

Proper 18C; Luke 14:25-33
September 8, 2019
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After careful consideration of this morning's Gospel passage, one of Jesus' harder sayings I'm afraid, I have concluded that Jesus would NOT have made a very good parish priest -- or any kind of parish leader, for that matter.

This past week the Episcopal Church published its parochial report charting trends in church membership over the past 10 years. The results were much as we'd expect: slow and steady decline. A few days later the Lutherans published a similar report – and their numbers were slightly worse than ours. I'll admit to you that I felt a little comfort in that. I guess it's every denomination for itself these days. After the reports were posted, Facebook and Twitter lit up like a Christmas tree – the whole world, it seemed, offering its endless opinions about why we're in decline, and what church leaders can and should be doing to stem the tide. A surprising number of comments were about how best to make it *easy* for people to come to church and then how to reward them for staying, or how to remove perceived barriers that make it challenging for people to come to church. The theme was clear: church leaders need to find out what people want and then give it to them so they don't find it somewhere else.

I actually find nothing intrinsically wrong with trying to be the best church we can be. As we heard from our Listening Links project this summer, our Trinity community works pretty darn hard to be ever more inclusive and hospitable, to meet pastoral needs, offer meaningful worship and spiritual education. We are loyal in reaching out to our neighbors in need. But Jesus – well, if Jesus was in charge of a church I think there would be about four people left there on Sunday. Because according to him living as a disciple is *hard*, and not at all about “easy,” or lowering the bar, or trying to meet everyone's needs. According to Jesus, we can't follow him unless we hate our families, carry our crosses, and give up everything we own. I have this imagine of Jesus standing next to Sue Veazie in our Atrium on Sunday morning greeting everyone by saying, “Are you absolutely sure you want to follow this path? It's going to take everything you have. It has to come before everything else that matters to you. Why don't you go home and think it over?”

Jesus is the complete opposite of a good parish minister. Far from trying to make it *easier* for people to follow him, he points out how hard it is. In this morning's Gospel passage from Luke, Jesus is talking to a large crowd that has begun trailing him from town to town. They aren't people Jesus has called to follow him, they've simply shown up, bubbling with enthusiasm. They all want to go with Jesus and get as close as they can to the energy that radiates from him like heat from a coal. They want to be the first to hear what he says next – to be part of changing the world with him – and they don't have a clue, or give a fig, what it will ask of them, or cost. But Jesus is less than welcoming. He tells them not to get their hopes up, that more than likely they can't afford what they think they want. Jesus wants them to know what it *really* means to follow him, because the worst thing he can do is to mislead and let them believe they are running off with the circus when they are in fact headed into battle ill-equipped and unarmed.

And Jesus says incredibly disturbing things to the crowds about hating their parents and their children and their lives. Why? Why so sharp? One explanation is that Jesus, in this passage, is using a figure of

speech we don't use anymore. In first century Palestine, the way a person stated a preference was by pairing two things and saying you loved one and hated the other. It didn't have anything to do with emotions, but 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 that the mountains are my first choice.

In all honesty I know that explanation doesn't soothe the sting very much, but it seems worthy of mention since priorities are what I think is on Jesus' mind. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, and he knows the hard road he's going to have to walk. And Luke knows even more. When he wrote his Gospel, Christians were already being persecuted for following Jesus. To have a Christian in the family was dangerous for everyone, because the Romans were thorough. If they found one believer in a household, everyone got arrested – so there was some truth that turning toward Jesus meant, in some ways, turning away from your family, whether you wanted to or not. Once you made following Jesus your first priority, everything else fell by the wayside – not because God took it away but because that's how the world works. As long as the world opposes those who set out to transform it, the transformers will always pay a high price. No one tangles with the status quo and walks away unscathed.

I think that is what Jesus wants us to know. I don't think Jesus is making threats or trying to frighten us. I think he is loving us – as usual – by refusing to lie to us, refusing to make his way sound easier than it is, painting the whole picture of what it costs so that none of us attempts to pattern our life after his under false pretenses.

If that sounds a little overdramatic, then maybe we have lost sight of what following Jesus is all about. Following him is probably less about being good, stable citizens who show up for church once in a while and more about changing the world. Probably less about our comfort and more about our transformation. I would imagine that being a disciple is less about our needs and more about attending to the world's needs. Maybe less about playing it safe and more about taking a risk. I would imagine that disciples jump in rather than hold back, wade into mystery instead of hold out for certainty. Discipleship might have something to do with easing our death grip on our need for control and learning to let go and trust the living God with what we most cherish. Maybe following has less to do with defaulting to the expectations of a consumer, and more with what we can do for others. Because as my former professor Dick Niebuhr once said: *the person sitting next to you is the greatest sacrament*. What's best for the community as a whole, if we're engaging our discipleship, probably overrides our individual wants every single time.

It seems to me that following Jesus and *learning how* to follow Jesus is a life-long pursuit. We start in one place and we go deeper, inch by inch, step by step, slowly, sometimes painfully. And maybe it's hard because a life in Christ necessitates a million small, daily choices – it's in those quotidian moments where we learn to choose the Jesus way over our way, slowly, methodically. Where we intent rather than default. Because it's just harder to jump in than hold back. It's harder to surrender to mystery than cling to what we think we can control. Jesus' way is the harder way.

Maybe following Jesus is a matter of cultivating an increased, more honed and intentional awareness on our part. I am in the midst of what I am sure will be the best book I've read all year, entitled, *On Earth We Are Briefly Gorgeous* by a young Vietnamese writer, Ocean Vuong. The novel is structured as a letter from a son to a mother who cannot read. Right at the beginning there's an incredible gem: *You once told me that the human eye is god's loneliest creation. How so much of the world passes through*

the pupil and still it holds nothing. The eye, alone in its socket, doesn't even know there's another one, just like it, an inch away, just as hungry, as empty. Opening the front door to the first snowfall of my life, you whispered, 'Look.' Indeed, making a million disciple choices necessitates our ability to “look,” to pay attention, be aware, and to interact with our world through Jesus' eyes.

Discipleship, if we're doing it right, costs all that we have, all that we love, all that we are. And I know that's a harsh “first Sunday back from summer” message – but there you are. And in the end, we need to remember, that while Jesus may have made a horrible parish leader, he made an excellent savior, and he is still saving us, every Sunday, every day. As one theologian said, *Jesus' best tool has always been the very thing that killed him – that cross he ended up on – the one he was carrying long before he got to Golgotha. He is always offering to share it with us...not..because he wants us to suffer but because he wants us to know how alive you can feel even underneath something that heavy and how it can take your breath away to get hold of your one true necessity.*

This morning Jesus reassures us that although living the way of Christ is incredibly hard, *it's worth it.* In the end, what is also true is that if we cannot help Jesus carry the cross, he will carry us, too. I think he just wants us not to take it for granted. I think he just wants us to know what it costs. AMEN.

Sources:

Barbara Brown Taylor, *Bread of Angels*, pp.46-50.

Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, p.12.

Arnold Lobel, *Frog and Toad Together*, pp.18-29.

Parochial Report: <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/pressreleases/data-from-2018-parochial-reports-now-available/>

David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (editors), *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 4*, pp. 44-49.