To Will One Thing

The Rev. Glenda Simpkins Hoffman

Luke 14:25-37

Sermon Series:
Life is Messy

Some of you may recall the movie City Slicker, in which Billy Crystal plays a character who leaves his job and the city to find himself. A cowpoke becomes his mentor and says, “Do you know what the secret of life is? This. One thing. Just one thing.” He tells Billy Crystal that it’s up to him to figure out what the one thing is. But I have good news. You don’t have to search or struggle, because Jesus gives us the answer to that question in our passage today.

Understand that this passage occurs when throngs of people are following Jesus, and they are awed by his teaching and amazed by his miraculous works. When Jesus turns and sees the crowd following him, he is not impressed by his own success. He is not interested in the casual, easy acceptance the crowd offers. He wants to make clear what the secret of life is—it’s to follow Jesus. But those who follow Jesus must be willing to make Jesus their first priority and leave everything behind. I like the way Soren Kierkegaard has put it: “Purity of heart is to will one thing.”

Let’s face it—this is not easy or simple. We live in a complex world of competing values and priorities. I don’t know about you, but sometimes I think of my life as an endless list of things to do related to family, friends, work, health, recreation, finances, and volunteer opportunities. I struggle to prioritize and find balance to all the aspects of what makes up my life. But here’s the danger: sometimes we fall into the trap of relegating Jesus to our “to-do” list. Along with everything else I need to do, I need to read my Bible, pray, and go to church, and so on. Now don’t get me wrong, those are very important things to do. But Jesus is not asking you to do another thing; he is asking you to make him the one thing—the priority of your life—and to see everything you do in light of that. So no matter who you are, or what you do, your priority is to follow Jesus. To will one thing.

Let’s go back to the passage and explore more of what this means in practical terms. In this passage, Jesus uses a phrase three times to help us understand what it will mean to follow him—to will one thing. The first is in verse 26. Jesus says, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and...
To will one thing, to follow Jesus, means we must be willing to renounce family ties.

even life itself cannot be my disciple.” This is a hard saying and difficult to understand in light of Jesus’ command to love others as he has loved us. Surely God wants us to love our families. To will one thing, to follow Jesus, means we must be willing to renounce family ties.

The background for this remark is crucial to understanding it correctly. This is a Semitic hyperbole—a form of language used to make a point more clear. The idea is not that we should hate our family, but that in comparison to Jesus, if we are forced to choose, Jesus is always our priority. He is to be loved more than anyone else.

The early Christians who first heard and read this teaching understood what Jesus was talking about because it was the reality of their lives. Choosing to follow Jesus did mean deciding against family and facing rejection, ridicule, and tension. Those who loved family more wouldn’t even consider following Jesus.

The same is true today for many around the world. Those who come to Christ out of a strong Jewish heritage, out of a Muslim cultural context, or out of Asian ancestral worship risk rejection from the outset. But this passage makes clear that the priority of following Jesus always has to come before any other human relationship—no matter what the cost.

Last Sunday was the ordination of Sean Walker, who grew up in this church and was called into ministry through the church. His ordination was a wonderful, joyful celebration, but two days later, Sean and Bethany and their children returned to Central Asia to continue their ministry, leaving behind beloved family and friends to follow Jesus; this is their first priority. Many missionaries have left family and friends to follow Jesus.

This passage has been important to me in my own following of Christ. As a young college graduate, I felt called to go into campus ministry. This was something that was not well understood in my family, but I was called to follow Jesus, and so I did. Seven years later, I was called to go overseas to Moscow, Russia for a year. Again, I left family and friends and the familiar as well as the man I was to marry to follow Jesus. That was a choice I made over 20 years ago; however, since then I have lived in the States, but thousands of miles away from my family of origin. That has been a part of what it has meant for me to follow Jesus.

Many people today—not just people in ministry—live apart from family because of work as well as other reasons. And I know there are some who have the wonderful blessing of living in the same area as their family. The issue is not about where you live but rather heart alignment. Jesus is challenging us to look honestly at our
Are you willing to follow him—to do his will—no matter what—even when it impacts your most cherished relationships?

relationships. Is Jesus your number one priority—over every other relationship—your parents, your children, your grandchildren, the person you are dating? Are you willing to follow him—to do his will—no matter what—even when it impacts your most cherished relationships? “Purity of heart is to will one thing.”

Let’s move on to the next time the phrase is used. In verse 27, Jesus’ says, “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” To will one thing, to follow Jesus, we must be willing to carry the cross.

The idea of carrying our cross has become corrupted by overuse. Any trial is considered a means of bearing the cross. But in the context of Jesus’ life and ministry, the cross was understood to be an instrument of death—reserved by the Roman Empire as a cruel form of punishment for the worst people. Jesus knows what awaits him in Jerusalem, and he knows that some in that crowd—his closest followers—will be martyred for their faith. Following Jesus is risky business, and he knows it is imperative to count the cost of discipleship.

Jesus gives two illustrations to help his listeners and us understand what it means to count the cost to follow him. One is of a man who builds a watchtower over his land or over a city. It’s going to cost a lot, and he has to make sure that such a project is affordable. So, he has to count the cost before starting to build. It would be sad and embarrassing to start a project and not have the money to finish.

Anyone who has done a major remodeling on their house or perhaps even built an addition understands what Jesus is saying here. You have to have a vision of what you want to have done, and then count the cost of money, time, and other resources as well as the inconvenience to move ahead. You have to prioritize this kind of project in order to make it happen in the course of everyday living.

To follow Jesus is a life-long commitment that will involve the renovation, the transformation of our individual lives and the willingness to participate in the building and expansion of the kingdom of God in the world. We are called to become like Christ together for the world, and, my friends, it will take time and energy, commitment, single-mindedness, and sacrifice. It will mean reordering every priority and commitment—giving up your life to follow Jesus. That, my friends, is why only cross-bearers can be disciples. Most of us will not be called to martyrdom, but let us be clear: Jesus is asking us to give our lives to him. There are always things that need to die—values, priorities, practices—that the life of Christ may live more fully in us.
This life is already ours because of what he did for us in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. We experience this life as we make Jesus our priority.

The second illustration pictures a king assessing his strength in preparation for war. A wise leader will not go to war unless there are enough soldiers and other resources to resist the opposing forces. What Jesus is trying to make clear is that there is a cost of going to war and a cost of not going to war. There are consequences either way.

The same is true of life. We have two options. We can go our own way with our own ideas, thoughts, values, and priorities and do our own thing. Or, we can take a wiser approach by following Christ on his gracious terms. But understand there are consequences either way.

In his book, Renovation of the Heart, Dallas Willard writes: “The impression gained by most who hear about “counting the cost” of following Jesus is one of how terrible and painful that cost is. But to count the cost is to take into consideration both the losses and the gains of all possible courses of action, to see which is most beneficial. This done, Jesus knew, the trials of discipleship would appear to be the only reasonable path. As has been said, “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” The cost of non-discipleship would then be seen for what it is—unbearable. That is why one would become able to sustain cheerfully the much smaller “cost of discipleship.”

Jesus is inviting us to experience the abundant, fruitful life he promised—a life of love, joy, peace and hope that comes from being transformed by God and discovering the deep sense of meaning and purpose in life that can come only from living as God’s children and participating in his work in the world. This life is already ours because of what he did for us in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. We experience this life as we make Jesus our priority.

“Purity of heart is to will one thing.”

This passage can be intimidating, because it is a high call to commitment, but realize that Jesus does not expect you to know all that that means from the start. And he certainly isn’t asking for perfection. What he wants is trust that engages us in the process—a lifelong process of following Jesus, of becoming like Christ together for the world. Though we don’t know all that will mean, we can trust him and his grace to accomplish for us what we can’t accomplish on our own.

Finally, in verse 33, Jesus says, “None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” Jesus is stating his case over and over, and if you haven’t quite gotten it yet, this ought to make it perfectly clear: To will one thing, to follow Jesus, we must be willing to give up everything. The giving up of everything means recognizing that God has claim on all areas of
Here’s the deal: the willingness to leave everything behind comes from an understanding that everything we are and everything we have belongs to God.

Our lives. If we seek to follow Jesus, then understand first that what is required is all that we are and all that we have. “To give up” literally means “to say farewell to” or “to take leave of” or “forsake all our possessions.”

Years ago, I took the *Perspectives* class on World Missions, which, by the way, will be offered here this winter. One of the teachers asked, “How do you know if you are a disciple—a follower of Christ?” He told us how we could know. If you knew without a doubt that Jesus was calling you to leave your family, quit your job, sell your home and other possessions and go to the desert and live and minister there for the rest of your life, would you go? Would you? That’s challenging, rattling, disturbing.

In the gospel, there is a story of a young man who came to Jesus and asked him, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus reviews the commandments, and the young man replies, “All these I have kept since I was a boy.” Then Jesus says, “Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.” This is troubling: “He went away very sad because he was a man of great wealth.”

Jesus was not suggesting that giving everything to the poor was necessary to be saved or to follow him. But listen very carefully: Jesus understood that for this wealthy man, and for many affluent people, possessions get in the way of following Jesus.

St. Francis of Assisi understood this, which is why he, a man from a wealthy family, renounced his family and gave up everything to follow Christ. This may sound really hard and radical because it is. But here’s the thing, when you read about St. Francis’s life, you will see that while he was poor in worldly ways, he was rich in his experience of the deep love of God. He was rich in the friendships and community he enjoyed with other followers of Christ. He was rich in the dynamic Spirit-empowered, anointed ministry God gave him that resulted in changed lives and the renewal of the church in his day. “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” Francis’s life reflected purity of heart—to will one thing.

You can relax, because I am not suggesting you have to give up everything to follow him. Jesus says you have to be willing to, but I’m not telling you anything about what you should do. Here’s the deal: the willingness to leave everything behind comes from an understanding that everything we are and everything we have belongs to God. Our time, our money, our stuff, our relationships, our very lives are not our own to do with as we want. We belong to God, so who we are and what we do both matter to God.
Does your life reflect a purity of heart—to will one thing—to follow Jesus?

Perhaps the question we need to be asking ourselves is this: “What in my life is getting in the way of following Jesus?”

I was speaking to a friend whose daughter recently went to a third-world country on a mission trip, and she came back changed. After seeing the poverty that so many live in, she stood in their suburban house and said, “We don’t need all of this stuff.” This young lady is preparing to go to college with a different mindset of what the good life is—it’s about letting go of whatever is getting in the way of following Jesus. “Purity of heart is to will one thing.”

One writer has said, “The cost of discipleship is paid in many different kinds of currency. For some it will involve a redirection of time and energy, for others a change in personal relationships, a change in vocation, or a commitment of financial resources; but for each person a call to discipleship is all consuming. A complete change in priorities is required of all would-be disciples. No part-time disciples are needed. No partial commitments are accepted.”

Jesus gives the final warning in a picture of salt. Salt is of value and useful as long as it continues to be salty. Dallas Willard uses the picture of a Pepsi. When a Pepsi is first opened, it has a lot of fizz, a lot of life; but after a time it becomes dull, flat, tasteless. It’s terrible, and it’s not the way Pepsi is meant to be.

There is a real danger of accommodating our faith to the culture by failing to see the tension between the teachings of Jesus and the common aspirations of the good life in America. Jesus doesn’t want our lives to be dull, lifeless, tasteless. He came to bring us an abundant life—a salty, fizzy, fruitful life. To will one thing is to follow Jesus—becoming like Christ together for the world. But he wants us to understand that to do that will require a complete change of priorities, values, and pursuits.

I don’t know what that means for you. I hope you take time, as I am, in these last weeks of summer to think about and pray about this. Ask yourself some hard questions: Are you giving Jesus first priority in your life? Really? Are you yielding every area of your life to Christ—money, possessions, time, relationships, family, even your very life? How is Jesus calling you to count the cost of following him? What might he be calling you to give up or leave behind? Does your life reflect a purity of heart—to will one thing—to follow Jesus?

And, then, I invite you to take the time to develop a Spiritual Growth Plan or to review and update the one you have. Becoming like Christ together for the world doesn’t just happen. Like building a house, getting an education, raising children, or doing anything important, it takes time.
So how will you intentionally arrange your life to follow Jesus—to will one thing? What practices will help you experience the connection you already have with Jesus? What relationships will help hold you accountable on this journey? What experiences will enable you to participate in what God is already doing in His church and in the world?

If you are struggling with this, you don’t have to figure this out alone. The pastors and other staff really want to help you with this, if you need it. Remember that you don’t have to do everything; our calling is to will one thing—to follow Jesus. Let’s pray.