

Ps. 139:1-6, 13-18

Luke 14:25-33

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Evie Macway

September 4, 2022

The Cost

Not long ago I attended a gathering of members of our presbytery. One of the topics that came up was how to increase participation in worship. One of the pastors wondered out loud what it means to be ‘seeker friendly’ these days. That phrase, ‘seek-friendly’ is one that comes up from time to time in conversations about church growth. Are our churches ‘seeker friendly’? It is kind of a catch phrase for all the things we as congregations do to encourage people to come and seek with us, explore with us what it means to follow Christ. It is kind of an evangelism/outreach phrase. Seeker-friendly. We are after all, all seekers on the journey. For a church to be ‘seeker-friendly’ is a good thing.

Our text for this morning is about as far from ‘seeker-friendly’ as one could get.

The suggested gospel readings for this fall are inviting us to read through some of the gospel of Luke. This passage for this morning is part of Luke’s travel section - that is the twelve chapters between the Transfiguration story and the Passion narrative during which Jesus is walking relentlessly, ominously toward Jerusalem and the crucifixion. These chapters are filled with parables, stories, teachings, conversations in which Jesus sometimes indirectly, but often quite directly talks about what it means to follow him. In the verses just previous to ours this morning Jesus is at a dinner party at the home of a Pharisee teaching and dining with a small group of followers.

Here, with verse 25 the scene changes suddenly and now Jesus is on the road again and a large crowd has gathered. Word is spreading and people want to know more about this man who tells great stories and heals people.¹ The people are there ready, seeking. They are open to the Word. This would be a perfect time to be ‘seeker-friendly’.

¹ Susan R. Andrews, “*What Family Values?*”, *Lectionary Homiletics*, September 9, 2007.
www.goodpreacher.com

I read a sermon on this passage by a former moderator of our denomination, Rev. Susan Andrews. She said, “With just a little marketing technique Jesus could easily break the membership statistics for his denomination -- and receive all kinds of kudos. But instead, Jesus offends them -- offends us -- with hard words. Instead of feel good faith, Jesus offers demanding discipleship.”²

This is not an easy text, to preach, or to hear. It is ironic, in a ‘doesn’t God have a strange sense of humor’ kind of way that this passage would come up in our lectionary on the Sunday of Labor Day weekend. This is the time of year congregations traditionally are preparing for a big back-to-church Sunday after the summer. Stone is no exception, as you can see from the announcements in the bulletin. Next Sunday is Kick Off Sunday. The choir will be back, church school begins again for the children. Several of our Session committees and groups in the church are planning to share what they will be up to this fall and invite us to join in. There will even be an ice cream truck in our front yard!!

This is meant to be a celebrative time as we come back together and get into our fall routines.

This too would be a perfect time to be ‘seeker-friendly’, to hear about the Jesus we know who is welcoming, loving, caring, forgiving, liberating, who meets our needs and calls us as we are. That would be nice today, and that would be true. Because that too is very much the Jesus of scripture, the Jesus we know.

Today however, unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, we get another side of Jesus, the one who tells us: “Whoever does not hate your family...you can not be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me...you can not be my disciple. Whoever does not give up all your possessions, you can not be my disciple.” This too is Jesus.

Instead of feel good faith, we get demanding discipleship. And if we chose today, and I am on your behalf, to look at this side of Jesus’ message what is it that we hear?

This is the Jesus who demands our all. Who says, you can not go half way with being a follower of the God we know in Jesus Christ. He knows those things that are most likely to come between us and God -- our family, those we love most deeply, our own health and safety and livelihood, and our stuff, our homes, our

² ibid.

cars, our electronic gadgets. And he goes right there. No one and nothing can come before God in our lives. Period.

This is the Jesus who taught and lived to the point of his own death, the reality that the love, the peace, the justice of God who comes among us in Jesus Christ, are not sometimes, conditional, as long as I feel safe, kinds of things. Discipleship demands our all.

There is really no getting around what Jesus is saying with this text. He even gives us some very concrete examples, the builder and the king. Count the costs. Know what you are getting into. Who starts a project without sitting down and figuring out if they have what it takes to finish it?

Now, one could argue here that there is Biblical precedent for doing just this. It is called stepping out in faith, isn't it? Trusting in God when we do not know the outcome. But that is a message for another day. The point of Jesus' teaching *here* is to make sure that the crowd that was following him, and we today who also want to follow, know that true following will not be easy. It will cost, a lot.

So, as seekers today, those who come to hear the words of Jesus and want to follow, what are we to make of this? Most scholars agree that this is the authentic Jesus. That these words and words like them did come from Jesus' mouth when he walked the earth. Some one would have tossed such a difficult passage as this out long ago if there was not a pretty strong case made that Jesus had said this.

We could soften these words by saying things like, the word, 'hate' in Jesus' time meant more, 'detach' or 'separate', instead of the the vicious meaning it has today. Which is true.

We could look at the larger scope of Jesus' life and ministry and say that surely Jesus was using some hyperbole here in order to make his point. Jesus' gospel is not one of hate. And this too would certainly be true.

But to look for ways around this text would be to miss the point.

Not long ago I heard a talk given by Jim Young, the founder and president of the board of directors of the Wings Program in Santa Cruz. Wings is a homeless services program. It offers one-on-one support to homeless individuals who are the most ill, the poorest and most at risk for dying on the streets. Young said that

part of the reason he took on this particular ministry is because it scared him. (Jim Young, Wings Program, Santa Cruz, <https://www.wingsadvocacy.org/>)

I thought about that comment as I was preparing this sermon. I don't think Jesus wants us to live afraid. 'Fear not' is a prevalent theme throughout scripture. But the idea that our ministry, our discipleship will push us outside of our comfort zone, require of us risk-taking and letting go of those things in our life other than God, that anchor us and give us comfort, that is Jesus' message for us today.

It is easy to feel guilty, immersed in this text for this morning. Because we know how easy it is to let God slip back and other demands and desires come forward in our lives, shaping our lives and our choices. But I don't think guilt is Jesus' point here. He did not deal in guilt. He dealt instead in possibility, in transformation, in new life.

His words this morning, I think, are meant to be invitation. Look at your life. See the possibilities. Where are you letting people, things, fears obscure the light and life of God that lives in you, and can come through you as you follow Christ?

If we were to read along in the gospel of Luke this morning the very next stories are of the lost and the found: the coin, the sheep and the Prodigal Son. Here Jesus tells of the amazing *grace* of God. We will get to these texts next week.

This is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Both gracious promises and daunting demands. Side by side. This morning may we hear these words, the demanding hard words, along side the gracious promises we know so well. And may we follow, you and I, in the ways God is calling us today, disciples on the journey, seekers always.