

## **Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 4, 2022**

### **Luke 14:25-33**

Everyone's ears tend to perk up when they hear the word- hate- from Jesus.

It's unexpected and doesn't seem to fit with what Jesus is about. You'd be right to think that. What is translated as hate is not talking about the feeling of intense dislike. A passionate antithesis to something or someone. How I feel about peas in a casserole. Rather, it means a moral choice elevating one thing over another.

A commentator talked about it in this way- a friend of his lived in Nicaragua and during their Civil War this friend did not serve on either side but rather volunteered with the Red Cross. The promise was, whenever the siren sounds you have to show up. The commentator shared the story of his friend who on a day when there was much shelling and explosions heard the siren and despite the pleas and tears from his wife and children went into the danger to answer the call. He did not hate his family- he loved them deeply. But he did choose his love of neighbor over his family in that moment. In Jesus' words he hated them, placed them below another thing- service to his neighbors.

I appreciate Luke's use of a word that jars us. Shakes us awake. Because what Jesus is asking us to do should be jarring. I know this because what is even more shocking than the word hate, is Jesus saying that those who do not pick up their cross and follow him cannot be his disciple.

The cross is an instrument of shame, torture, punishment. To pick it up is to acknowledge that you are going somewhere where it will be used on you. Take up your cross and follow me. You will suffer and be in pain. All for following

Jesus. Not exactly a great sell for being a Christian is it? Follow me into suffering and pain. Yay!

I often talk about how you can read a Gospel on three different levels- one is the level of the story, another is the level of the group who the author of Luke is writing to, and the third is us hearing it in 2022. Those who Luke was writing to would have been nodding their heads at Jesus' description of discipleship because many would have experienced rupture with their families over their following Jesus. They would have nodded their heads over picking up their cross and following Jesus, they would know the social and economic cost of living as if everyone else was just as important (if not more at times) than blood relatives.

So why do it? Why follow after Jesus if it means suffering and pain? Possible rupture of relationship with family.

As I pondered this, I thought about one of the main reasons Luke tells us that God has sent the Spirit upon Jesus to do, "To set the captives free". What is the cost of being freed from something that binds you? Keeps you captive?

Why do people stay in abusive or harmful relationships? It's because they know it. It's comfortable in that they know what to expect. Even if it is awful. The idea of change, the hope of something better- costs something. Energy, fear, an uncertain future. While not an abusive relationship, I know this feeling from personal experience.

Or think about what it costs to break free of addiction. Being freed from, freeing ourselves from things that bind us- hurts. It causes suffering and pain- physical and psychological, but ultimately leads to a better, fuller life.

I'm not saying that suffering on that scale is necessary or even desired to be a follower of Jesus, but it certainly is consistent with it. Because following Jesus means doing what he does. It's literally like playing follow the leader, when he jumps- you jump. When Jesus frees the bent over woman, you free someone bent over, unseen by society. When he feeds the hungry, you feed the hungry. What Jesus is doing is training us to live in the reign of God. Is saying that love of God, means loving everyone else first. Regardless of who they are, friend, enemy, righteous, sinner, deserving and undeserving.

This will hurt and there will be suffering because we see in the gospels and in our own lives that such love of others, especially over and above "your own kind", is not well received. In our tribalized political atmosphere, what happens when someone has the audacity to criticize someone on "their" side? Or to express sympathy with someone on the "other" side? All too often they are criticized and ostracized themselves. For some reason we are threatened by those who love everyone without discrimination. Tell me there's not a bondage in that.

Now, Jesus says, if you do not have the power to step into that suffering, to walk through it, then you can't follow me. I wonder if this is not the moment where Luther's first use of the Law kicks in, because I look at this command and say, "Well then I guess I'm out." Because I know that on my own, I cannot do this. I do not have the power to follow Jesus in this way.

As one author put it, "Jesus may be making it impossible to be his disciples on our own abilities. When we confess, "I can't", then we are open for God's, "I can."

This is Third Article of the Apostles' Creed stuff here- I cannot by my own understanding or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord and come to him. I

cannot by my own understanding or strength daily pick up my cross and follow Jesus, to follow his lead and know that I will suffer for it. I cannot.

But God can.

Think back to Advent, the beginning of the Gospel of Luke. An angel appears to Mary and says what? You will bear a child, his name will be Jesus, and he will be the Son of God. Do you remember what she says? Yep, how can this be.

The angel responds, “for nothing will be impossible with God.”

I cannot. But claimed by God in the waters of baptism. Filled with the same Holy Spirit that descended upon Jesus and which fuels his own ministry, I can. We can daily pick up our cross and follow Jesus. Because with God nothing is impossible, even getting us to love our neighbors- all of them. Because God can free us from all that binds us and lead us- often kicking and screaming- into life fuller and more abundant.

Because when we despair of ourselves and trust God, when we follow Jesus and live as if the reign of God were here now, those fruits of the Spirit become present in our lives. Love- that orients us to love everyone. To at times leave our beloved as we run outside into danger to save others. Joy- which is rooted in the grace of God, the feeling we have when we dip into those waters of baptism and feel the cool drop on our forehead and know that we have been claimed- we can do this because God is with us. Peace- which is not the absence of conflict (far from it based on what Jesus says) but which comes from being whole in the presence of God. Patience- long suffering with others, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

As we follow Jesus, as we wade through the suffering and pain that come from living in God's reign not that of this world. As our bonds are broken and we are made free. As we daily strive with God's help to follow Jesus, the fruit will grow in our lives. And over time it will ripen into the abundant life we want so much but cannot manufacture according to our human nature.

The choice that is before us every day is as stark as the one Moses sets before the Israelites. Life and prosperity or death and adversity. Follow God and life might not be easy, but you will have life, true life and prosper your work. Go your own way, the way of the world, following other gods, and it will only lead to death. Conflict. Adversity.

I am imperfect in it. But I choose Jesus. I cry with the father of the epileptic boy, "I believe, help my unbelief!" And trust, every day, that Jesus is the way. The way to true life, fuller and more abundant. The way to hope. The way to joy, and peace. And as I live, and trust in God, the chains of my bondage begin to part. The fruits of the Spirit grow. And I am better able to follow Jesus.

So come, plant yourselves in the waters of baptism. Let them flow over you, so that filled by the Holy Spirit you may choose to follow after Jesus. Be watered by the Word and in due season the fruits of the Spirit will bloom in you. Yes, there will be discomfort, pain, as you are freed from all that binds you and as you rub up against the way of the world. Yes, this way will have pain and suffering, but the yoke of Jesus is easy and his burden is light because it is shared. Because nothing is impossible with God.

But as we travel our lives with Jesus, we will receive life fuller and more abundant. Filled with peace, joy, and love for all. Come be freed from all that

binds you. Come experience the love of God in Jesus Christ. Come and sing the song of Jesus as you journey through this life and into a future that is fuller and more abundant. Come.