

## Proper 18C 2019 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."*

“Now large crowds were traveling with him...”

Jesus is on this way to Jerusalem, where he will be crucified; but these large crowds following him are oblivious to his impending fate. They have seen or heard about his healings and his miracles, and they are enthusiastic; they are totally *unaware* of what Jesus is only **too** aware of: that in Jerusalem, he will be betrayed, abandoned, tortured, and crucified. And Jesus strongly hints that those who would be his disciples might also face suffering.

Professor and preacher Fred Craddock wonders about the mood of the crowd in today's Gospel. He writes: “Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, but what is the nature of the journey? Is it a funeral procession? Apparently only Jesus has seriously faced the issue of his death; the Twelve certainly have not yet grasped it. Is it a march? Very likely *some* think so, investing a good deal of emotion in imagining the projected clash: Galilee versus Jerusalem, peasants versus power, laity versus clergy, Jews versus Romans, Jesus versus the establishment. Is it a parade? Obviously this crowd thinks so, oblivious to any conflict, any price to pay, any cross to bear. The crowds **swell**; *everybody* loves a parade. What does Jesus have to say to hasty volunteers? In [summary], his word is, Think about what you are doing and decide if you are willing to stay with me all the way.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, this is *not* a parade, and following Jesus has ramifications in terms of how this world responds to disciples.

Today's Gospel story is not the first time that Jesus has tried to get his followers to understand the cost of discipleship. A few chapters earlier in Luke's Gospel, Jesus had said to his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.” (9:23-24)

But not even Jesus' chosen 12 disciples comprehended those words! So, in *today's* Gospel, in the **strongest** language possible, Jesus tries to make his point once again: "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." Now, as I mentioned several sermons ago, in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Mediterranean world, you were *defined* by your family. So, in saying that disciples needed to *hate* their family members, the very things that gave them their identity, was shocking, to say the least! Now, Dr. Craddock points out that "To hate is a Semitic expression meaning to turn away from, to detach oneself from. There is nothing of that emotion *we* experience in the expression 'I hate you.'"<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, for members of the crowd to turn away from, detach themselves from, their families was to let go of the strongest attachments people of Jesus' day had – let go of the very things that defined their identity.

Now, if we are to be faithful to interpreting Scripture, we need to ask ourselves, "What are the things that define **our** identity today?" I think we can fairly say that it is not only our families, but our jobs, our status in the community, our religion or denomination, our nationality, our race, our political party – you can fill out the list for yourself. Jesus is asking **us** to *hate* these things – turn away from them, let go of the claims they have on us, the inordinate attachments we have toward them. And when Jesus says that a disciple must hate his or her life itself, I take that to mean one's ego – which is what we tend to think *is* our life. We must let go of our ego identity as our primary identity if we are to be disciples of Jesus.

Now, my friends, all of these "letting-gos" of our various attachments and identities are difficult, to be sure; but that is Jesus' *point* in saying we must lose our life in order to save it.<sup>3</sup> All too often, at least in my own life, I have put ultimate or near-ultimate value on things and attachments that have, unconsciously, displaced God, God's love, God's mercy from the center of my life. *My* problem is more often than not over-identification with my ego, which in turn can get way too wrapped up in my job, my prejudices and biases, my comfort and security, wanting people to like me and avoiding conflict at all costs (like the Enneagram 9 that I am), and what have you. And yet, my friends, I firmly believe that Richard Rohr is right when he says that all true spirituality is about letting go.<sup>4</sup>

There is a passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians that I believe is central to what it means to be a disciple of Jesus; at least, it speaks to me on a profound level. Paul exhorts us: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself..." (2:5-6) The Eternal Christ *emptied* himself, letting go of his status as equal to God. Yet, so often, you and I are so **full** of ourselves and our own agendas and desires and needs and wants that to follow Christ and empty oneself is difficult in the extreme! Yet emptying

ourselves of our egos, our self-centered agendas and desires and wants and biases may be **the** most transformative step we can take in our spiritual path towards having the “mind of Christ,” as Paul says, or becoming “little Christs,” as C.S. Lewis says is the whole purpose of being a Christian.<sup>5</sup>

Recovering Alcoholics say it this way: “Let go, and let God.” Richard Rohr believes that Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel about carrying one’s cross and following him echo Step 3 in the 12 Steps of AA: “We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood God.” (Fr. Rohr believes that the 12 Steps of AA are the greatest gift America has ever given to world spirituality.) Have you and I made a decision to turn our wills and our lives over to the care of God? What are the ramifications of that decision for us in our world today?

I can think of two areas of consequence. The first has to do with the difficulty of letting go of the status quo: letting go of our self-centeredness, our unhealthy egos, and our less-than-mature relationships. This is painful only because we have come to think that our self-constructed egos are who we are, and we would be giving up our very identity. But, as one Bible scholar puts it, “there is some demolition work required if the tower is to be constructed upon a firm foundation.”<sup>6</sup> Tearing down the tower is painful, but the new tower, built on the foundation of God, is so much more fulfilling and rewarding! Similarly, we all know that as we grow from childhood into adulthood and then into our later years, our relationships with our parents change from total dependence on our parents, to adult-to-adult relationship, and finally to taking responsibility for our parents’ care. We let go of the previous relationship in order that a more mature relationship be established. This is basically what St. Paul is saying in today’s Epistle: Philemon has had a master/slave relationship with his slave Onesimus; Paul is asking Philemon to free Onesimus so that he can have him back, not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ.

All of this is demolition and reconstruction work; and the demolition part is always painful, though ultimately, eternally, rewarding.

The second ramification of going “all in” on being a disciple of Jesus is in how the world – our family, friends, society – respond to us. In his 2004 book on Mark’s Gospel, David Rhoads recalls a situation which has many similarities to Jesus’ parables about counting the cost in today’s Gospel: “In the late 1980s,” Rhoads writes, “a volunteer approached a leader of the Sanctuary Movement in the United States serving 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.”<sup>7</sup>

My friends, as we grow deeper in our identity in Christ, our baptismal identity, and more and more try to “seek and serve Christ in all persons”<sup>8</sup> – including persons whom society looks down upon: those children of God who are suffering from homelessness, or poverty, or joblessness; those children of God who have a different skin color, or religion, or country of origin, or sexual orientation – as we grow deeper in our baptismal identity, we, too, may find we are shunned or criticized (sometimes overtly, sometimes behind our backs) by those who are used to the established status quo. These are good people – friends and family, and it is not our place to judge them. We are simply called to discipleship.

And, my friends, in today’s Gospel, Jesus wakes us up to the reality that there will be a cost – to our egos, and to our place in the greater status quo, the kingdoms of this world. There is a cost when we decide to live as “little Christs” in God’s kingdom come on earth.

AMEN

- 1 Fred Craddock, *Luke* (Interpretation Series), Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990, p. 181
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 Matthew 16:25, Mark 8:35, Luke 9:24, Luke 17:33
- 4 “Commodity Culture,” Richard Rohr’s Daily Email Meditation, Sept. 1, 2016 <https://cac.org/commodity-culture-2016-09-01/>
- 5 “Now the whole offer which Christianity makes is this: that we can, if we let God have His way, come to share in the life of Christ. ... He came to this world and became a man in order to spread to other men the kind of life He has — by what I call "good infection." Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else.” — C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*
- 6 William H. Lamar IV, *The Christian Century*, August 16, 2016 <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2016-07/september-4-23rd-sunday-ordinary-time>
- 7 David Rhoads, *Reading Mark, Engaging the Gospel*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004, p.53)
- 8 One of our Baptismal Vows; see *Book of Common Prayer* p. 305