

Jesus' Call to Discipleship

Luke 14:25-33

“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.”

If you realize that all things change, there is nothing you will try to hold onto. --Tao te Ching (6th Cent. BCE)

A large crowd is following Jesus. He seems on the verge of a successful religious movement! Maybe a "mega church"! Jesus suddenly stops, turns around, and brings the crowd up short by explaining what it really means to follow him. This is an important text for the Church of the Covenant community. It has to do with what we call "integrity of membership," that being part of the community of Jesus means deciding to let our whole lives become an expression of our relationship with God. It means having a willingness to grow into the fullness of the life of faith. It means taking seriously and taking responsibility for our own spiritual lives. It means finding out within our own lives what it means to die to one way of life and to be re-born into our true lives as those created by God and called to serve the life of God's world. This is a perfect text to come before us in these weeks before our recommitment retreat and commitment Sunday.

“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.” Jesus is calling people to re-center their lives in God. He is not recruiting people to become adherents of a religion. God knows we have more than enough of that! When the life of faith becomes adhering to and promoting a religion, the seeds of religious extremism are sown--Muslim, Jewish, Christian, whatever. Maybe this will shock you, but I don't believe Jesus is particularly interested in our calling ourselves “Christian”. One day a fellow comes up to him, calling him "Lord". What did Jesus say? *Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord', and do not do what I ask?* He is interested in our living the kind of life he is talking about. He is interested in our becoming new people, the people God made us to be.

The life of following Jesus, the journey of faith, or whatever we want to call it, begins by hearing Jesus' seemingly harsh words about hating spouse, siblings, friends, even our own lives. In another place, Jesus' family comes looking for him.[Mark 3:31-35] He is in a house teaching. When he is told that his mother and brothers are outside, he asks, “Who is my mother? My brothers? My family? My family is everyone who does the will of God.” There is nothing in Jesus' teachings or life to support what is called “traditional family values”. Jesus is not “pro-family” in the way that term is used these days. He calls us into a different family, all human beings everywhere who are seeking to love and serve God and their fellow human beings. It is not about fitting the life of faith into the relationships we have with others; it is a matter of bringing all of our relationships into our primary call to center our lives in God and God's love and kingdom. This is how life finds its truest, most meaningful and loving perspective.

In Eastern or Middle Eastern spirituality, the word “hate” means detachment, letting go of something in order to be open to something else. It does not mean emotional hostility. We cannot use this passage to support abuse, neglect, or disrespect toward our families or friends. When Jesus says we need to hate life itself, he is not talking about seeing our lives and the world as evil, and becoming filled with despair and gloom. It is about priorities, what comes first, what is most essential to life. Real growth, real maturity of faith and life comes by way of detachment, letting go of everything that gets in the way of our relationship with God. It is standing on our own feet spiritually, drawing our lives first of all from God.

When we begin to see where we are attached, or you might say addicted, then we can begin to drop that attachment. This is a big part of the process of working with and deepening our relationship with God, what we call the inward journey. We begin waking up to our own lives. We begin to turn away from wanting others to tell us what to do and to look inwardly to our deepest self, discovering what God has given us to be and do as unique persons. We begin to be able to drop our need for others' approval or agreement, and to live out of our own uniqueness and gifts. When we are working with this kind of spiritual growth, then our relationships with others become more fruitful, more truly loving and free. We become less demanding of others, that they meet our needs or always affirm us. When we let “goods and kindred go,” as Martin Luther wrote in his great hymn, and follow Jesus, he leads us into our true relationship with God, with others, with ourselves, with the world. By

the way, I think this is an important text especially for those who come out of hurtful, abusive, neglectful families. It says that we don't have to stay stuck in all of that. We have another, deeper, primary belonging out of which we can live full and fruitful lives. But whether our families were healthy or unhealthy, Jesus calls us to leave them and find our true and deepest belonging and vocation in life.

“Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” What is carrying the cross? It is not what we mean when we sigh and exclaim, “Oh, I guess that’s just my cross to bear.” That’s a burden. Burdens are things that happen to us in life, things we have to face and deal with somehow. A cross is different. It is endeavoring to love with the love of God in all the circumstances of our lives. It is a life that is always working with what we feel God is calling us to be and to do. It is the life of making God’s love the most important motivating force in our lives. The cross is the sign of our living fully in this world as those who are becoming more and more part of God's loving of the world. This kind of living will involve “intentional suffering”. That means we are willing to suffer for the sake of new life in ourselves, others, and the world. We are willing to put ourselves out, to take on what is uncomfortable, to be stretched and to move into places of pain for the sake of love. That is what I think Jesus meant when he said we need to carry our own cross if we are to follow him. Not his cross, but our own. Our own faithfulness. Our own struggles to love and serve. Our own willingness to experience the growing pains that come as we wake up to our lives in God, dying to the old, being born to the new.

Then Jesus offers two little parables about knowing what we’re getting into. If you are going to build a tower, make your plan and count the costs before you start. Otherwise you won't be able to finish. A king going out to fight a battle has to consider whether he has enough soldiers to succeed against the other king. If he can't justify the fight, he calls for a truce. The point Jesus is making is that the life of discipleship, the life of faith means that we look honestly at our readiness and willingness to move into it, to take it on. The spiritual path of following Jesus can't be on the basis of emotions, because we want to feel good all the time. It can't be because we expect to get something out of it--a sense of our own righteousness, a guarantee that we will be safe from the bad things of life, or whatever.

The life Jesus is inviting us into is a life that is serious, demanding, and goes against the grain of the dominant culture. It will mean our working with every attachment we have and learning to let go, to trust. It may mean being considered crazy, naïve, or disloyal. So Jesus wants us to look at what we’re getting into and to decide whether or not we are ready to work with all this stuff. And if we’re not, there seems to be no condemnation on Jesus’ part. A rich man came to Jesus wanting to know how to gain eternal life.[Mark 10:17-31] They agree that keeping the commandments is the way. But Jesus says a further thing. The only thing you are lacking, says Jesus, is to sell everything you own, give the money to the poor, and follow me. The man becomes depressed. His attachments are strong and he turns away. The story says that Jesus looked upon him lovingly. This man counted the cost in his own life and just couldn’t do it. Jesus did not condemn him. He simply went on to explain to his disciples that it is very difficult to enter the kingdom of God, this new life of loving God with our whole being. Jesus does not demand that people follow him or condemn them because they do not choose to do so. He doesn’t spiritually browbeat or threaten people. It is always the invitation to freely respond. It has to be so, because it is costly and challenging.

This is what’s behind membership in the Church of the Covenant. No one makes you do it. There is always the freedom to not commit or recommit with no judgment at all. It is this church’s vision from the beginning, to be a community of those who are freely working with what it means to give up everything to follow Jesus, who are responding to his call to make their relationship with God the most central thing in their lives. We try to place ourselves on that road with Jesus when he turns around and says that if we are to be his disciples then we must hate everything else and that we must take up that life of intentional suffering, the life of bearing the cross of God’s love in the world in concrete, specific actions and ways of living. And we must always be free to assess where we are in this, to take stock. Am I ready for this? Am I willing to work with this total commitment? In our own way, we try to take seriously the challenges of discipleship and the freedom out of which discipleship must arise.

Finally, Jesus sums up: None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions. This one leaves us wondering: Where am I in this? What am I still clinging to? In what ways have I claimed to follow Jesus and continued to hold onto possessions? Possessions can really be anything—material belongings and money, people and relationships, guilt and regret, rigid ideas that prevent fresh winds of God’s spirit, habitual patterns of behavior, hanging onto the past. We try to overcome our insecurities and feelings of anxiety

about life by nailing things down, clinging to one thing or another. But Jesus calls us to enter into the movement of God's spirit, God's redeeming activity in the world and in our own lives. In all, I think this challenging passage for today is a call from the life of possessiveness and clinging to the life of the spirit, of letting go of everything that holds us back from being part of God's active, redeeming love.