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# The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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Luke 14:25-33





The Jesus that we've encountered in the Gospel of Luke over the past several weeks has not been the most warm and cuddly Jesus. Instead, we've heard from a rather prickly Jesus, an almost cactus-like Jesus whose sharp spines prick us with challenging words and messages. As we heard Jesus say a few weeks ago, "I've come to bring fire on the Earth!" and "I've not come to bring peace but rather division." Picking up directly on this divisive theme, we hear another sharp, pointed message of Jesus in today's Gospel reading: "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."

"Hate your parents, your spouse and kids, your siblings?!" Wow, these are some intense and provocative words, and we well might respond in one of two opposite ways. On the one hand, we might say, "No problem, I already can't stand my kids. Got that one covered, Jesus. I'm happy to know that my distaste for my in-laws or my siblings bears Jesus' own seal of approval." But on the other hand—and more likely—we might reason that Jesus is doing something deeper here than sanctifying family frictions. We might surmise that he is pushing us in a very challenging, even uncomfortable, direction. And while his meaning is less than crystal-clear, we might have an unsettling sense that he's not literally advocating hatred but that he is setting for his followers a very high bar.

So what is Jesus really saying here? What is Jesus' message? If you are one of those who think that Jesus is probably not literally advocating hatred of your family members in these verses, I would estimate that you are correct. It would be completely contradictory for Jesus, who said that the two greatest commandments are to love God and to love other people, to then commend hostility towards one's own family. So if the point of Jesus' message here is not really hatred per se, then what is his point? What is Jesus trying to communicate?

The point, I believe, that Jesus is trying to get across here is not really about how you feel or relate to your family members. Jesus' teaching here is not, most basically, about family relationships. Rather, the gist of his comments, and what matters in his teaching here, is how you relate to Jesus himself, and more specifically, what it means to truly be a disciple, a follower, of Jesus. In other words, Jesus is not talking about how to relate to

your family members so much as he's describing how we ought to relate to him: what does it mean, what does it look like, to be Jesus' disciple.

And Jesus underscores at least three main things about this life of discipleship, about being a follower of Christ. There are numerous dimensions of discipleship that Jesus highlights in this passage, but given our limited time, I want to just emphasize three of the most prominent: which are that this discipleship is 1) accessible; 2) unconditional; and 3) cross-based. Accessible, unconditional, and rooted in the cross.

First, being a follower of Jesus is accessible to all. This can be seen clearly in the opening phrase of this morning's reading. Jesus is walking along with his disciples and a huge crowd is following behind them. For the most part, Jesus seems to be focused primarily on his close companions, his disciples, speaking with them, teaching them, giving them some gold nuggets of wisdom. But then at the start of this passage, we see Jesus deliberately turning towards the whole crowd and directing to them the teaching on discipleship which follows. Through this action of turning, in other words, Jesus effectively communicates that discipleship is not just for the so-called "disciples." In the Christian life, all are called to be followers, to be disciples, of Jesus. In the 1st century, to be a "disciple" literally meant to be a "learner," a "pupil," and so by turning and addressing the large crowds behind him, Jesus shows that learning from him and following him are opportunities open and accessible to everyone. And even more than that, Jesus calls all—everyone in the huge crowd—to follow him, not just some people.

Living the Christian life, therefore, is rather different from—for example—going to hear a band at a concert or going to listen to a famous speaker. Let's imagine that Steven Spielberg is coming to give a guest lecture here at St. Anne's, and we sell tickets based on the proximity of your seat to Mr. Spielberg. Those who are really gung-ho about Spielberg's movies, those of you who still have ET posters hanging on your walls, are going to be more likely to shell out some big bucks to sit up here right in front to see Steven up close. But for those who are not really so enthralled by Steven's films, those who maybe are more so in the Scorsese camp, are going to be perfectly fine paying just a few dollars for the nosebleed seats in the back. Those folks reason,

“Yeah, being in the same sacred space as Spielberg is cool, but it’s fine to not really be all that close or involved.”

Now this kind of arrangement makes sense when we’re talking about a speaker or a band. We all have different levels of commitment and investment depending upon our respective interest levels in whoever the performer happens to be. But when it comes to Jesus, when we’re talking about Christian discipleship, Jesus says, “no, this info about being a disciple is not just for my inner circle, my closest companions.” Jesus turns to everyone in the huge crowd behind him and says, “This life, this life of discipleship and following me, this is for all of you. I want this for all of you, and so I’m going to tell all of you how to do it.” In following Jesus, in other words, there are no nosebleed seats; there are no categories of “mildly interested” Christians and “real-disciple” Christians. All are invited and all are called to be right up front; each one of us is asked to go “all-in” on Jesus, to be Christ’s wholehearted disciple.

So, first of all, we see that Christian discipleship—the life of following Jesus—is open and accessible and meant for all. Second, after extending this broad invitation, Jesus then gets down to brass tacks. In a certain sense, he’s given the good news: this amazing life of discipleship is open to anyone and everyone. And then he says, “But I’ve also got some challenging news: this life is going to cost you everything.” Or, to put it differently, the life of a disciple is unconditional in its demands.

Where do we see this in our passage? “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.” Now this command sounds challenging to us in our highly individualistic, postmodern Western, New England, 21st century context: just imagine the unthinkable level of challenge to someone from an ancient, traditional, Near-Eastern society in which one’s familial relationships were everything. Your entire social identity, often your livelihood, your long-term economic security, in short your entire life was bound up, first and foremost, in your relationships with your father, mother, spouse, kids, and siblings. It was virtually impossible to conceive of living, of functioning in society, without these essential bonds and carefully cultivated relationships. And then Jesus arrives on the scene and says, “Oh, those people upon whom you depend for your very life, I want you to hate them. For

you to be my disciple, those relationships need to be regarded as nothing to you.”

Now what does Jesus mean by this? Jesus is talking here about relative worth. He is obviously not expecting his audience to actively begin hating their family members. But instead he’s saying “if you come to me and want to be my disciple, then your love for me, your devotion to me, has to be so great, so unconditional, so absolute that all your other ties, all your other identity markers (which in Jesus’ society were tightly bound to one’s family relationships) must be as nothing compared to me.”

This message dovetails closely with what we read last week from Hebrews 13, and St. Augustine’s teachings about rightly ordered loves. The point is not that we ought to hate our jobs, our careers, our family members, our friends, our hobbies, and so forth. But rather, if we wish to take up Jesus’ offer of discipleship, if we really want to commit ourselves to following in his path, then all of these good things become no longer absolute goods but relative ones. Love and devotion to Jesus alone must become so absolute and all-encompassing that our lesser loves (like love of relatives) so pale in comparison that, poetically and figuratively, we could call it hate.

Another way to say this, put briefly, is that love for Jesus is not just another love we fit into our lives. As if we have love of our parents, love of our kids, love of our pets, and oh yeah, we’ll fit in love of Jesus on Sunday mornings. No, devotion to Jesus does not just fit into our lives; devotion to Jesus demands a whole new life, a whole new agenda, a whole new assessment of priorities and commitments.

Wow, you might say, this definitely sounds like prickly, cactus Jesus—this does not sound warm and fuzzy at all; this maybe doesn’t even sound like something I am prepared or capable to do. It’s great that this life of discipleship is (1) open to all, but I don’t know about (2) being absolute and unconditional and demanding the first place of love in my life.

Yeah, I totally understand that; this sounds like quite a tall order, quite a demanding Jesus. And so I want to conclude this morning with a third and final aspect of this call to discipleship, namely the fact that this discipleship involves a cross, as Jesus says, “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” Now on the surface of it, this actually might

make Jesus' words sound even more difficult. You might well be thinking, "Jesus, you mean not only do I have to love you above all, but I have to be crucified? What is all this morose suffering? This is way too much for me to handle."

It's very understandable to have that initial reaction, but if we think about it, embracing the cross is actually one of the easiest things to do because it is simply accepting the truth. What do I mean by this?

Why are groups like AA so powerful? There are a number of reasons, but in part, they're so successful because they're built on simply admitting the truth, on finally putting down that enormous, heavy burden of self-delusion and lies, and embracing the joy and freedom of acknowledging what you already know to be true. Taking up one's cross is like that.

Who in the ancient world carried crosses? It wasn't the "good people"; it was people who had a really hard time being good, people who in their own strength and ability could not live morally pure lives. And so by telling us to pick up our cross and follow him, Jesus in a sense is saying, "stop trying to appear so moral, so righteous, so good. None of us are that squeaky clean. All of us struggle with our dark sides—with being selfish, self-absorbed, petty, easily angered, and so forth. Rather than pretending that those things aren't real, aren't problems that we all have, just pick up your cross and acknowledge your faults, face them squarely and do your best to crucify them day after day." As you commit to doing so, says Jesus, you'll increasingly find your identity in me, the crucified and risen Christ. As it says in Colossians 2:

"When you were dead in your sins... God made you alive with Christ. God forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge... which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross."

It's on the cross that our sins, our disordered loves, our misplaced values find not only correction but even more so healing and forgiveness. It's through the cross that those aspects of our lives which make it so difficult to be Jesus' disciples get worked out and rightly ordered. So, without pretending to be squeaky clean, Jesus invites us to pick up the cross of our flaws, faults, shortcomings, and disordered loves. Let those disordered loves—excessive love of anything that is not Christ—be nailed

to Christ's cross and taken away. Following him and loving Christ above all, acknowledge honestly before him those aspects of your life that—to use some strong language—need to be “crucified,” need to be “hated,” relative to your love for Christ alone. As we lay these lesser loves before Christ day by day, our love for Christ will gradually grow, and we will learn over time how to be his disciple. In turn, our lives begin to come into a more healthy order: the volume of our loves for family, friends, and other created things get toned down to a proper, healthy level, which actually leads to greater inner freedom. At the same time, love for Christ is allowed to grow, to expand up to its proper proportions, to consume us with its unconditional demands, which ironically set us free into lives of unparalleled fullness, freedom, and joy.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.