

Not So Fast

A sermon offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle, Pastor
September 4-5, 2010 • Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 18)
Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Luke 14:25-33

Now large crowds were traveling with him; 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.

"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."

Luke 14:26

I love this time of year, so full of new promise and new beginnings. Summer is over and a new season is in the air. How are you liking these cool nights for sleeping? I love it! New possibilities are abounding here at the church house as we re-group and re-energize with new intentionality, new programs and new mission efforts. A new school year is in full swing as we witnessed over the past couple of weekends as we welcomed new sixth graders into the youth group and celebrated the educational milestones of our children. And at our house, we have new school supplies, new shoes, new teachers to break in, and new things to learn.

I love this time of year. Always have. When I was in school and college, I was the type of guy who would carefully lay out his new school clothes the night before the first day of class and lay awake half the night because I was so excited about a new year and new classes. It is always felt like Christmas to me. I was the kind of person who delighted in receiving the syllabi on the first day of classes outlining the semester ahead, naming what supplies and books that were needed, and detailing the assignments that we would need to complete. There was always so much to learn, to read, to explore. I was the kind of guy who would love to shop for those school text books and organize my desk and my closet in joyful anticipation of what was to come.

It feels good to be excited about new beginnings, does it not? Better feeling good, I guess, than feeling how hard and how exhausting and how weighty any or all of our new beginnings can become once we start to work at them. And I know this: the beginning of the school year always felt very different from later in the school year when the tests that had to be studied for and worried about, and when the homework had to be tended to in the midst of the other demands of life, work, and play, and when I stayed up all writing those term papers. I remember some dark nights, when in desperation and pressure to meet a deadline, I would call out to Jesus: "Jesus if you are coming back, now would be a great time to do it. Come, Lord Jesus, Come!" Here is what we know: Practically everything we set out to do ends up requiring more, costing more, and weighing more than we anticipated or imagined at the beginning. And this is true whether it is love, whether it is learning, whether it is sports or art, whether it is dieting or exercise, or whether it is the work of justice and care. It is probably a good thing that we don't fully know, or that we don't consider all the costs at the beginning of our new endeavors. If we did, we might never begin anything. Just maybe naiveté and denial and ignorance of the cost are essential elements for those undertakings that are, in fact, hard.

Unfortunately, on the other hand, we also know that not counting the costs can set us up for failure. Because starting is easy, because dreams are easy, because desires come easy, we may fool ourselves

into thinking that these things should always be easy and we are shocked and disheartened when things get hard and dreary. We are embarrassed when we feel like giving up or quitting.

We know this is true of relationships in our day and time. So many people like the idea of falling in love, the idea of marriage and life partnership, the idea of children, the idea of friendship, but once the demands and struggles and obligations of real relationships start to unfold, then the joy of the “idea” fades and we want to pull away, and sometimes we even say goodbye to love.

We know this is true about the work of the church as well. So many people like the idea of God and spirituality, and spiritual practice, and love, and peace, and justice, and reconciliation, and care, and hospitality and worship, and acts of service like feeding the hungry and clothing the naked, and welcoming the stranger, but when you start getting your hands dirty with these things and start putting up the time and effort and money it takes to do those things, then the passion and energy wanes and we want to back off or give up altogether. As one has said, “many a worthwhile pursuit is abandoned or otherwise weakened because our pleasure in the starting of it was unprepared for the rigors in the living of it.” We know this is true in love, in relationships, in school work, in your life’s work and in the work of faith.

I think Jesus knew this well and on more than one occasion he warned those who wanted to be his disciples that starting a journey with him was very different from being on a journey with him. Frequently, people would show up and want to start some new kind of life with Jesus, but he would warn them: don’t start this unless you willing to go the distance; think about what you are committing to; consider carefully what the costs might be and if you are willing and able to pay those costs; reflect seriously on what is being asked and required of you. In essence, Jesus said, “Not so fast pilgrims. If you really want to put my name and my way on your life, you better think about it long and hard. If you are not willing to do what it takes, then you might not want to come along with me.” The values that Jesus espoused and his vision of the kingdom of God were compelling and seductive but Jesus also tempered his vision and his calling with a wisdom that reminded us that a journey with him is much more difficult and much more costly than we might think.

Will Willimon tells the story of a recruiter for *Teach America* who came to Duke University. She told her audience, “I don’t know why I’m here tonight. You are the best and the brightest and this is one of America’s finest schools. And you will leave here to become lawyers and doctors and investment counselors amassing great wealth. But we would send you to a burned out school in Watts to teach inner city children biology or to a one room school house in West Virginia to teach first through eighth graders how to read. There’s no glory in that. And it’s dangerous. Last year three of our teachers were killed. So I’m sure none of you would want to throw your life away on something like that. But just in case, I’ll leave a few brochures up here for those who have a passing interest. Thanks for coming anyway.” When she finished, the students crowded their way forward in a rush to get the brochures and sign up because, as Willimon observed, “People are hungry to give their lives to something more important than themselves. 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.”

It is a nice story really. It is moving. It gives us warm fuzzies, but I have to wonder: are we really willing to pay the price? Are we really *eager* to pay the price? Really? I wonder how many of those students actually followed up after that presentation and worked for *Teach America*? This is Jesus’ challenge before us.

Jesus would not have made a very good church growth expert, nor a very good parish minister. He didn’t seem too interested in keeping everyone happy and making faith easy and personal and safe. He didn’t seem to have any interest in getting bigger and bigger crowds. After all, it was to the large crowds that were following him that he spoke these hard words that we find in our gospel reading today.

Church growth and being a “successful” church seems all too often to be all about giving people what they want, about making church fun and easy, and not, God forbid, boring! It is about offering a simple salvation that assures your ticket to heaven when you die.

I wonder how many times mega church pastors have used the biblical text before us as the basis of one of their sermons? Most preachers I know, including me, would rather avoid a text like this one. And to be

honest, for 14 years of serving as your pastor I have avoided this text. I went back and looked! But this week I decided that it was time to deal with it. One of the disciplines of preaching from the lectionary, which is used by all Roman Catholics and Anglicans and most mainline protestant churches, is that preachers and congregations are confronted with texts that they would rather ignore, or hope would just go away.

Anyway, according to Luke, large crowds are following after Jesus. He must have been like a rock star...a celebrity *du jour*. He must have been compelling and winsome. His stories must have been entertaining and witty. Sick people were made well, sad people laughed, despairing people found hope, marginalized people were touched and embraced and welcomed, and in the midst of all of this people experienced God ... God!... because of his presence among them. With all of that going on, who wouldn't want to hang out and follow Jesus?

But Jesus is no dummy. To these large crowds so mesmerized by him, he offers some of the wisest, yet harshest, words he ever uttered: "You cannot be my disciple. You cannot be my disciple. You cannot be my disciple." Three times he uses strong "cannot" statements that depict the difficulty of discipleship.

The first one always brings us up short: *"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."*

Say what Ethel? Hate? Betty Cox, who served as our 9:30 liturgist, came into my office this morning seeking clarification about this text. She said "Something is not right. I can't be reading this text correctly. There must be a mistake." But I had to tell her, "No Betty that is exactly what it says. I know it is bothersome." Jesus, the very embodiment of the God of Love, says "hate"? Hate those closest to us? Hate life too? This makes no sense. This is absurd. I certainly don't want "hate" attached to Jesus. We've got enough hateful Christians these days, some claiming "God Hates Fags" and others burning the Koran and saying that Islam is of the devil. We've got enough hate in the world and we certainly don't need to offer more. We certainly don't need our Jesus giving the "haters" cover and stirring up more "hate."

There have been all kinds of reasons put forth as to why Jesus might have said this. One has said that Jesus "doesn't mean hate as we mean it. He was using a Semitic hyperbole, familiar to his hearers. Hate in this usage has nothing to do with anger or ill will. It means loving something less ultimately than you love something else. It means a certain detachment from who and what you love because of a greater attachment that precedes it and outweighs all else. You can't be my disciple, Jesus says, if any of these attachments is absolute."

Another one has suggested that Jesus was "using a figure of speech we do not use anymore. In his day, the way you stated a preference was by pairing two things and saying you loved one and hated the other. It did not have anything to do with emotions. It was a matter of priorities, so if I said, 'I love the mountains and hate the beach,' it would not actually mean I felt hostile toward the ocean, but simply mean that the mountains were my first choice."

And while some of these ideas may help interpret this passage, it still doesn't put me at ease. I know it is tempting to want to tone Jesus down, to try and explain away the harshness of his words, to try and ratchet him back a bit. But unfortunately, the Greek word that's translated as "hate" really does mean hate. *Miseo* is the Greek root; it can also be translated as "to pursue with hatred" or "to detest." It's the same word Jesus used in earlier in Luke's gospel: "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man." (Luke 6:22) So, instead of trying to explain Jesus away, I think it is best that I just leave his words as they are and let each of us ponder what this disturbing and gut wrenching teaching might mean for our Christian discipleship today.

One thing I think about is this: families can be one of the most oppressive, controlling and humanity diminishing institutions that exist. If you want to follow in the way of Jesus, if you want to be all God made you to be, if you want to do what God is calling you to do; and this way of Jesus is indeed marked by a deep love for life and wholeness and liberation; a deep love for justice and peace and reconciliation; a deep love for a table fellowship that welcomes all, the last, the least, the stranger; then, unfortunately, tragically, it is often families that are the first to kill those awakenings; it is families that are the first to try and thwart those passions; it is families who are the first to try and squash those callings.

Women encounter this when they want to rise above the traditional roles assigned to them. GLBT people encounter this when they are forced to choose “family” over being who they are and who they were created to be. People who want to do good in the world are told they can make more money and have more power if they give up their crazy ideas of working with the poor and seeking justice for all. And while I might fuss with Jesus about the word “hate,” especially in our day and time and cultural context, I think Jesus is naming a deep wisdom. He’s warning us about drawing our deepest identity from our family and those closest to us. He is warning us about making our Ultimate commitments to our family or anything else. He is calling us to loosen our grip on them, and to loosen, if need be, their grip on us. One way or another we cannot keep them and they cannot keep us. Life itself we cannot keep. Unless we live like this is so, unless we uncurl our anxious fingers from them all, unless we center ourselves in what is Ultimate...what is GOD...we cannot love, not really, and we won’t have what it takes to be disciples of Jesus.

Jesus says the same thing about possessions. You cannot be my disciple if you don’t give up “all” of your possessions. All? More hyperbole? Exaggeration? Is Jesus going for more shock value here? Honestly, I don’t know what to do with the “all.” Couldn’t he have just left that “all” out here? I am guessing that possessions are not in and of themselves bad. However, like relationships, he is warning us that possessions shouldn’t possess us. You can’t be my disciples, he says, if your stuff has got a hold on you and is more important than the way I have set before you.

He says the same thing about carrying the cross. You cannot be my disciple unless you are willing to carry the cross and follow me. It is another warning from Jesus that the way of love and justice is costly: it involves suffering and heartache and pain; it involves a passion and willingness to die for love’s sake.

And to anyone wanting to follow in the way of Jesus, he accents the costliness of discipleship by asking a couple of questions: “Would any of you launch right in on a building project without first figuring out what money and materials you’ll need to finish it?” Of course not! You could end up with a nice open-air basement! The neighbors would howl and scoff and say, “You can’t finish what you start.” “Or can you imagine a ruler so dumb that he sends 10,000 troops to fight off an enemy of 20,000 without a plan for how his smaller force can prevail? Of course not! If he sees he can’t win, he saves face, he saves lives – he negotiates for peace.” So too with us, Jesus says: as you organize your life around what is Ultimate, around what is Source-of-life; as you set out on the spiritual journey with Jesus; beware of beginnings that are doomed to fail because they are naïve, and ignorant of what is to come, and unprepared to do what it takes. Don’t start without asking what it will take to finish.

So, after hearing these hard words of Jesus, after hearing the costs of following Jesus, does anyone here want to be a disciple of Jesus? Do I see any hands? I wouldn’t be surprised at all if you would rather go get a martini, go shopping, go invest your time in working and making money, go do something you can manage. I understand. But for those of us who gathered here today, who desire to follow in the way of Jesus, Jesus is offering us some grace. He knows how attracted we are to his way of Love that is boundless, and unconditional and all-embracing and amazing. He knows we need *that* Love and He knows it would give us great joy to bear *that* Love in the world. He knows that deep down we would like to be a part of his way in the transformation of the world, to see justice done, to side with the poor and the marginalized in a world where the rich are getting richer and “power” is falling into fewer and fewer rich hands. I think Jesus knows that his way really does touch our deepest desires, really does stir our passion and zeal for gracious love, really does stoke beautiful dreams of justice and peace and goodness, but Jesus won’t have us reaching for any of it in vain. Jesus says if you want to follow in my way it will take this: it will take all that you have; it will take all that you love; it will take all that you are. There is no beginning that is adequate, there is no counting of the costs that is complete, there is no response that is meaningful apart from an ultimate commitment to the Source of Life were we are willing to empty ourselves for it fully and are willing to open ourselves to it entirely. Think about that, says Jesus, because I want what you start with me, and what I start with you, to come to fruition...to bear fruit...to reveal the reign of God in the world right here...right now.

Now, I don’t want you to get the idea that perfection, and a lack of failure, is the mark of true discipleship with Jesus. In fact, I think just the opposite is true. As the old adage goes: “There is no success without failure.” Lots of failures! Lots of fits and starts! But thank goodness it is not perfection that we seek, nor

is it perfection that Jesus demands. Instead, what he is asking is that we tenaciously seek to be on this journey with him, going with him where life is hard, and pain is real, and the choices before us are often messy and uncertain, and suffering and struggle is par for the course. The way I see it, this following Jesus is more about a commitment to the journey than any destination we might imagine.

And that's why we come to this table again today. We come to find nourishment for that journey. We come to find new energy for that particular way. We come to sort out our varied entanglements and discern the hold they can have on us. We come to center ourselves in that Source of Love and Life that is ultimate and sure so we can stand upright and strong and endure. We come to link arms with traveling companions that offer care and bear God's face as we go.

We come to this table again because WE CAN, and WE ARE, and WE WILL BE disciples of Jesus who are willing to follow where he leads.

Amen.