

Proper 18 (C)

Lk 14.25-33

The kind of talk that we hear from Jesus in today's gospel lesson makes us very nervous, and there is a very real danger here that we will try to disarm this text in an effort to avoid its message. We don't like to hear Jesus talking about things like hating other people; that doesn't make much sense to us. And we don't like to hear Jesus saying things like, "None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." That doesn't make much sense to us, either...or maybe it's more accurate to say that it makes perfect sense to us, but we don't much care for it.

So we are tempted at this point to try and massage these texts a bit by applying a little judicious interpretation. "Well, of course, Jesus didn't really mean that we should hate other people, he didn't really mean that we need to give up all our possessions. That's just his way of making a point; he's just using a bit of hyperbole."

But there's a problem with that approach: when we read this text in that way, it leaves our lives untouched by the challenge that Jesus presents to us. In other words, we have to avoid the temptation to try and turn what Jesus has to say into a kind of bumper sticker, to water down what he says until it's a kind of abstract spiritual principle. If we want to call ourselves his disciples, we have to take seriously what it is he's saying to us.

And Jesus does want us to take him seriously. At this point in Luke's gospel, Jesus is on his way up to Jerusalem; he has discerned that the time was drawing near when his ministry would reach its culmination, and he had discerned that this would involve his own death, and he was determined to see it through. So he sets out for the holy city, making his way south from Galilee towards Judea, and along the way he picks up quite a band of followers; "large crowds were traveling with him," Luke writes.

Jesus was wary of crowds; he didn't trust them. In the gospel of John, we read that at one point in his ministry many people believed in Jesus "because they saw the signs that he was doing," but Jesus refused to entrust himself to them because he knew better. As John puts it, "he knew what was in the human heart." Jesus was not one to let the acclamation of the crowd go to his head, and he was not impressed with easy faith. As far as he was concerned, being a disciple required serious commitment, and the half-hearted need not apply.

So in today's gospel he turns to the crowds that are following him and he says something that is not only designed to get their attention, he says something that actually seems calculated to discourage them from following him. "If you want to follow me, you have to hate everyone else. If you want to follow me, you have to be ready to carry your cross. If you want to follow me, you have to get rid of all of your possessions."

This is not the only time in the gospels when Jesus says something outrageous in order to get people to stop following him around. At one time he provided them with food to eat, and the crowds sang his praises: "Look how great Jesus is, he's given us all this wonderful food. Yay,

Jesus!” But the next thing you know, Jesus is telling them not to chase after the bread that perishes, but to hunger for the bread that comes down from heaven, the bread that is his own body and blood. And the crowds get disappointed, and they leave.

Another time, the crowds tried to push him into a confrontation with the Romans, thinking that he was going to start a revolution. “Look how great Jesus is, he’s going to be our political messiah. Yay, Jesus!” But the next thing you know, Jesus is telling them that his kingdom was not going to be won through bloody insurrection. And the crowds get disappointed, and they leave.

Jesus was single-minded in his pursuit of the mission his Father had given him; he would not compromise his mission. He welcomed everyone to be a part of the work that he believed his Father was doing in the world, but not once did he say or do anything that suggested he believed that God’s will for the world was up for negotiation.

That’s what he means when he says that we cannot be his disciples unless we are willing to hate father and mother, wife and children, family and friends, and yes, even life itself. He’s not talking about an visceral emotional attitude; he’s not saying that we can’t be his disciples unless we sustain an active dislike for other people. He’s saying that the call to be his disciple, the call to participate in the work of God in the world, takes priority over every other call and every other relationship we have. This is a more forceful way of saying, “Strive first for the kingdom of God, and everything else will be given to you as well...but put the kingdom of God second, or third, or fourth, and you will end up with nothing.”

There’s something else worth noting about what Jesus says to the crowds. Think for a moment about the things he tells them that they have to give up if they want to be his disciples: family relationships, money and possessions, “Yes, and even life itself.” Now we’re used to thinking of these things as potentially getting in the way of our relationship with God; we’ve grown up in a culture that tends to see such things as worldly distractions from the spiritual life. We’re used to thinking of people who literally do what Jesus said and give up these things as being more holy or more righteous than those of us who don’t; the more you give up, the holier you must be, right?

But the people of Jesus’ day would not have thought about these things in this way. Indeed, all of the things that Jesus mentions—family, money, possessions, life—all of these things were seen as signs of God’s blessing. The larger your family, the more descendants you had, the greater your wealth, the larger your estate, the more secure and privileged your life, the better you must be doing in your relationship with God. The people of Jesus’ day did not see these things as *distractions* from spiritual life; they saw them as *evidence* of spiritual life.

So in one sense what Jesus was saying to the crowds was that they had to relearn what it meant to live a holy life. All of the familiar markers were called into question. The things they had learned to associate with a healthy, vibrant, authentic faith had to be unlearned, and a new way of understanding the life of faith had to be adopted instead. Being a disciple required a complete transformation of the way one thought about the life faith.

So where does all of this leave us? Can we hope to live up to the expectations that Jesus seems to have? Is it at all reasonable to expect that this kind of faith can make a difference in today's world, a world that is after all very different from the one in which Jesus lived? What does authentic faith look like in our day and age?

Well, despite the fact that our world is very different from the world of Jesus, some things haven't changed. Being a disciple still requires serious commitment; the half-hearted need not apply. And being a disciple still requires a complete transformation of the way we think about ourselves, the world, and God; the double-minded need not apply. The demands Jesus makes of those who would call themselves his followers in this day and age are every bit as stringent as were the demands he made of the crowds following him as he made his way up to Jerusalem.

But if all we hear in this morning's gospel is that we have to give up certain things in our lives, then we will have altogether missed the point. In other words, if the only thing we hear coming out of Jesus' mouth is that we need to give up this and give up that, then we will not have really understood what he's saying.

He's not calling us to give up things simply for the sake of giving up things; rather, we're called to give up life in the terms *we* use to define it precisely so we can take up life in the terms *God* uses to define it. St. Paul put it this way: we must forego what we think of as wisdom so we can learn his wisdom, we must put off the perishable so that we can put on the imperishable, we must free ourselves of shame so that we can experience glory, we must rid ourselves of weakness so that we can live in the power of God.

So, yes, we have to learn to give up things; in fact, we will eventually have to learn how to give up everything, and one way or another we all eventually give up everything. But we do this in order to make room in our lives for the good gifts, the enduring gifts God wants to give to us. We have to give up our families so that we can learn to see ourselves as members of the family of God, brothers and sisters of one another held together by bonds of affection stronger even than the bond between husband and wife, stronger even than the bond between parents and children. We have to learn to let go of the illusion of security and prosperity that comes from earthly riches so that we can learn to value what God values. We have to learn to surrender our lives to God so that we will find ourselves drawn into the life and the love of God. In the end, there is no other way to be a disciple.

What is the glory that God is waiting to reveal in you? What gift does he hope to give to the world through your life? And what kind of changes will you have to make in order for him to be able to work through you? What are you being called to give up, for the sake of taking up what God has to give you? Answering this question is what being a follower of Jesus is about.

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