

September 4th, 2022

Luke 14:25-33 “Jesus, the Unelectable”

Although they’ve been around for years, I’ve been seeing a lot of “Jesus for President” bumper stickers lately. As a Christian, I get it, believe me. When it doesn’t seem like there are many suitable candidates left for *any* public office I can see where you’d want a candidate who represented Jesus’ values. But those sorts of candidates seem few and far between these days. I even wonder whether some of the ones who *say* they represent Jesus have ever cracked open a Bible to read anything other than the handful of out-of-context clobber passages that support whatever hot-button culture war issues they think will rile up the crowds the most. Historically candidates for various public offices on *both* ends of the political spectrum often make promises that they can’t keep just to get votes. They’re always telling us that if we just vote for them, everyone will be gainfully employed, happy, prosperous and all will be well. But that’s what you have to do to win. I mean, who would vote for someone who’d say, “Listen, if you elect me things are going to go from bad to worse.” That’s not a very good campaign strategy is it? With that in mind, I want you to think about this: If the scripture that Jerry just read was Jesus’ campaign speech, would he even stand a chance to be elected dog catcher let alone president? I’m sure that if someone running for office gave a speech like that, we may applaud their honesty, but would we *vote* for them? And would they stand a chance to win? Stranger things have happened, I suppose.

Okay, time to deal with our scripture lesson. No pastor likes to preach on this passage from Luke. Last time it came up in the lectionary was September, 2019 six months before the pandemic shut everything down. Georgeanne had the privilege of reading this scripture back then. I thought about putting in a request to have her lead worship this morning, but that would be cruel for her to have to read that passage again so soon. So why would I want to revisit this text again? See, if I timed it right and preached from the other three options over the next three

cycles, I wouldn't have to touch it again for *nine years*! But I'm a masochist so I'm going to tackle it again this year because why not?

Luke is only one of four gospels, so we've always got to see if any of the other gospels include this story. As it is, Matthew is the only other gospel writer who does. His version is in 10:37-39 and is shorter, kinder and less harsh than Luke's gospel. Matthew says, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me" and it's all over in three verses. But Luke's got to take it to the extreme. He says, "If anyone comes to me and does not *hate* his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." Then he goes on for seven more verses hammering in the point even more. By the way, I preached Matthew's version of this story back in 2013. It comes up again next June if you want an excuse to stay home. But don't worry, I'm pretty sure I'll choose something else from the menu when *either* of these scriptures come up again. I felt a need to stay with Luke though. I chose him last week and plan on preaching from his gospel for the next three weeks at least. Last week, Jesus was addressing a relatively small group of people at a dinner party that a well-to-do Pharisee was hosting. This week, Jesus is speaking to a large crowd. In other words, last week, Jesus was addressing a group that was already on board with him or at the very least knew who he was and what he stood for. Most of the people he's addressing this week are probably *not* on board with him. They don't know what it means to follow him. As one who doesn't mince words, Jesus clearly tells them what it means to be a disciple.

Jesus doesn't seem terribly fond of big crowds and for good reason. They usually turn on him and either try to run him out of town or have him arrested or even killed. Jesus knew how quickly crowds can get stirred up into a frenzied mob and do terrible things. Also, this isn't the only time Jesus seemed intent on *discouraging* would-be followers rather than *encouraging* them. So why does he say things like this to crowds who he knows might get up and walk away upon hearing his requirements or worse turn on him? It doesn't seem like a very good

church growth strategy that's for sure. The "focus on the family" folks wouldn't appreciate this. The anti-capital punishment people might say, "Wait, did he just say what I think he said?" The "prosperity gospel" folks would balk at this too. What does he mean when he talks about hating our families, putting ourselves on death row, and needing to give up everything we own? And most importantly, since *we* still own things and *our* lives for the most part don't seem to be attracting hostility, what is Jesus saying to churches like ours in the 21st century? Where is the good news?

First of all, Jesus is addressing a group of people who are probably wondering what one has to do in order to follow him. Is there some kind of affirmation of faith that's necessary? Some ritual to perform? Some vow of fealty to determine one's faithfulness to the cause? Jesus says three things are necessary to follow him – Hate your family, be crucified, and give up all your possessions. No problem, right?

Let's start with hating your family. I acknowledge that for some, especially those who suffered abuse and trauma at the hands of their family, this might not be much of a stretch. Now I could play with the Greek word for "hate" here too and sanitize the heck out of what Jesus said, but back in Luke 12:51-53 Jesus said how his presence here on earth will cause division even among families. Again, not a great campaign platform for Jesus. I do want to go back to last week's text, though, where Jesus is telling those who host dinners not just to invite family and friends, but also the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. The point of that part of his parable had to do with re-defining family. He's saying that the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind are to be treated *equal* to family. Since this week's lesson happens immediately after last week's, maybe it's just an extension of Jesus' call to re-define what family is. In the first century, family was the only "social security" that was available. This was true in both Roman and Jewish culture. There was no safety net or retirement plans. You depended on family to take care of you if a tragedy happened or if you no longer had a way of providing for yourself. What happens to people

who have no family and are on the extreme margins ... say the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind? The lesson last week was, "Invite them to the table even though you know they can't repay the favor." In other words, treat them as family. That's what it means to be a disciple. "Hate your family" is a hyperbole to drive in a difficult-to-grasp point. I believe the lesson here is, "The poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" are to be treated equally. It's a call to follow Jesus' ethic of accountability, forgiveness, and love in all our relationships, even the ones who you would *never* consider family. Sure, it's not so hard to love the elderly in your community as you would love your own parents. But when this applies to the stranger, the addict, the lonely, and the prisoner? *That's* the high cost of discipleship.

Okay, how about "take up your cross" or "be willing to be put to death?" A potential issue here has to do with what God told the people of Israel in Deuteronomy 30:19 -- "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live." So why would Jesus have us *choose* death *on a cross*? Jesus often spoke of discipleship as a call to self-denial. I don't think choosing to take up our cross is meant in a destructive way, but in a way that puts forgiveness, love and justice above our own self-interests and even self-preservation. How often does the church focus on survival more than mission? Guilty! Being willing to die for the sake of the Gospel goes against every natural survival instinct we have. The Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:18 calls this, "the foolishness of the cross." But when we are baptized, we say that we're dying to our old self so we can be born again as a new creature in Christ. If we're unwilling to do this ... if we're unwilling to die to our former selves so we can become a new creature, are we saying that we're unwilling to fulfill our baptism?

Then there's this last requirement. "Therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." I think this one might be the hardest one to fulfill. Some people would *rather* die than give up their possessions. Some people would and *have* disowned

family members over possessions or wealth. Again, there are theologians who want to play with the original language to make it sound less harsh ... to sanitize it. They suggest that the meaning of this has more to do with “releasing your possessive grip on all that is important to you.” Either way, it’s a lot to require. Think about the amount of time and effort we spend focused on possessions. Even the church gets wrapped up in this. When we had our flood a couple of years ago, we felt fortunate and relieved that we didn’t lose anything tremendously valuable. In fact, in some ways it motivated us to clear out some “stuff” that we really didn’t need in the first place. But think about how you’d feel if it had been a fire that destroyed *everything*. Think of how lost we would feel. Will our insurance cover us enough to find or build a new place to meet? How will we be able to do anything? Didn’t that “New Beginnings” study we did several years ago say that our building was our greatest asset? What are we going to do now? Ultimately, this last requirement for discipleship is about fully trusting God.

Okay, now that we know what is required of us to be able to call ourselves “disciples,” how *honest* are we about the *cost* of discipleship? How often do we even talk about it? To go back to our original illustration, we, as the church, want to run a good campaign. We want people to jump on board. We want the votes of confidence! Sometimes we avoid these tough sayings of Jesus because they make us feel uncomfortable and we don’t want to scare people away.

Maybe what we need to be asking is, “What keeps us from following Jesus completely? What things, tasks, obligations, guilts, prides, goals and failures are keeping us from being a true disciple of Jesus? And are we willing to let go of these things? Why or why not? What gets in the way of our churches fully following the way of Jesus? Is it finances? Traditional programs? Inward focus? Being nice instead of being honest? Fear of conflict or change? Are we as people who want to follow Jesus willing to let go of those things? Those are the kinds of questions we need to keep asking if we are going to understand the true cost of discipleship.