

Sunday, September 4, 2022
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 18 (Year C)

Luke 14.25-33

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/599760855112316>

(Sermon begins at about 11:05)

“Cost of Discipleship”

“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.”

How do these words make you feel? Uncomfortable? Confused? Fearful? Maybe even angry?

Make no mistake about it: these are not just some words Jesus said to a crowd of people 2,000 years ago. These words are clearly spoken to anyone who follows Jesus. Any one, for all time. These words are, therefore, spoken directly to each and every one of us.

Admittedly, these words to those who seek to follow him are some of the most controversial spoken by Jesus and some of the most difficult for would-be disciples to hear. The thought that a potential follower of Jesus needs to hate? Let alone members of their own family? To hate even their own life? With requirements like that, it's a wonder that anyone would choose to follow Jesus. It's a miracle that the Christian religion even managed to get off the ground. That it didn't die with Jesus on the cross. The very cross that Jesus says would-be disciples need to carry. This is so counter to the message of love and acceptance that Jesus preaches elsewhere in the Gospels.

The challenge presented by this—and, truth be told, by many of Jesus words—is how to faithfully interpret the intended meaning. Especially when the words are seemingly counter to the overarching message that Jesus sought to proclaim through his teachings and through his actions. Particularly when considering that his whole ministry was based on love and compassion. Most notably, the Great Commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind . . . and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” This was the foundation of Jesus' life and ministry. And Jesus tells us that this is to be the foundation of our life of faith, as well. How can you love your neighbor as yourself if you are also expected to hate your family and your own life? It just doesn't make any sense. Which means that we need to find a way of reconciling these two seemingly conflicting messages. If the foundation of our lives and ministries is supposed to be one of love, the challenge becomes one of taking Jesus' words in today's Gospel seriously without taking them literally.

I think the key to a faithful interpretation of today's Gospel, without diminishing Jesus' intent or watering down the message, is in the verse “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” The general concept is not new to our Gospel for today. Jesus previously used this image of one carrying the cross five chapters earlier in Luke: “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.” (Lk 9.23-24). If Jesus feels a need to repeat it, there must be something to it.

This concept of taking up one’s cross is, I fear, taken out of context. It is not, as is often thought, about enduring suffering for the sake of the Gospel. The first time he uses this image, Jesus is not talking about his followers having to undergo physical crucifixion. In Luke chapter 9, Jesus foretells his own death and resurrection. His follow-up statement about us taking up our cross and following him is meant to say something about our response to his death and resurrection. When we step back and look at the big picture, it is clear that the overarching message of Jesus’ life, and particularly his own death and subsequent resurrection—and all that means for us in terms of promised salvation and new life—is that we are not expected to endure the same trials that he does. What we see in the Passion is that Jesus undergoes all that for our sake. Precisely so that we DON’T have to endure such pain and suffering and death. So, there is obviously some other meaning behind Jesus’ statement that we need to “carry the cross” in order to follow him.

To comprehend what Jesus is asking of us, we need to more fully understand just what the cross meant for Jesus and his followers. For Jesus and the people of his day, the cross was not a decorative feature in places of worship. The cross was not a piece of jewelry worn around one’s neck. The cross was an instrument of torture and death. In fact, some have posited that crucifixion—death on a cross—was and still is the most horrific form of death ever devised by humans. We can skip all the gory details of what was involved.

Another thing that we need to understand is when crucifixion was used. While obviously a form of capital punishment, in the Roman Empire crucifixion was not the de facto means of punishment for all serious crimes that carried the death sentence. No, crucifixion was reserved for one crime and one crime only. The crime that, in the eyes of the Roman Empire was more serious than any other. Insurrection against the Empire. Crucifixion was reserved for those deemed enemies of the state. Now, of course, there was a broad range of crimes that could be classified as insurrection, depending on circumstances. For instance, murder of a fellow Jew probably would not result in crucifixion. But murder of a Roman soldier could, if it was deemed to be an act of rebellion against the Empire.

That was why Jesus was crucified. On charges of insurrection. He claimed to be the Messiah, the Son of God. In the eyes of the Jewish authorities, this was blasphemy, punishable under Jewish law by being stoned to death. But to the Romans, “son of God” was a term, a title, applied to the emperor. So claiming to be the Son of God was tantamount to claiming to be the rightful emperor. With the presumption of wanting to overthrow the incumbent emperor. In short, insurrection.

This is what reference to the cross would call to mind to the original hearers of Jesus’ words. Insurrection. Overthrowing the Empire. Or, in more general terms, overturning the established order. Which is precisely what Jesus came to do. Jesus’ ministry was all about overthrowing the established order. Everything he taught, everything he did, was a commentary against the established order. Calling for liberation from the oppressive Roman Empire, for sure. But even

more so, criticizing and condemning the perversion of the Jewish religious system. Not the entire religious system, but specifically the onerous requirements placed on the people by the temple authorities. A system that evolved into a means of gaining power and wealth for the Jewish elite, at the expense of the poor and the marginalized, to the detriment of the widowed and the orphaned. In short, a perversion of the law, an abuse of power. Which is why Jesus continually referred to the authorities as hypocrites. What Jesus preached was a reversal of these ways and a return to a faithful observance of the laws established by God. Especially the law about loving one's neighbor as oneself. What Jesus did through healing the sick and infirmed, through casting out of demons, what Jesus did in associating with outcasts and sinners, with tax collectors and prostitutes, was to model what the kingdom of God is supposed to be about. What the kingdom of God will look like under his reign.

In Jesus' words and actions about love and compassion, about acceptance and mercy, about the hope and promise of a new and better way, we see a nice comforting message. Which it is. Which it certainly was in his own day. But at the time, it was so much more. What Jesus was preaching, what Jesus was doing, was radically subversive. It was a call to overturn the status quo in all respects. Religiously, politically, societally. Jesus was nothing short of a revolutionary. Jesus was nothing short of an insurrectionist.

So when Jesus says "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple," he is calling all his would-be disciples to follow his lead. He is calling all his would-be disciples to be revolutionaries, to be insurrectionists. He is calling all his would-be disciples to embrace a radically new way of living. A radically new way of embracing the Gospel. He is calling all his would-be disciples to truly live the commandments to love God and to love their neighbors in a radical way. To TRULY live those commandments with every fiber of their being. To love God and to love their neighbors to the exclusion of all else.

This is what Jesus is getting at when 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." Of course he does not want us to hate those closest to us. Of course he does not want us to hate our own life. Rather, in this ideal of taking up the cross, in this ideal of truly living the Gospel as was intended from the beginning, following Jesus means re-evaluating our priorities. Following Jesus means transforming who we consider "family." Following Jesus means evaluating our relationship with our possessions and determining how they can be used to further the kingdom of God. Being a disciple of Jesus means overturning and leaving behind conventional approaches to relationship, to how we view and use our resources, to how we view and live our lives. Being a disciple of Jesus means not allowing anything—ANYTHING—to get in the way of living the Gospel to the fullest.

The rest of the Gospel for today goes on to talk about the importance of weighing the cost and the potential impacts of undertaking major projects such as building a tower or waging war. That such endeavors are not entered into lightly, without considering the true cost. So, too, in our decision to follow Jesus. Following Jesus comes at a great cost. It means entering into a revolutionary way of life dedicated to the love and care of who and what are of greatest concern to God. It means being an insurrectionist, working to overturn the status quo and to help bring the kingdom of God to fruition. This is what Jesus invites us into. This is who Jesus

invites us to be. Although the term disciple is perhaps a little more palatable and less emotionally charged than insurrectionist.

Jesus' message is clear. The cost of discipleship is very high. The life of discipleship is very demanding. But Jesus promises time and again through his words and through his actions, and most particularly through his willingness to go to the cross for our salvation, that the benefits far outweigh the costs.