

"To Do the Difficult Thing"

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 23
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Sunday, September 5, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's time we admit to the elephant in the room this morning. A person simply cannot let the words of the Gospel lesson slip by unnoticed and unacknowledged. The preacher simply cannot say, "Oh, I think I'll preach on the second lesson today." No. We need to deal with the elephant. From the mouth of Jesus our Lord, whose love knows no bounds, comes these words: *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.*

HATE. Luke records Jesus using the word "hate." This is not one of those times I can conveniently tell you that the Greek word for "hate" here can be translated into something less than what it appears. Something less offensive to our ears. Nope. The word used here is the word for "hate": *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.*

Just last week, a worshiper with us, looking ahead in our lesson cycle, asked me about this verse. It clearly troubled him. No wonder. The Holy One who commanded us to love our neighbor as ourselves tells us to hate those who undoubtedly are our closest "neighbors." It boggles the mind. So let's deal with it, shall we?

Look where Jesus is speaking here. We learn in vs. 25 that large crowds are traveling with him, journeying from town to town. Probably there are groupies of every kind—some with clear devotion to Jesus, some caught up blindly in the excitement, still others riding on his celebrity coattails for personal gain. I think Jesus knows this is the situation. So he deliberately turns around to face the crowd and teaches in clear, stark terms what following him means. And it is not a cakewalk.

As a fan of Monty Python, and as someone who has memorized her share of quotes from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, I also watched their movie *Life of Brian*—which tells the story of a young Jewish man named Brian. The silly plot is this: Brian was born on the same day as, and next door to, Jesus Christ, and is subsequently mistaken for the real Messiah. Be forewarned: It is a totally irreverent movie, but its depiction of people mindlessly following Brian through the desert is both hysterically funny and sadly accurate. In one scene, as the crowds grow and follow Brian, he journeys faster to escape them, only to have one of his sandals fall on the ground. A groupie picks up the sandal, certain that is a sign, a pronouncement from Brian himself that all of them should take off one sandal and follow him. Of course, others in the crowd begin to debate that doctrinal point,

saying, no, Brian means they should take off their sandals and gather them all together in abundance. Thus he is able to escape because they are busy arguing about what the dropped sandal means.

Whereas Brian manages to sneak away from the growing crowds, Jesus turns and confronts his followers with honest words about discipleship. If these folks are serious about following Jesus, they need to know up front what such following involves.

Now, if we believe that Jesus is telling us to go home and pick a fight with family members, despise them, be hateful to them, close our hearts to them, then we are as foolish, unthinking and mindless as those silly people in the desert taking off one sandal and following Brian. Of course Jesus isn't teaching us to act like that to spouse, partner, parents, or child. But what Jesus does here is overstate, using words to the extreme, words meant to exaggerate, as he describes the commitments we have. "Love" for family could very well seem like "hate" when compared to the love we ought to have for Jesus Christ. And love for Jesus involves an entire life's worth of reprioritizing everything we value and everything we do. Jesus is saying here that following him requires a whole-hearted allegiance, which cannot help but impact relationships and loyalties and allegiances we already have. Putting Jesus first in our lives, committing ourselves to following him, will inevitably affect the other commitments in our lives—family, friends, possessions. Our Lord is laying out for us the radical commitment it takes to be his disciple. And that's the other elephant in the room. **COMMITMENT.**

Lutheran Pastor Sharron Lucas says this to pastors wrestling with this text: *More than likely, the people to whom you preach this Sunday are trying to be faithful to a high-commitment God in a no-commitment culture.*

I thought that summed it up rather nicely. We have a high-commitment God in a no-commitment culture. But the more I thought about it, the more I wanted to revise that statement a bit. It's really not that we don't have any commitments. We certainly do. In fact, we have **way too many** commitments, and they clash with one another as we attempt to juggle them and fulfill them. So we often end up failing to keep some of those commitments, and thus become reluctant to take on other commitments. And now we're being reminded that our primary commitment is to our Lord Jesus. Well, where do we fit **that** commitment into the mix? **We can't fit it in**, which is precisely Jesus' point. We are like the man who plans to build a tower, then discovers he doesn't have enough money to complete the project. We are like the army commander who fails to recognize he cannot muster enough troops to win the war. If we try to wedge somehow our commitment to Christ into the stuffed-full schedule of commitments we already struggle to maintain, something is going to give. And I'm afraid that what happens far too often is that our commitment to be disciples is the thing that gives. Our faith life will take the path of least resistance. Look—in pure bureaucratic terms, a person maintains membership in the Lutheran Church (ELCA) as long as there is record of communing and financially contributing once in a two-year period. That's pretty minimal discipleship, and when life gets hectic and challenging, with a raft of

commitments, people in the Church may take that path of least resistance, do the minimum, and consider themselves having fulfilled their commitment as disciples.

Jesus knows the path-of-least-resistance folks are there in the crowd, and so he offers full disclosure to them here when he says: *Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*

Okay, now it's time to acknowledge the **real** elephant in the room. **THE CROSS.** Oh, we talk plenty about the cross when it pertains to the way Jesus died. We talk plenty about the cross when we proclaim how God's sheer love in Jesus willingly gave itself on that cross so that the world and you and I might be forever changed by that love. We know that for Jesus the cross was no cakewalk, never the path of least resistance, but was the hard, hard, suffering work Jesus did to reconcile a broken creation to God.

*But **we** don't want to carry the cross.*

Yet that is exactly what Jesus teaches, and it's tucked right here in the middle of his words to the crowd following him: *Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*

Now Jesus has already died for you and me. He has already conquered sin and death, our sins are forgiven, our life is in God's kingdom, and we are assured in the promises of baptism about that. You and I don't have to be crucified. But there remains a cross for you and me and all who claim to follow Jesus—a cross we are to carry. I don't know what kind of cross you will carry in your faith journey, but I do know Jesus is saying it will often be difficult. It's not a cakewalk. It will be hard, hard work to carry that cross and follow Jesus and be his disciple. But we must encourage one another not to take the path of least resistance.

To do the difficult thing—to fulfill our commitment as disciples of Jesus—well, each of us here will have to discern what that cross might be. It might involve telling our kids who are whining about having to go to church that we're all going to go to church anyway. It might involve forgiving someone though there's been hurt all around. It might involve sharing our own resources when our first inclination is to keep our resources for ourselves. It might involve biting our tongue when words we want to say could be destructive. It might involve deciding we simply have to set aside time for prayer—even if our calendar is chock-full of other stuff to do. It might involve admitting to ourselves that many times we have little control over situations—that we cannot control or micromanage others or ourselves—and we need to let go.

That cross can be heavy to carry some days.

All I know is that when Jesus Christ, our crucified and risen Lord, becomes our primary commitment, then all facets of our lives will be shaped by that whole-hearted commitment. And shaped for the good. Don't you suppose that our devotion to Jesus, whose love for us knows no bounds, will shape us well in our

devotion to family and congregation and friends and neighborhood and country and world?

On this Labor Day weekend, many of us rest from our daily labors. But the **real work** of faithful living to the glory of God goes on.

AMEN.