

Wesley United Methodist Church

September 4, 2016

The Danger of Discipleship.”

Luke 14:25-33

Why are you here today? I would like to believe that you are here for the preaching. Tony and Jim would like to believe that you are here for the music. But we all have been around long enough to know that may not be the case. There is one person here in attendance because his wife made him come—perhaps she went to a ball game with him, so it's only fair. I believe that grandparents will bring the grandchildren so they will hear the word of Jesus. But of all the possible reasons why you are here this morning, let's assume, that you are here because you are trying to follow Jesus.

You could have slept late—lots of people do. You could have gone to the lake, to the mountains, the golf course or to the Fair; it's a good day for that. But perhaps you are here in worship because you are trying, in your own little corner of the world, to follow Jesus, be a disciple. And it is my job to help you do just that...primarily be exposing you to God's instructive word in Scripture. But wait until you hear today's gospel lesson!

Read Luke 14:25-33

Hmm. Not exactly “church growth” text, is it? I can imagine your pastor meeting with prospective members. “Reverend, tell us something of your understanding of church membership.”

“The first rule is you must hate your father and mother, your wife and children, your brothers and sisters—yes, even your own life. Then you must be prepared to die for the cause. As Jesus has said, anyone who is not prepared to give up everything cannot be a member.” “Uh-huh. Well, thank you, Reverend. We will get back to you as we continue our search.” Sure!

Is that the kind of church that would appeal to you? A few, perhaps. But most would be drawn to something more in the vision of Norman Rockwell, a third grade Sunday School class full of little girls with blond pigtails and little boys with slingshots in their back pockets, all of them bowing their heads in prayer; families lined up in a comfortable pew in a sanctuary graced by the spectrum of light filtered through stained glass; a graying, gentle pastor who is a friend to everyone and would rather die than to ever hurt or offend. That is what appeals most. I have to disappoint you...

Then we hear Jesus: unless we hate our families, carry our crosses, and give up all our possessions, we cannot be his disciples. So why don't we all—you and me both--just turn in our resignations right now? Because clearly, none of us has what it takes. Someone said, “If Jesus were in charge of an average congregation I figure there would be about four people left here on Sunday mornings, and chances are those four would be fooling themselves. Jesus would greet newcomers by saying, ‘Are you absolutely sure you want to follow this way of life? It will take everything you have. It has to come before everything else that matters to you. Plenty of people have launched out on it without counting the cost, and as you can see they are not here anymore. The other thing is, if you succeed—if you really do follow me—it will probably get you killed. Why don't you go home and think it over? I would hate for you to get in over your head’”

What are we dealing with here? How are we to understand? The first thing is to look at the context. The passage starts by saying, “Large crowds were traveling with Jesus...” This rabbi had become popular, and suddenly, like a rock star, the groupies had begun to gather. They had heard about his preaching and teaching; they had especially heard about his miracles; they wanted to get close to this incredible character and experience the unusual energy that seemed to surround him. Goose bumps? You bet! Some of the more serious ones no doubt thought that perhaps this was the Messiah the nation had longed for, the one who would deliver them from the hand of the Roman legions. One way or the other, Time to party!

But Jesus is less than encouraging. He tells them their high hopes may be writing a check that reality cannot cash. There is more to this disciple business than meets the eye. He suggests that they go home and do some serious thinking about whether or not they are ready for commitment. To tell you the truth, I suspect many who heard him that day were as puzzled by what he said as you and I are.

What is all this about hating our parents, our children, even our own lives? The best way to understand it is to realize that Jesus was using a figure of speech we do not use anymore. In Aramaic, the word we translate “hate” has nothing to do with an emotion. It was a way of expressing priorities. So, if I say, “I love Michigan State and hate U of M, it would not mean that I feel hostile toward one school or the other, but simply that one of those was my first choice. In Jesus' day, the way you stated a preference was by pairing two things and saying you loved one and hated the other. It had nothing to do with feelings. The issue here was priorities.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He knows what lies ahead. With the benefit of 20/20 hindsight, Luke knows even more. When he wrote his gospel, Christians were already being persecuted for following Jesus. To have a Christian in the family was dangerous for everyone, because the Romans were thorough. If they found a believer in a household they

would arrest everyone. So it really was true that turning toward Jesus meant turning away from your family, whether you wanted to or not. Once you made following Jesus your first priority, everything else fell by the wayside—not because God took it away from you but because that is how the world works. You make the choice.

One of the keys to understanding Scripture, especially difficult passages like the one today, is to remember who is speaking and what is his situation. We know that he is caring and compassionate, one who goes out of his way to be welcoming. Suddenly, we are confronted with words that sound harsh, words that want to push us away.

I think this is just a matter of Jesus refusing to lead us on. He will not lie to us, refusing to make his way sound easier than it is. No false pretenses. Discipleship makes a difference; it makes a difference in the way we live; it makes a difference in the way we die.

“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple.” Admirer? Yes. Disciple? No.

Discipleship can cost all that we have, all that we love, all that we are. As I say, that is less God’s doing than our own—we, after all, are the ones who set our own priorities. The danger of discipleship is that it changes us.

Discipleship might mean leaving hearth and home for service somewhere on the other side of the globe. It could mean a ministry in a dangerous neighborhood of an inner city. It could mean participating in a work trip to Louisiana to help clean the flooded areas. It could mean getting up early on a Saturday morning to help with the Men’s Breakfast or helping at the local soup kitchen in the cause of helping the hungry. It could mean something as simple as making certain you are here for Sunday School from week to week because the Greek word we translate as disciple really means “Learner.”

And so we come full circle. As we began this morning, I asked you why you were here. I hope it is because you know what your business is, that your priorities are straight, or if they are not, you know they are not, but you want them to be. Good. You have come to the right place.

The danger of discipleship is simply this—it changes us. Suddenly, you see the world through new eyes, the eyes of Jesus. You see the needs and you want to fill them; you see the hurts and you want to heal them. The danger of discipleship—it changes you, and keeps on changing you...for now and always. Amen!