

Sunday, September 7, 2025
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 18C)
Luke 14.25-33
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“The Fine Print”

Most of us are old enough to remember the TV ads for various medications in which, at the end of the ad, there was a voice over with the legal fine print. Invariably, it was something along the lines of “in rare instances, use of this medication may cause . . .” going on to list a variety of potential side effects, usually from lesser intensity to greater. And it seemed like all medications had the exact same potential side effects. Usually ending with such effects as heart attack, stroke, suicidal thoughts, and even death. Even medications for benign ailments included such dire warnings. To which my father would invariably quip, “Why, then, would I even consider taking this medication?”

That is the image I had upon reading today’s Gospel passage. That Jesus is issuing the obligatory legal fine print regarding becoming his disciple. “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.” And ending with “none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.”

So, let me get this straight, Jesus. If I want to become one of your disciples, I have to hate my own life, hate everyone in my family, and give up all my possessions. And not only that, I have to be willing to carry an instrument of torture and execution, with the very real possibility that I might end up on that cross myself? To paraphrase my father, “Why, then, would I even consider following you?” Jesus is not able to answer that question for his audience—then or now. At least not directly, in this encounter. Although the answer is ultimately provided through what will happen in Jerusalem, with his own encounter with the cross and his subsequent resurrection. No, everyone must answer for themselves the question of whether they are willing to follow Jesus, as we are unique individuals with our own unique circumstances. Jesus illustrates this with a couple of examples.

Within the pericope, Jesus uses two images. One of a landowner wanting to build a new tower but not having sufficient resources to complete it, and the second of a king wanting to go to war, necessitating an evaluation of whether he has sufficient troops to defeat his enemy. The message in both images is the same. Before entering into any decision, particularly one as serious as a major building project or going to war—or dedicating one’s life to following Jesus—one must consider the costs. The total costs. For if one is not willing or able to bear the cost of their decision, the venture is doomed to failure. In the case of the decision to follow Jesus, one must consider what is often referred to as the cost of discipleship. Can one “afford” to follow Jesus. Admittedly, the cost of discipleship is far more nebulous and perhaps harder to define than calculating the cost of a building project or determining whether one has more soldiers than one’s enemy. The costs are going to be dictated by one’s personal circumstances. And the calculation needs to include not only cost to self, but also the cost to those impacted by the decision: one’s family and broader community.

Jesus' final statement in today's reading is "So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." When it comes to making that critical decision to be a disciple, the condition of giving up all one's possessions is about so much more than physical possessions. It is about giving up anything and everything that stands in the way of being Jesus' disciple. It is about giving up anything that would inhibit us. Anything that would get in the way of being able to commit to following. Be that our material possessions, be that some if not all our relationships, be that our uncertainties and fears. The bottom line in Jesus' statement is that no one can truly follow him unless they are willing and prepared to go all the way. To be all in, come what may.

Now, admittedly, there are some very real differences between making a decision to become Jesus' disciple 2,000 years ago in an outpost of the Roman Empire as opposed to today in our own context. Let's start with what Jesus said about hating family. First off, why—how—could the incarnate Son of the God of love, the physical embodiment of God's love, possibly even suggest that we must hate others? Particularly family. The Greek word translated as hate is *miseō*. While *miseō* most directly means to hate, detest, or abhor, it can also mean to love less or to prefer something else over it. The actual meaning depends on context. In the case of Jesus' statement about "hating" family, and given just who Jesus is and what he stands for, the implication is one of preferring or prioritizing our relationship with God over other relationships. To prioritize following Jesus over other relationships. Particularly where the demands of those relationships might come into conflict.

Certainly, in Jesus' time, there was more potential for one's decision to follow Jesus to be in direct conflict with family. Jesus' message was radical, controversial, and, in some contexts countercultural. Choosing to follow Jesus may well have been in conflict with the religious beliefs of one's family. Certainly, if one's family were pagans, but even if they were devout Jews, one's decision to go off and follow an itinerant teacher could create conflict, even being ostracized. In such conditions, one would definitely need to be willing to place following Jesus over one's family. Today, with Christianity being the largest religion in the world, one's decision to follow Jesus is less likely to create conflict. Possibly in some areas, but certainly less likely in the Western world. In fact, in our own nation, families of mixed religions or of a religious person and others with no religion at all are relatively common. We've figured out how to make it work, to minimize the conflict.

Even the suggestion of needing to give up possessions to follow Jesus would have had different significance in his time as opposed to ours. Those who first followed Jesus, particularly while he was still alive, lived a largely itinerant life, moving about from place to place. In such a life, one just could not easily carry and care for any possessions beyond the clothes on their back. Following Jesus would have necessitated the giving up of possessions so as to move about unincumbered. And frankly, back then, people just did not have as much stuff to begin with. Today, things are different. Aside from monastics, who do give up their possessions upon entering the monastic life and any others who willingly take a vow of poverty, the giving up of possessions is not viewed as necessary to following Jesus. Rather, the emphasis has changed. The reality is that in our contemporary society, we need resources to survive and to engage in ministry. It is more about how we use our resources than whether we have resources. The idea

is more about whether having possessions becomes more important than following Jesus; whether our possessions become an impediment to our following Jesus; whether our possessions distract us from what we are called to do as disciples of Jesus.

As for Jesus' statement that "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple," the idea behind that has changed, as well. In Jesus' own time, anyone who chose to follow him lived with the threat of the cross. Literally. The cross was a form of torture and execution reserved for non-Roman citizens who were insurrectionists. And, in the eyes of the Roman Empire at the time, Jesus' message was counter to the values and practices of the Empire. Jesus being the Son of God was viewed as a threat to the emperor, who was viewed as being divine. All of this making him an insurrectionist in the eyes of the Empire. Just as Jesus was ultimately crucified as an insurrectionist, anyone who willingly followed him could potentially be subject to the same fate.

Today, we do not have to fear the threat of crucifixion because of our beliefs. For us, carrying the cross takes on a new and different meaning. It means living according to the commandments of the One who went to the cross on our behalf. The one who went to the cross so we don't have to. It means being willing to proclaim through our words and actions the truth of who Christ is and what he has accomplished by going to the cross and then defeating death and rising to new life. That through his cross and resurrection, we have all been forgiven of our sins and assured of new and eternal life with him. Taking up our cross means devotion to proclaiming that new reality, to living that new reality.

So, as we take a critical look at what Jesus says about becoming his disciples, it is obvious that the conditions for being a disciple have changed over time. These changes are largely due to the fact that Jesus was talking about what it meant to follow him prior to his death and resurrection whereas we live post-resurrection. What, at the time of his original words, was a radical, countercultural message has become the largest religion in the world—countercultural though it may still be, in many ways. Moving from the margins to mainstream resulting in fundamental changes in perspective, and thereby removing some of the more extreme conditions for becoming a disciple.

While the specific conditions—the costs, if you will—of following Jesus have changed and even softened over time, the basic message, the fundamental purpose, of Jesus' statements in today's Gospel remains unchanged. We do not take the decision to follow Jesus lightly. In choosing to become his disciple, we are to do so wholeheartedly, fully committing to the cause. Fully committing to living the Gospel, to proclaiming that Gospel in our words and actions. In so doing, we are to not allow anything else, be it relationships or possessions or any other allegiances, to get in the way of or conflict with our calling to be a disciple. Which means, we still, as Jesus cautions, need to carefully consider the cost of being his disciple. To consider whether we feel we can truly afford to follow him. But, then again, given what we have gained through him, through his death and resurrection, can we afford not to follow him?