

Blessings Of Discipleship

Luke 14:25-33

August 8, 2010

I.

I would like to use this time today for two purposes. First, I will comment on today's Gospel reading from Luke. But my sermon will be a little shorter because after I finish I will ask Patty Hourin to come forward and speak to us about the vestry's recent weekend retreat.

We might think about the Gospel by starting with politics. This year the entire House of Representatives and one-third of the U.S. Senate is up for election. Suppose one of those candidates said, "Vote for me. I will increase taxes and lower your income. Prices will go up, government spending will increase, and you might lose your home."

What would we think about that? Would we vote for that candidate? Probably not. We would be hard pressed to find anything in that candidate's ideas that would do anything good for us.

Now look at today's Gospel. Jesus said that in order to be his disciples we must hate our mothers and fathers, wives and children, and brothers and sisters. Then he said we had to carry the cross and give up all our possessions.

Was Jesus making the same mistake as that imaginary candidate? I don't think so. Let's change the scenario a little. Suppose we were on a ship that was taking on water in a storm, and the captain told us to "get rid of all our possessions, throw everything overboard." That would change things, wouldn't it? We probably would do what the captain said.

What's the difference? In the first case, listening to the candidate, it's likely we would be thinking only about material things. In the second case, when the ship might be going down, we would be thinking of our lives.

I believe the second case is more like what Jesus said. He never promised us material gains or profits in this world. Instead he promised us life. Everything that he taught and preached throughout Scripture was focused on how we are to live in God's will and love one another in preparation for the coming of God's kingdom, and the chance to forever be in God's presence.

II.

And at times Jesus used gentle words. He said, for example, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Mt. 11:28), and "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness" (Jn. 8:12).

At other times, however, Jesus used strong words. Sometimes, as in today's reading, he gave extreme examples, or used emotionally charged ideas that were to be understood apart from the literal words. And it's important to have a sense of the context or setting in which he made those statements.

Jesus began his ministry of healing and teaching in and around Galilee, a relatively safe place where he was not yet perceived as a serious threat to the Jewish leaders who later became his avowed enemies. And the Romans probably viewed him as the harmless leader of one of the many Jewish sects that existed in the area.

In today's reading, however, time had passed and Jesus was on his fateful journey to Jerusalem and the cross, and the dangers had increased. Roman and Jewish leaders were watching more closely. Those who accompanied him were under scrutiny. It now was getting more risky.

And so Jesus used strong language. He spoke emphatically so there would be no confusion. He wanted people to know the potential costs of discipleship. That's why he also used the analogies of how someone planning to build a tower first would estimate the expenses, and how a king planning a war first would consider the military strength of each side.

But he also could be misunderstood if taken literally. And when I think about misunderstandings I'm reminded of the old country pastor talking with his congregation about purchasing a new chandelier. Someone rose and opposed the idea for three reasons. He said, "First, we can't afford it, second, no one knows how to play it, and third, what we really need is a new light fixture."

A similar thing happened to me in a grocery store shortly after we moved to Mississippi. I asked a clerk where I could find a grocery cart. He looked a little puzzled, and I said, "You know, something to carry my groceries." "Oh," he said. "You want a buggy." I didn't know the jargon.

We approach Jesus' words today seeking the same common ground of meaning. And when he referred to hating family members, he did not use that word as we might understand it. An accepted Jewish use of the Greek verb for hate did not convey the idea of despising or disliking. Rather, it meant to love less, or value less highly, or leave aside.

And so Jesus was telling people that to be his disciples they had to love him more than they loved family members. They did not literally have to hate or dislike anyone. They simply could not value worldly relationships more than their relationship with him.

The same idea was behind Jesus' instruction that people must carry the cross as they followed him. He was asking them to allow his teaching, and the sacrifice he knew he was about to make, to govern their lives. He called for total commitment because the stakes were high. Discipleship could lead to martyrdom.

Finally, he said that following him meant leaving worldly things behind. He told people they had to give up their possessions. But he did not mean they actually had to dispose of their possessions. Peter and Phillip kept their houses (Mt. 8:14, Acts 21:8), and other disciples kept their boats (Jn. 21:7).

But disciples were called to give up their attachments to possessions. Just as with family members, they could not allow possessions to interfere with their commitment to him.

III.

And so for Christians living in twenty-first century America the message of today's reading is to place God first. This is not always easy. It does not always come naturally. There is a big difference between liking the idea of being a disciple, and doing the work of being a disciple.

Jesus called for commitment then, and he does the same now. He does not call us to follow him just so we can be nicer people, but rather so we can be different people. Accepting discipleship in Christ means more than making a few adjustments here and there. St. Paul said that if we are in Christ we are new creations (2 Cor. 5:17). When we are in Christ our priorities completely will have changed.

And the firmness and seriousness with which Jesus spoke today makes clear that the choice is not between two options of comparable value. It's not like deciding whether to go to the Pier House or the country club for dinner. It's not like choosing between a red shirt or a blue shirt.

We simultaneously live in a secular world, and in the presence of a spiritual world. And the secular world is the default option. It's what we get by doing nothing. We have to consciously choose to partake of the spiritual world. And although most people no longer are persecuted for their religious views, the consequences of accepting or rejecting Jesus are the same.

And I suspect that we intuitively know what we are called to do, and that we similarly know when we are not doing it. We all at times find ourselves being inattentive to our spiritual commitments. And in the same way we all probably find ourselves overwhelmed with the concerns of the here and now rather than the hereafter.

There are days when I begin the morning absolutely convinced that I am a good Christian and that I know what Jesus wants me to do. The world seems a beautiful place, prospects for the day are good, and nothing bad has happened. I'm optimistic and confident. All is going well. Then I have to get out of bed.

And that's when the world creeps in and when things start to go awry. I might think that I have tried to count the costs of discipleship, but there always are cost over-runs. The world brings its own change orders. In some way or another, at some time or another, I fall short as most of us do.

IV.

But fortunately we are not left to deal with the world on our own. Most of us cannot do it alone. That's why we have the church and why we have our community here at St. Thomas.

Through the church we can hear God's word, we can support and encourage friends and family in the faith, and we can carry our crosses in a joyful way. And there is a cost of doing this, but it is a real bargain and the best deal we ever could have. Through prayer, and fellowship, and the study of Scripture, and participating in worship here we bring today's Gospel to life.

I often have said that I never knew anyone who, on their deathbed, believed they had spent too much time in church. It usually is just the opposite. The church can help us share a common life that unites us in God's love. Through the church we can know peace as we praise and thank God for our lives and for creation. And because we're together now we can see today's reading as a promise rather than a burden. *Amen.*