

Sept. 8, 2019

Luke 14: 25-33

Dear God, We welcome you into this sanctuary. Make our worship true and honest. Help us be pleasing to you. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Fair-Weather Disciples

Back in my newsroom days, I was the arbiter of "average." In a room filled with quirky and talented and downright odd people, I represented the average reader.

If an editor told a reporter that her reference was too hip or too esoteric or too obscure, she'd say, "Well, let's ask Deb. If she gets it, anybody will get it."

A friend called it having "a keen sense of the obvious."

We all have our gifts.

So I don't pretend to be cutting edge. I am usually so late to the culture party, so late to the news party, so late to the slang party that by the time I pick up on something, I assume it's common knowledge.

But when it comes to what we do at Triune, that's a mistake. People don't necessarily know. So when someone finally comes to visit and tour, they almost always say, "I had no idea of all the things that go on here."

We will cover what the staff does in our Sept. 22 session for new and inquiring members. But this morning, I'm going to tell you a little of what our volunteers do.

Some of it you see on Sundays. One man donates and arranges the flowers in the narthex before we arrive. Richard, Paul, Kenny, Isaiah and others hand out the bulletins. Ushers show people to their seats and make name tags. Volunteers take up the offering, lead the responsive reading, sing in the choir, play in the band, serve communion. Rick and Nikki and Dan make sure that communion meal is always waiting and ready.

Volunteers from other churches cook and serve two meals on Sunday, and two more on Saturday and Monday. Someone will do laundry all afternoon.

On weekdays, volunteers oversee the receptionist's desk, answer phones, write thank you letters, arrange flowers for the dining room. Gail recently spent a couple of days assembling an email list for me.

Others sweep and mop and vacuum and empty endless trashcans. Douglas and others help Don change A/C filters and trim hedges and dig weeds.

A large group packs groceries, while Betty oversees our flower beds. Karen organizes clothes and toiletry donations. Others lead NA, AA, Bible studies, JustFaith or participate in Triune Circles.

On Wednesdays, we have maybe 20 volunteers greet the families who come for grocery bags. They perform intake, pray, serve snacks, offer legal aid, give out greeting cards, take blood pressures, staff the art and computer rooms.

I've left out a lot, but you get the picture.

We couldn't *pretend* to run this place without our faithful volunteers – many of whom are sitting right here this morning.

But But....

Sometimes, a visitor will come in and be all gung-ho and tell us all these big plans he has for us. One man, for instance, wanted to come in every week and show movies. I said OK. And he disappeared.

In the early days, a woman wanted to bring her daughter to volunteer. In those days we had a clothes closet that used a lot of volunteers, so I said sure.

Well, on the day they were supposed to come, I didn't see them and didn't see them.

I finally described them to a staff member and asked if she'd seen anyone matching that description. And the staff member replied, "Oh, yeah, they came into the closet for about 20 minutes. Then the woman said, 'We've got to get out of here!' And they left."

Triune is not for everyone. I think some people wonder why I am not more excited when they announce what grandiose thing they are going to do. It's because I've seen too many of them fade away.

Triune is not for everyone. Many volunteers have told me they cried the first few times they left here. I have volunteers who tear up almost every time I speak to them.

And I'm not even yelling at them.

I won't say there's more pain and brokenness here than in other churches. But the pain is more obvious. The brokenness is more naked. And this place is simply not for everyone.

Which brings us to our Scripture passage for today in which Jesus says that following him may not be for everyone. Because to follow him is costly. To follow him is demanding.

Last week, we talked about a dinner at a Pharisee's house, which the gospel writer Luke used as a setting for several teachings by Jesus. The point of at least part of the passage was that the kingdom of God is open to absolutely everyone.

Today's passage is the flip side. If last week represented the invitation, today we learn about our response.

As we begin reading today, Jesus and the disciples have left that dinner, and are back on the road toward Jerusalem. So the audience has changed abruptly from an intimate dinner gathering to a large crowd.

READ Luke 14: 25-33.

Now large crowds were travelling with him; and he turned and said to them, ²⁶Whoever 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. ²⁷Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

²⁸For 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? ²⁹Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all

who see it will begin to ridicule him, ³⁰saying, “This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.”

³¹Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³²If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace.

³³So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

This is a startling passage, a difficult passage, primarily due to that word “hate” in verse 26. It unglues us. **“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.”**

With our modern meaning of hate, this verse contradicts Jesus’ core commandment: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” How could he possibly be telling us, then, to hate our family members?

This word, in the Semitic vernacular of Luke’s time, meant detachment, a turning away from. Not the screaming passion we think of when we use the word “hate.”

So what Jesus is saying is a disciple is one who must be willing to *detach* from the earthly, comforting pull of family and self. Just like a good soldier must be willing to detach from family

in order to go overseas and fight, so, too, must a good disciple be willing to detach from the comforts of family and self-centeredness.

That's why it's so important to recognize whom Jesus is addressing in this passage. He's talking to enthusiastic crowds. He's talking to people who are excited about this healer and speaker and exorcist, and want to join in the hoopla.

He's talking to the woman who stayed in our clothes closet for 20 minutes.

He's talking to the man who wanted to show movies.

And Jesus is telling them what it means to follow him. He's headed to Jerusalem to be crucified, and he doesn't really have time for fair-weather followers.

“Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”

We have heard this before. Jesus must have said it often because the gospel writers use several similar versions of this quote. Mark quotes Jesus as saying, **“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”** (Mark 8: 34)

He was speaking to a crowd in that scene, too, warning them that to follow him was to take up the means to their execution, to their death.

Earlier in Luke's gospel, Jesus says, **“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross *daily* and follow me.”** (Luke 9: 23)

Now in this same gospel, Jesus has flipped the statement into a double negative, but the meaning is the same: **“Whoever does *not* carry the cross and follow me *cannot* be my disciple.”**

We call this cross-carrying “the cost of discipleship,” and people have written entire books about it: What does it mean to be a disciple of Christ? What does it require? What does it cost?

More, certainly, than a cheery street party on the way to Jerusalem.

A man once told me he thought he’d get sober and baptized “sometime next year.” I think the cost of discipleship is probably a little higher than that, too.

After his opening statements, Jesus gave two examples to make people think about discipleship before rushing in headlong.

The first example concerned a feat of engineering. Who would start building a tower without first sitting down to estimate the cost? Otherwise, he might get halfway through the project and be unable to finish it.

The second example concerned a country at war. Who would begin a war without first calculating its risk? Who would begin a war that he thought he couldn’t win?

History from Vietnam to Iraq to Afghanistan has taught us that we cannot know all we need to know, that we cannot plan for all the contingencies of war. But to wage a war with no forethought, no intelligence, would be foolish.

In the same way, Jesus wants disciples who have weighed the cost and decided that discipleship is worth it. He doesn’t want disciples who have merely been swept into some emotional fever. He knows they won’t *remain* disciples -- either on the road to Jerusalem, or on Rutherford Road.

Jesus talked about this idea of commitment a good bit. Do you remember the parable of the farmer who sowed seeds on four different types of ground?

Last week Anna Romano gave me and Tandy bottles of mustard seeds. I immediately put mine on a shelf that I can see every day because Jesus talked about seeds *all the time*. It's a great visual aid.

As Jesus relates this particular parable of planting seeds, some fell on the path and were trampled AND birds ate them. No possibility of plant growth – or discipleship.

Some seeds fell on rock and *began* to grow. But the plants withered for lack of moisture.

Some other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns choked out the young plants.

And some seeds fell on good earth and produced an incredibly rich yield.

Like the hard path that repelled the seeds, some people reject Christian discipleship out of hand. They don't even pretend to accept the gospel.

And like the rich, fertile earth that welcomed the seeds, some people embrace discipleship and relish it and live it.

But look at the two middle categories. As Jesus explained the parable, some people – those like rock -- hear the word with joy, but in time of testing fall away. And some – those like thorny ground – hear the word, but allow the cares of the world choke it out.

In other words, neither group looked ahead. They didn't look ahead to the watering and weeding that were *absolutely necessary* for a harvest.

Neither group calculated the cost. They didn't estimate what it was going to cost to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Christian discipleship is a tension that we hold. **“Whosoever believeth in me shall not perish but have everlasting life,”** Jesus promises in the gospel of John. (John 3: 16)

And yet, at the same time, following him requires a commitment beyond belief. *Way beyond belief.*

So now, on the road to Jerusalem, with all these excited crowds following him, Jesus urges them to think first. He has no use for happy-time disciples who want to join the party and then abandon him when he picks up his cross.

He has no use for happy-time disciples who want to continue drinking for another year until they're *really* ready to serve God.

And then comes the final line, the final blow, the final challenge. **“So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.”**

Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message*, often hits the nail on the head with his modern translation. Here's his version of this last verse: “Simply put, if you're not willing to take what is dearest to you, whether plans or people, and kiss it good-bye, you can't be my disciple.”

If you're not willing to take what is dearest to you ... and kiss it good-bye, you can't be my disciple.

That's it in a nutshell, isn't it?

What is dearest to us? Family? Money? Alcohol? Political power? For what is dearest to us can be bad or it can be good.

But Christian discipleship demands that it be Christ.

Anything less, Jesus tells the enthused revelers on the road to Jerusalem, is not good enough.

Anything less, Jesus tells lukewarm believers in the 21st century, is not good enough.

Amen.