

Sermon Preached by Pastor Jennifer Rose

September 4, 2016

Luke 14:25-33

“Extravagant Generosity”

Dear friends in Christ: Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord & Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

So, Happy Labor Day weekend! Happy beginning of the fall! Happy School Starts in only two days day - but who's counting? And you know, nothing says, “Let's celebrate and have a great start to the year!” like our gospel text for today. Jesus says, “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. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple....none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.”

That's one of the most depressing Sunday messages....ever. All week I've been thinking about this text and thinking “Arrgh! It's Labor Day weekend. Everyone's enjoying a holiday weekend. This is so depressing. What on earth am I supposed to say about this text?!”

Honestly, I'd much rather preach on the Deuteronomy or Philemon texts.

But while I would like to preach on those two texts, I have always been taught that if there is a biblical text that you want to avoid, one that you would rather not have read in church on Sunday, one that you would rather act as if it does not exist, then it is probably the one you should be preaching on.

Those pesky seminary professors.

So what are we supposed to do with a passage like this? Because my temptation is to try and soften it up a bit. To tell you that Jesus doesn't really mean we are supposed to hate our family members, but that it really means “turn away.” So he doesn't mean that you need to hate your parents or brothers or sisters, but just that you are to turn away from them. But whether this is true or not, it does not change the fact that you are still being asked to give up your family. To turn away from them. To leave them behind so that you can follow Jesus.

Part of me wants to be snarky and say that because the texts reference people hating their wives and children, then Jesus must only be talking to the men in the room, and everyone else is off the hook.

But in the end, I can't. I can't smooth this one over. I can't make it say what it doesn't say. In the end, Jesus demands something of us. Expects something of us as his disciples.

But maybe that's actually good news - that Jesus is trying to tell us that our faith actually demands something of us. That God actually invites to have a role to play in this beautifully, messed up world. That God actually trusts us to be a partner in bringing about a love so divine that reaches into all our stone-like hearts. That it truly is God's work and our hands. That God accomplishes more with us than without us.

God doesn't ask this of us so that we can get into heaven or so we can earn God's love for us. God's love will be with you always, even if you ignore this text and pretend you never heard it. Jesus doesn't ask us to do good things so that we can win a reward in the end. And yet, Jesus asks us to do hard things so that others might flourish in this world. And in the words of a friend of mine, we can do hard things.

So what hard thing might Jesus be asking of you today? What might Jesus be asking you to give up or sacrifice for the sake of a better world? What that looks like for you, I don't know. You'll have to figure that out on your own.

But as I think about Jesus asking his disciples to turn from the families and leave behind all their stuff to follow him, all I can think about is the millions of refugees who have fled their country in order to find safety and refuge in their surrounding countries. People who have left behind every single thing they own, people who have maybe even left behind family members who are fighting in a war that has become much too chaotic, in order that they might find a safer and better life.

Sometimes what God asks of us is really hard. But we can do hard things. Martin Luther urged us to put our old self to death. He urged us to remember our baptism. Baptism isn't just a ritual moistening that we perform on new babies to thank God for the gift of new life. Baptism is a ritual drowning. In baptism, the old self, with all its struggles to justify its own existence, is drowned, put to death. Following Jesus means dying to self. Bonhoeffer said that "When Christ calls a person, Christ bids them come and die." The cost of discipleship is everything. Not just everything you have, everything you are. But following Jesus – discipleship, baptism—also means being raised with Jesus.

It means understanding yourself to be a new creation in Christ's image, with all the potential to be all that we can be. It is as if, God scoops us out of the waters of baptism and says, "Yes! This is exactly what I had in mind when I created you". Turning away from and detaching ourselves from people, possessions and work so that we can follow Jesus means that: suddenly we no longer work to justify our own existence, we work simply because there is work that needs doing. We work because God has given us work that no one else can do, and because if we don't do it, it simply won't get done.

Suddenly our possessions no longer prove our worth; they are simply gifts from God. They are given to us to serve God and God's people: our homes so that we can provide hospitality to strangers, our wealth so that we can share it with others. And suddenly our families no longer justify our existence, they merely surround us with love and care. Our fathers are not there to be lived up to, but to love us and accept us. Our mothers love us not because we deserve it, but simply because we exist. Our sisters and brothers can be companions for the journey, walking alongside us enjoying the scenery. And

children can be more than just something we put our stamp on and raise to be just how we want them, they can be signs that God is at work in the world, constantly bringing new life, constantly opening up the future. Following Jesus means dying to self, to everything we have, to everything we are. But it also means being reborn, and receiving all of life as a gift.

So, again, what hard thing might Jesus be asking of you? Maybe Jesus is asking you to get over yourself and to quit worry about yourself all the time. Or maybe Jesus is asking to get out of whatever dangerous and chaotic life you've been living in for far too long. Or maybe Jesus is asking you to heal a relationship that's been broken for far too long. Or maybe Jesus is asking you open up your home to someone who doesn't have one. Whatever it is, you'll have to figure that out.

But what I do know is that as disciples of Jesus, he actually expects something from us. And that is the most beautiful part. That God actually calls you by name and asks something of you. God needs you. And sometimes God needs you to do hard things.

I'll be honest, no matter what hard thing I might think Jesus is calling me to, the odds are pretty high that I'm not going to go home today and start hating my family. And I'm not going to sell all of my possessions either. And if that counts as failure in Jesus' eyes, then so be it. But I think there is good news in failure too. You see, there was a large crowd there that day when Jesus laid out these great expectations. And we never learn how it turns out. The story doesn't say what the crowd decided to do. Well, it doesn't say it explicitly what they decided. But we can assume it. You see, later on in Luke's gospel, Jesus' travels lead him all the way to Jerusalem and to the top of a cross. And when we look around, his friends and the crowd are nowhere to be found. They have scattered and are standing at a distance. And yet God still used those same people, like Peter who denied Jesus, to build God's church. A church thousands of years ago that led to the building of this very church.

Jesus' closest friends failed him. And so will we. But God remained faithful to them, continuing to call them into partnership in creating a better world. And God will remain faithful to us. Even if we go home today and nothing changes, it doesn't mean that God won't continue to invite you use your hands for God's work tomorrow. And the next day. And the next day. And the next day.

Thanks be to God. Amen.