

## Proper 18C 2016 Sermon

### *Luke 14:25-33*

*Now large crowds were traveling with Jesus; and he turned and said to them, "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. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."*

*(Much of what I share today comes from David Lose.)<sup>1</sup>*

In the late 1980s, a volunteer approached a leader of the Sanctuary Movement in the United States [which served] refugees from Central America, and she asked to join in the work of the movement. The leader said to her, "Before you say whether you really wish to join us, let me pose some questions: Are you ready to have your telephone tapped by the government? Are you prepared to have your neighbors shun you? Are you strong enough to have your children ridiculed and harassed at school? Are you ready to be arrested and tried, with full media coverage? If you are not prepared for these things, you may not be ready to join the movement. For when push comes to shove, if you fear these things, you will not be ready to do what needs to be done for the refugees." The woman decided to think it over. (David Rhoads, *Reading Mark, Engaging the Gospel* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004] p. 53)

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells two parables about being aware of the costliness of certain ventures before plunging into them: aware of the cost of building a tower before starting construction, or the cost of war before going into battle. Jesus says to the large crowds who are following him, "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. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."

Professor David Lose writes: "We tend to associate Jesus' talk of the cross with sacrifice. And understandably so, considering that he is on the way to Jerusalem to make the ultimate sacrifice of his life on the cross to demonstrate God's love for us... And... 'taking up the cross' implies sacrifices on the part of those who

identify as his disciples, whether [the sacrifice is] selling one's possessions or bearing the burdens of others or giving up prior allegiances and even relationships, or more.

“But here's the thing: I think we've been so led by our culture to think of sacrifice as a *bad* thing that it's difficult for us to hear this passage [without inner resistance]... [Yes,] we've been trained to admire those who make sacrifices – Olympic athletes, fire fighters, our women and men serving in the military, etc. – but [paradoxically, at the **same** time we] have also been induced to think that there's no reason we should **ourselves** have to sacrifice in [this] instant-access and immediate-gratification kind of world.

“And yet we all do make sacrifices. Parents [sacrifice] to give their children a good life. Innumerable persons seeking to finish their schooling or to accomplish something in their career [make sacrifices]. Life choices and freedom to get married or start a family [involve sacrifices]. ... And not only do we *make* these sacrifices, but often we do so with a sense of **joy**.

“Why? Because there are sacrifices and then there are sacrifices. Some that lead to greater life, and some that don't. Which... doesn't mean that life-giving sacrifices are easy or fun or comfortable. Just that they lead to a greater sense of purpose, life, and joy, whereas other sacrifices lead to less life, and sometimes to death.

“Which helps me hear this [Gospel] passage a little differently. Jesus isn't inviting [us to make] **meaningless** sacrifices. He isn't inviting door-mat discipleship or a whiney Christianity ('that's just my cross to bear'). Rather, he's inviting us to a full-bodied Christian faith that stands over and against all those things that are often presented to us as 'life' by [our] culture. Jesus invites us... to the kind of abundant life that is discovered only as you give yourself away. The kingdom of God Jesus proclaims is about life and love. And just as love is one thing that only grows when it's given away, so also is genuine and abundant life.

“Again, [this is not to say] that such sacrifices are easy. Some [of the people] around us may... not understand why we spend less on ourselves in order to give more to others or why we'd invest our time and resources on a person or effort [which our] culture considers a lost cause [like getting involved in, and supporting, the Church, or Laundry Love, or befriending refugees and people who are homeless]. The choices we make, the relationships we decide to pursue, the way we spend this life we've been given, may cause not just [bewilderment but displeasure, even distress], among those we care about. But the question before us, as put so fiercely by Moses in [our] first reading, is whether we will choose life or death.

“The challenge, of course, is that such a choice is not always as clear as we’d like. Sometimes we get just plain confused about what is the right choice, the life-giving choice. And sometimes we may hear Jesus’ voice calling us to sacrifice for the sake of life but it gets... drowned out by the cultural voices holding out success and accumulation and security as life. And sometimes the choices in front of us are just incredibly ambiguous.

“Which is why Jesus makes his *own* sacrifice, of course. To assure us of God’s love and forgiveness, so that whether we are confused, overwhelmed, unclear, or just choose badly, ... the promise of life is always in front of us. This promise of God’s unconditional love *frees* us to **choose** life...”<sup>1</sup>

There are sacrifices, and then there are sacrifices. I’m very aware how difficult it can be to distinguish what our *culture* sees as sacrifices from the kind of sacrifices *Jesus* is calling for, which our culture can make no sense of: “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.” And again: “...none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” In our individualistic, consumer culture, which sells pleasure, security, and comfort, Jesus’ words are anathema: they go against everything our culture-supported egos believe is important: *My* life, *my* family, *my* possessions and comfort. A Pew Research survey was published a little over a week ago which said that the main reason attendance at Christian churches in the United States has declined so much in recent years is not that people don’t believe in God – they overwhelmingly do! It’s primarily because involvement in church conflicts with their schedules and other priorities. What often gets sacrificed when schedules conflict is the church, the community of God. We don’t like to hear it, but we must face the fact that this is the new normal in our American culture: that every other thing takes precedence over the community of the church, the body of Christ.

Now let me be quick to add that simply *attending* church services does not a disciple make. As the great baseball player and evangelist Billy Sunday said, “Walking into a church no more makes me a Christian than walking into my garage makes me a car.” Jesus does not preach church attendance; he exhorts his followers to *be* the church, to *be* his Body, the community of the faithful, in the world. (And being community necessarily involves meeting together with as much regularity as possible.) In order to roust his listeners out of their habituated ways of thinking, Jesus resorts to some pretty shocking language.<sup>2</sup>

It’s not that “father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself” are bad, in and of themselves. But in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Middle Eastern world, the family was what **defined** you, gave you your identity. You were “Jesus, son of Joseph; Simon, son of John; Bartimaeus, son of Timaeus.” What Jesus is saying quite forcefully in today’s Gospel is: “No! That is **not** your true identity! You are sons and daughters **of God** – **that’s** who you are!” At its

core, our identity is found **not** in our nuclear family, but in our relationship to God and the family of God.

The same can be said of possessions: they are not bad in and of themselves, but they **become** bad when *they* possess *us*. In today's Epistle, Paul writes to Philemon, asking him to give up his life as a slave owner (something that neither George Washington nor Thomas Jefferson was ever able to do, and which certainly would have had economic consequences for Philemon). Paul asks Philemon to free his slave Onesimus, "so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother." There is the Gospel truth: it is only when we let go of something that we receive it back in its true relationship – receive it back as blessing! This is what taking up our cross is all about: letting go of, dying to our old ways, our old self in order to receive life and family and possessions back in their proper relationship, the relationship God intended for us to have with family, possessions, and our own life. "Those who want to save their lives will lose them," Jesus says, several times. "But those who lose their lives for me will save them."

There is sacrifice, and then there is sacrifice. Jesus is asking for the sacrifice that leads to life, the sacrifice of letting go and giving ourselves to God and to others, that we might receive our true, abundant lives in return.

AMEN

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/08/pentecost-16-c-life-giving-sacrifice/>

<sup>2</sup> Richard Rohr states that we are all addicted to our own way of thinking, and overcoming that addiction involves a total change of mind and outlook. Jesus uses the rabbinic technique of hyperbole to explode the old way of thinking in his listeners. Paul writes: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds... (Romans 12:2)" and "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus... (Philippians 2:5)" and "...[becoming] a new creation is everything! (Galatians 6:15)"