holiday weekend. We know that you are a God of love - indeed, you are the embodiment of love itself - and we know that your Son Jesus did not literally mean that we are to hate our family and friends, or our very lives - but that he encourages us to make clear our priorities in our lives, looking to him for guidance and leadership in the life choices we make. He also does not want us to plunge ourselves into poverty, but to place our possessions in proper perspective, and when possible, to use our wealth in a way that is generous to those in need.

On this Labor Day weekend we lift up those who Labor for the benefit of family and society. And pray for their safety and fair wages.

Help us all, Lord, to follow your Son on the pathways you would have us travel, carrying in our hearts, and revealing through our words and actions the values of your kingdom.

Let us also lift up the sick, the dying, the addict, the mentally ill, the lonely and anxious, that they may know your healing love, remembering to you... Amen.