

Proper 18C— Luke 14: 25-33
September 4, 2022
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You figure Jesus must be doing something right. I mean, he's been preaching and he's started to attract great crowds. In fact, he's become something of a first century celebrity, besieged by fans and groupies, who push and press just to be close to him. Everybody wanted a piece of him, to be near him, follow him. Jesus must be doing something right to attract so many people. I mean, you can't argue with numbers. Television mega-evangelists are followed by millions who give millions; they must be doing something right. Considering Jesus' humble beginnings—little place like Nazareth, no formal education, no connections to the power-players of the day—it is great to see that at last his career has taken off. Look at the crowds! See how great it could be to be a disciple! That's what we're thinking.

But then Jesus goes to the microphone, turns to the crowds and says: "Whoever does not hate their father and mother, children, brothers and sisters, yes, even their own life, cannot be my disciple. Take up your cross and follow." All of a sudden, the crowd ceases its pushing and falls into stunned silence. What did he just say? *Hate* your father, mother, brothers, sisters, your own life? I thought Jesus was into love. One of his disciples, a theologian, attempts to explain, "He doesn't literally mean to 'hate' your mom and dad. He means rather, keep them in proper perspective. That's what he's saying."

Maybe. But that doesn't change the fact that Jesus could really use a public relations consultant. I mean, doesn't he know that saying things like that will only turn people off? I mean, you gotta "eliminate the negative" and "accentuate the positive," right? Telling people that following you will cause family tensions and lead to an untimely death on the cross is no way to attract people. You gotta tell them what they are going to *get* out of following you, how following you will grow their business, improve their marriage, help them raise successful kids and give him fresh breath! And you need to assure them that it won't cost them too much—just pray a prayer and fill out a form, and you're set. At least, that's what we're told by those who have "successful churches," that if we want to attract multitudes in our market-driven society, we have to learn how to "sell" Christianity, how to make being Christian attractive to the 'spiritual seeker.' Usually this means making Christianity out to be a "convenient, low-cost and low-risk" commodity. How else can Christianity compete with other ideas and ways of life, if not by coming in with a better offer, a lower cost?

It appears that Jesus never heard this advice, or if he did, he paid it no mind. He doesn't seem particularly impressed by the crowds, as if he saw attracting a large following not as a sign of success, but as a problem that he needed to solve. Why else would he have said to the crowds that day that they couldn't follow him unless they hated their families, if not to ensure that the crowd will be a great deal smaller at next Sunday's service? Then again, maybe it wasn't that the crowds themselves that were a problem, but rather why they came. Jesus wanted to make half-hearted, wanna-be followers think twice about signing up with him. He wants those who follow him to know what they're getting themselves into, to count the cost: "Do whatever cost-benefit analyses and feasibility studies and risk assessments you need to do," Jesus says. "Just make

sure you are going into it with open eyes, knowing what you're getting yourselves into, knowing that being his follower is not going to bring you wealth, fame, or long life, but instead will put you in conflict with the rest of the world and jeopardize all that you hold dear—your families, friends, possessions, freedom, even your lives.” Following Jesus may be free, but Jesus tells us in today's passage, it'll cost, it'll cost a lot, perhaps everything.

We in the church are not very good at communicating that to others. Especially those of us in Mainline churches. Often we make joining the church sound like joining Rotary. But as Jesus makes clear, becoming Christian, becoming his disciple, is very different. When you join Rotary, they hand you a membership card, a lapel pin, and give you the handshake. That little exercise makes you as much a member of Rotary as you will ever be. However, when you join the church, we grab hold of you, throw you in the water, hold you under, tell you that you have died, bring you up and tell you that you have been born again, and tell you that God now owns your life. This baptism service, the Church's initiation rite, is meant to tell us something about the cost of membership, the cost of discipleship. It tells us that becoming a Christian, becoming a disciple, is not cheap, not easy. Discipleship is like anything else worth doing—it takes time, energy, work, and practice. In a word, it takes sacrifice.

And if there is any word we in the Church don't want to say, it's sacrifice. Asking people to give up something they value is a sure way of turning people off, we reckon, and so we do everything we can to not have to. This didn't used to be the case. When Kennedy said in his inaugural address, “Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country,” it resonated not just with older people but with the younger generation as well. That was, however, a much more idealistic age than the one we are currently in. The age we live in today is characterized by easy convenience and instant gratification. You'd never hear a politician today calling for voters to make sacrifices. They don't want to be ousted from office. Government is supposed to give us things, not ask things of us, right?

It's little wonder then that churches that want to appeal to the masses tend to avoid talk about giving up anything for Jesus and try to make church involvement and being Christian as easy as possible. That's the strategy of mega-evangelists like the guy in Houston who preaches to a stadium full of people every week—never ask anyone to give up anything. Instead talk about all the good things that God wants to give us. And be sure that the cross is removed from the stage and from sermons; we don't want people to get the “wrong impression.”

But the thing is, even if politicians and prosperity preachers don't want to talk about sacrifice, people are doing it anyway. I know a lot of parents who give up nearly every weekend for their kids' travelling sports team. And I know lots of career-minded folks who put in long hours in jobs they don't love in order to secure their futures or just to make ends meet. A lot of people are spending hard-earned money to join a gym or participate in diet programs to get healthier. And how many families make sacrifices just to make sure their kids are dressed well and have a chance for further education?

I'm not criticizing any of these choices. I just want us to consider why we make these and other sacrifices. I believe it's because the things we hope to gain are more important than what we are giving up, because the good outweighs the cost. That is to say, we make sacrifices according to

our priorities. For some, their highest priority is their career, for others it's their family's well-being, their children's success, for others it's financial security and, for some, such as those in uniform, it's love of country and the defense of liberty. Whatever their highest priority is, they are willing to make sacrifices for it because they think it is important.

People are already making sacrifices, and in this passage Jesus is saying that Christian discipleship calls for the same. If we want to become his followers, if we want to be a part of what he is doing, we have to make following him our number one priority, our greatest concern.

I know, I know, we all are busy, we've got lots of things we have to do, we're pulled in so many different directions—family, career, marriage, retirement. How can Jesus expect us to make following *him* the most important thing in our lives? Doesn't he care about the other things we do? Doesn't he want us to care for our family and do a good job and save for the future and enjoy our golden years?

Jesus doesn't say that any of these things are bad, and for some people maybe they're enough. But I believe that there are others for whom they are not enough, they do not satisfy. There are some people, and maybe some of you, for whom life is so confusing, so perplexing, the questions so unanswerable, that you know in your heart of hearts that if there is anything that can speak to us, anything that can make a difference in our lives, it will not be simple or cheap. It will not come in three easy steps. It will not be reducible to a simple slogan that you can put on a bumper sticker. It will be something that will demand something of us. We will have to give something. We will have to change in order to get better. There is a cost to everything important. And for things that are most important, the cost can be everything.

And the truth is, we long for something that is worth giving ourselves to, something worth dying for, to give our lives for. People are hungry to give their lives to something more important than themselves. We saw this in the protests of last summer. What those marches said to me, among other things, is that people, particularly young people, want to be a part of something larger than themselves, part of a cause, a movement to do good. It's the same impulse that led college graduates to join the Peace Corp in the 60s and others to join the military and the CIA after 9/11.

It is a fact of life, not only that everything costs us something, but that, in our better moments, we are even eager to pay the price. A colleague of mine tells the story of how a recruiter from the Teach America Program came to the university where he served as chaplain. Do you know Teach America? Teach America is an organization that recruits the nation's best college and university students to teach in the most impossible situations in our country. This recruiter looked out on a crowd of students and began by saying, "I don't really know why I am here tonight. I can tell just by looking at you that you are probably not interested in what I have to say. This is one of the best universities in America. You are all successful. That is why you are here, to become an even greater success on Madison Avenue, or Wall Street, or in law school. And here I stand, trying to recruit some people for the most difficult job you will ever have in your life. I'm out looking for people who want to go into a burned-out classroom in Watts and teach biology. I'm looking for somebody to go into a little one-room schoolhouse in West Virginia and teach kids from 6 to 13 years old how to read. We had three teachers killed last year in their classrooms. And I can tell, just by looking at you, that none of you want to throw away

your lives on anything like that. On the other hand, if by chance there is somebody here who may be interested, I've got these brochures and I am going to leave them down here and will be glad to speak to anybody who is interested. The meeting is over." With that, a great mass of students jumped up, rushed into the aisles, rushed down to the front, and started fighting over her pamphlets, just dying to apply to Teach America. People are hungry to give their lives to something more important than themselves.

In a world that is always trying to sell us on things we don't need, that won't last, Jesus offers us something worth dying for. The choice is not whether we will live or die—everybody dies—but what we live for, what we are willing to give our lives for. It doesn't matter how old you are or what you do, whether you are rich or poor, Jesus invites us to be sold out for the kingdom. I've known former executives who've sacrificed the peace of retirement to build latrines in Honduras. I've known grandmothers who have sold their home—downsized—to fund theological education for pastors in Africa. We're never too young or too old to follow Jesus. It just means letting go, giving over and selling out for Christ. Following Christ may cost us everything we have, everything we are. But, in the end there really isn't anything else worth giving ourselves to. Thanks be to God!