



First United Church of Oak Park

Just the Opposite

Luke 14:25-33

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Jesus' words today come smack in the meat of the gospel of Luke. Jesus' ministry has been going on for some time at this point and he has at last amassed a sizable following. Word of him had spread and there was a large crowd following him. And Jesus takes this opportunity with a large crowd to teach a flurry of parables. Parables are clever little things; often the place they lead is precisely in the opposite direction of my initial reaction.

There is the story about a lost sheep and the shepherd that leaves 99 at risk to find one. I start off imagining myself as the shepherd, and I worry over the foolishness of a 99 to one cost-benefit proposition. The parable starts me off thinking like the shepherd but it leads me to a place where I know that I am the lamb, lost and alone in need of a God who will risk everything to find me. Then there is the story of the great banquet, where the guests all turn out to be no-shows and the host has to pull people off the street just to fill out the table. The parable starts me off thinking like the host, disgruntled that more people do not accept my gracious invitations. But it leads me to a place where I know I am the hungry wanderer, snatched off a lonely road and set astonished down before a feast. Parables are clever little things, often the place they lead is precisely in the opposite direction of my initial reaction.

But then there are Jesus' words from today's passage. "Whoever comes to me and does not hate mother and father, spouse and children, brothers and sisters, yes even life itself, cannot be my disciple...whoever does not give up all their possessions cannot be my disciple."

Hate...money...How can hate and money be what being a disciple of Jesus is all about? It's enough to send a preacher hunting through his moving boxes looking for an ancient Greek to English dictionary to see if there's any wiggle room on this hate stuff.

But to make matters worse there's these parables, which are supposed to help flesh out what discipleship is all about. The one is about the financing schemes of building great buildings and the other is about the military arithmetic of fighting wars when human life is little more than numbers to subtract and divide. Parables are clever little things, often the place they lead is precisely in the opposite direction of my initial reaction.

These two parables in particular are odd, even by Jesus' standards. Usually, Jesus chooses parables that relate to people's everyday lives: agriculture, family disputes, the plants and animals surrounding and enlivening the world. Jesus takes relatable experiences to teach about grand truths. But not these parables. There would be nothing relatable about these parables, not to the people listening to Jesus.

"For which of you intending to build a tower does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether there is enough to complete it?" In case you are wondering, the financing of the building of tall towers was not something ordinary people could afford to do. There were no more people in Jesus age who could finance building towers than there are individuals today who could bankroll the construction of a skyscraper

on their own dime. Maybe a handful in the midst of a great city. This is not relatable. The building of great buildings is something ordinary people could merely watch from afar. Perhaps it would impact their lives, but they would not be the ones making decisions.

The second parable is more of the same. "What king going out to wage war against another king will not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand?" There are no kings following Jesus, not one. Even a high military officer like a centurion, not unheard of as among Jesus followers, even a centurion is given orders by a king and must follow them. This is not relatable. A king's machinations on whether to go to war or make peace, this is something ordinary people could merely watch from afar. Perhaps it would impact their lives, but they would not be the ones making decisions.

People in the crowd's initial reaction to hearing these parables back to back would be to glance around at each other with that look in their eyes that says... towers? Armies? who does he think he's talking to? Nobody bothers to consult us when they are changing the world with grand projects, deciding matters of war and peace.

But. But. Those are exactly the stakes at play in the movement that Jesus is building. Jesus is setting out to build something much grander than a mere tower; his is the realm of God which must be built, a glittering jewel of beloved community. Jesus is setting out like a king with an army, a king with only 12 to take against ten-thousand, setting out to win a peace so lasting that soldiers would beat their swords into plowshares simply that they might have any use for them again.

Jesus is in the midst of teaching about what it means to be his disciple. And Jesus tells these parables, parables he knows people's reactions to will be that they have nothing to do with them, Jesus tells these parables to raise people's vision. To be a disciple of Jesus is to take up high and weighty matters, to shape the world and make its fate their own. To be a disciple of Jesus is to take up high and weighty matters, to shape the world and make its fate their own.

A grand call. Daunting. What resources does Jesus need for this? Having raised people's vision and told them he is looking for world-beaters, what does Jesus demand that people bring? If changing the world is the goal of discipleship, what is the cost of discipleship? Great wealth, grand wisdom, worldly power, armies beyond counting? No. The costs of discipleship are ordinary things, the glorious and wonderful ordinary. Mother, father, spouse, child, sisters brothers, yes even life itself. That is all that is needed. Following Jesus means using the ordinary stuff of life, and changing the world. We cannot be stingy about what he have when talk of God's use for them, that's true. But Jesus does not demand of us anything we do not already have, and abundantly.

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Jesus' teaching starts off telling the great crowds that followed him: *Whoever comes to me and does not hate mother and father, spouse and children, brothers and sisters, yes even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not give up all of their possessions cannot be my disciple.*

My initial reaction is to reject this as horrifying. The parable starts me off trying to cling to what I have, the precious ordinariness of life. But it leads me to a place where if I give of the ordinary stuff of my life, in giving them find they are returned strangely multiplied. Father and mother, spouse and children, brother and sister,

worldly possessions of a modest scope, these are all that is needed to change the world. Parables are clever little things, often the place they lead me is in precisely the opposite direction of my initial reaction.

This is what Christian life is like. We must treat the ordinary stuff of life like they are mighty and precious tools in the hands of God. Because they are. We are to give from our worldly possessions, so that our money is used not just in a way that our own have enough, but so that all might flourish. We are to care for our family, raise our children so that they do not become just any kind of people, but people of good will and good conscience who choose what is right but hard over what is easy but wrong. We are to work in all our several vocations - around boardroom tables and poring over actuarial tables and advocating in the public square - we are to do our work not just in any way, but with such love and integrity that people might see how we live and say—there—there is what life is supposed to be like. We are to build this church so that it becomes not just any kind of community, but a place where the lost and the least find refuge, where the broken-hearted find comfort, where justice is served.

First United Church of Oak Park, as we embark upon a new year of ministry together, as we embark upon a new season of ministry together, as you live and move in the world as a follower of Jesus, know that you are called to nothing less than building up the realm of God. And friends, know that this will demand of you nothing more than the life you already have, and it will demand nothing less than everything you've got.