



SAINT LUKE'S

“WHY FOLLOW JESUS?”
PROPER 18C

DEUTERONOMY 30:15-20
PSALM 1
PHILEMON 1-21
LUKE 14:25-33

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY
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This is a hard gospel today. Jesus says: if you really want to follow me, you must be willing to sever family ties, even to “hate” our family. (Who wants to sign up for that?) Jesus doesn’t preach family values as we usually understand them¹. Jesus says we have to carry the cross – risk everything - to truly follow him. Then Jesus gives more advice about discipleship. Think it through before you commit. Just as you would if you plan to build a tower, count the costs of construction before you start. If you are a king or military leader, don’t start a battle you can’t win. Then Jesus goes back to the demands of discipleship: need to surrender all your possessions. By “possessions” I understand Jesus to mean whatever gives us a sense of control, security, well-being and a buffer of safety. Jesus today might include: investments or savings, apartment or house, even our clothes, things we might regard as “basic” to a good life: the opera, books, smartphones and the rest of our beloved “indispensable” tech, the theater, gym membership, travel and vacations. (We will know what those things are for us). It is easier to risk everything when we are younger and full of youthful enthusiasm, especially if we don’t have anything to lose. Possessions may not matter much to us in themselves but a sense of security matters more as we age.

¹ Elsewhere Jesus upholds the commandment to “Honor your father and mother”, but not in this context.

Jesus is speaking to large crowds at this point. I bet the crowds got smaller after this. We know for a fact they did. How many were with Jesus at the end? 12, then 11, then a few women.

There's a significant assumption buried in Luke's text. Which of you intending to build a tower... Which king, intending to wage war... Luke's examples presume a privileged audience. A Galilean peasant or fisherman would not imagine construction of a tower. It would be beyond his needs or means. A wealthy landowner might build a tower. Or a vineyard owner. Luke was a man of privilege, education and cosmopolitan habits², writing primarily to and for equally privileged people – people with the most to surrender if they choose discipleship. Of all the gospels, Luke might be the most natural fit for New Yorkers because compared with most people in the world we too are privileged, educated and cosmopolitan.

Luke's Jesus enters our world of privilege and challenges our habits and the securities privilege buys. Jesus asks for a generous, whole-hearted response in discipleship. Some commentators have suggested Jesus' words only apply to first generation disciples as

² *Luke 1:4 Luke's Greek is sophisticated he wrote his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles to Theophilus, a well-educated Greek man*

they planted churches³. However, the majority of scholars conclude that Jesus most likely said this or Luke would surely have dropped it from his text because it is such challenging teaching and it would have grated on Luke's privileged audience. This gospel remains a perennial challenge.

Jesus doesn't come to magically solve our personal problems and anxieties or make our lives easy. Jesus actually creates issues that aren't a problem until we start following Jesus – like our attitude to possessions and other relationships. And some things that most concern us – ageing, sickness, poverty – Jesus doesn't talk about much. He heals most everywhere he goes but this is not the focus of his message. Rather healing is “a sign of the kingdom of God come near”⁴ – a by-product of God's presence. Jesus' questions often go beyond our immediate problems and needs.

How can we possibly fulfil these demands of discipleship to relinquish our loves and securities? We can't. We come up against our own limitations and anxieties. It is absolutely impossible on our own strength. But we don't have to do this on our own strength – that's not the gospel. The Collect for today reminds us that self-sufficiency is an illusion, pride is

³ Some commentators have also suggested this is intended primarily (exclusively?) for a quasi-monastic community

⁴ eg Luke 10:9

“confiding in our own strength”, but God never abandons those who depend on God’s mercy and God’s strength. We cannot follow Jesus without Jesus’ own help. We cannot follow Jesus without asking Jesus to give us an internal spiritual makeover.

So Jesus offers us *himself* in our life. Jesus asks if we will walk with him, doing our best each day to love as he loves, to love God and all the neighbors God gives us. This is the guarantee and the promise of the gospel for this life – we don’t have to do this alone. Jesus is always with us. Jesus offers himself as our resting place, our security. This is not an easy journey. Yet there will always be some people – maybe not many – who choose this journey with Jesus above all else. If we look to our right and to our left, we will have company. Sometimes that company has gone before us and we are encouraged by their example and the writings they have left behind. Sometimes we can find soul friends on the road with us now, on our right and on our left.

What is Jesus about? Jesus is indifferent to whether the crowds are large or small. Jesus is indifferent to his ratings. Jesus is indifferent to the opinions of political and religious leaders. Jesus doesn’t even make religious conversion speeches urging people to

abandon their Hebrew traditions (although he is a reformer). I don't think Jesus will think it catastrophic if all the mainline Christian denominations merge or dissolve because Jesus doesn't care about denominations as such. What matters to Jesus is the kingdom of God: love of God and neighbor, with justice and peace and mercy. In other words, I think Jesus is way ahead of where most of us get to spiritually in this life. Jesus calls his followers to surrender exclusive, particular familial loves not because they are bad but so that we are more available to love everyone else more fully, whoever we meet who needs us. The spiritual goal is freedom for greater service to God and neighbor.

Jesus offers us himself on a journey into greater freedom than we can imagine. Not easy. But awesome. And so worth it.

AMEN.

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