

Martha C Langford
First Presbyterian Church, LaGrange Texas
8 September 2019 – Rally Sunday
Luke 14:25-33

Powerless

First family division and now hate? Reading this passage and I feel my shoulders tighten, my eyebrows rise, and my stomach sink. What is Jesus saying?

Theologians and scholars dance around this text like so many angels on the head of a pin.

Is this hyperbole OR good theater OR a talking point made “sticky” so that hearers will understand; Jesus is NOT conducting a Jerusalem bound coronation parade?

Did “hate” have an alternative meaning in the Greek—was it not the emotionally-laden word of our modern vocabulary, but instead a descriptive word of detachment.

Do we have to hate life itself? Truly give up all our possessions?

Over Facebook and over breakfast, I found that many of my friends have opted out of this text and are preaching from Philemon—or Jeremiah—or the Psalter.

Yet, this week, I had the privilege of giving the children’s chat at chapel for the St James preschool and interestingly enough, Laurie Krumpala, the school’s director, didn’t shy away from this story. Instead she narrowed the focus to one verse: “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:27).

One of the things the kids are learning early in the school year is something essential to evacuation drills everywhere. They are learning the art of lining up and following the person in front of them. Following Jesus, I said, is like this—lining up behind him and letting him lead the way.

Then we talked about carrying the cross. I asked them to imagine something verrrrrry heavy; to pretend that they were trying to pick it up—oh it’s sooooo heavy—then invited them to take a deep breath as the weight became too heavy and we dropped it.

The encouragement was in telling them they would be able try again and again, because Jesus loves THEM for themselves and not just for what they are able to do.

So, I wonder, what kind of heavy lifting is Jesus asking of us?

We have the setting, Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem and once again large crowds have come to travel with him. I’m reminded of that scene in Forest Gump—the one where he has been

running for three years, crisscrossing the nation. He comes to the crest of a hill and a host of others are running behind him each one wanting, needing something from the experience and he stops running! WHAT is happening wonders the crowd?

Fred Craddock writes, “It is evident that Jesus is not facing reluctance but enthusiasm... These people come to him, he is not calling them to a life of discipleship. One is to read what follows, therefore, as the response of Jesus to the enthusiasm of persons who seem totally unaware that he is going to Jerusalem and to the cross.”¹

Luke has gathered these challenging words together onto one place—and so we would do well to listen carefully to what Jesus is saying. There is a poetry to the main teaching points... “Whoever does not” [fill in the blank] “cannot be my disciple.”

At least this is the smooth English translation.

The difficulty is that “cannot” IS NOT actually found in the Greek—the verb used is *dunamai* which talks about capacity and ability, about having the innate power to do or achieve the object of the verb.

You are not able—of your own power—to become my disciples. This is what Jesus is saying to the crowd. That is what this brow-raising, gut tightening talk is all about. The crowd has indeed joined what they might imagine to be a coronation parade—but Jesus knows, and his disciples will come to understand, the true cost of this journey.

Then Jesus tells two quick parables—encouraging the crowd to count the cost and to understand it.

“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?” (Lk 14:28).

Prudent builders draw up plans, get bids, and put together enough money to get-er-done. (Including—if you watch HGTV—a contingency for the unexpected.) We humans tend to poke fun at those whose grand visions stand incomplete.

I remember my first visit to Washington DC, walking the mall toward the Washington Monument. Getting closer, I could see a change in the color and quality of the marble cladding and wondered if that was intentional. Then I read the story...

Construction on the tower began in 1848 under the direction of the Washington National Monument Society. Construction reached 156 feet before stopping in 1854—because the Society ran out of funds. Political wrangling and the civil war kept the tower from completion, AND the unfinished monument became a national embarrassment.

Construction would not begin again until 1876, as Congress gave the project to the Army Corps of Engineers. In 1884, embarrassment gave way to fulfillment as the obelisk rose to its final height of 555 feet.

As Jesus speaks, I wonder if the crowd heard the warning that their grand visions and their unknowing enthusiasms would remain incomplete in the face of a larger vision and a greater calling.

Theologian Emilie Townes notes that “This term for ‘cost’ appears only once in the New Testament... in this passage.” Cost, she writes, “is what we give up to acquire, accomplish, maintain or produce something.”²

Jesus calls disciples to follow, calls disciples to do the sweaty spiritual labor of carrying the cross, calls disciples to reorient themselves and their relationship to things, to neighbors, to family, and even to life itself.

Last week, we commissioned Jerry and Pam Hurst as ambassadors of this congregation to Brethren congregations in the Czech Republic. As part of the commissioning, we heard these words: “The call of Christ is to willing, dedicated discipleship... a manifestation of the new life we enter through baptism... both a gift and a commitment, an offering and a responsibility.”³

We will hear them again today as we commission our teachers.

This serves as our reminder that, like the crowd, we are not able—of our own power—to be disciples. Discipleship comes to us as a gift.

AND, answering the call to discipleship does not mean we spring fully formed (as if from the head of Zeus.) Discipleship is a process. We are like the preschoolers in our education wing—rookies who are learning what it means to follow the leader.

We are being nurtured into faithfulness by the doing of faithful things. We are learning to focus on Jesus by bringing our attention back to him whenever distraction takes us. As we journey with Jesus, we experience true attachment—not the bonds of obligation, but the love that will not let us go. We are rookies—all of us—learning what it means to “become living disciples.”⁴

It takes a lifetime to build the muscle required for this kind of heavy lifting.

Emilie Townes assures us, “This... involves both false starts and modest successes, as we... live into the fulness of our humanity and dare to begin to live the holiness that resides inside each of us.”⁵

What might that look like?

Perhaps it looks like this: we learn to become less attached to our stuff and more attached to God and neighbor. We learn to set aside our fears and our self-centeredness, our prejudices and our greed, even our hopes and our innate goodness so that we might belong wholly to Christ and wholly to each other.

Jeremiah likens the process to being remade by God the potter, who reshapes the clay of which we are made.

The cost of discipleship is the willingness to be remade—so that we might live our lives in the light of Christ.

This weekend, Rick Pryce posted “A good news story” in the Facebook Group, *Things They Didn't Teach Us in Seminary*. In it, he writes:

I am in Nova Scotia. Hurricane Dorian will be making landfall here in the next couple hours. Preparations are made and everyone is hunkered down.

Thursday night, the finance committee, knowing this was coming, made a recommendation that an outreach account be emptied to send support to the victims of Dorian in the Bahamas.

What a powerful witness of devoted discipleship: discipleship as BOTH “gift and responsibility” not a thing of casual affection or unconsidered affiliation, discipleship that demonstrates ultimate allegiance.

We are invited to consider the cost and the meaning of these words as Jesus calls us to follow. Let us consider how we might heft up the weight of the cross in our daily lives and in so doing be transformed into salt and light for the world.

Amen.

¹ Craddock, Fred B. *Luke: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990). 181.

² Townes, Emilie M. “Theological Perspective: Luke 15:25-33.” *Feasting on the Word*. Yr C. Vol 4. (Louisville: WJK, 2010) 46.

³ Presbyterian Church (USA). *Book of Occasional Services*. (Louisville: Geneva, 1999) 125.

⁴ Townes. 46.

⁵ Townes. 46.