

Homily Pentecost 16C  
September 4, 2016  
Grace, River Forest

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

### The Problem of Hasty Followers

In Jesus' name. Amen

Large crowds are coming to Jesus in today's Gospel – evidently, coming to him of their own accord. I suspect they liked being in Jesus' entourage, this popular itinerant preacher and teacher and healer. After all, he was probably the closest thing to a true "celebrity" back then.

Jesus turns to talk to the crowds. From what he says, it's quite clear that he never attended a Dale Carnegie course on "how to win friends and influence people," never went either to a "recruitment" seminar. Jesus makes a speech that seems designed to send his listeners packing: "Unless you hate everyone in your family and your own life, you cannot be my disciple. Unless you carry the cross, you can't be my disciple. And unless you give up all your possessions, you can't be my disciple." And then if they were still having trouble getting it, Jesus recounts two short parables that illustrate why it's important to count the cost of something before you sign on the dotted line. "Don't start to build a tower to store grain or protect your fields, without first estimating the cost of the entire

project. Otherwise, you'll be the laughing stock of the neighborhood – when you've run out of money before it's finished. And if you're a king, and your troops are outnumbered two-to-one, it would be smart to figure out – *before* getting embroiled in battle – whether you could defeat the opposition. So that if you can't, you could quickly send a delegation to seek peace instead!"

These illustrations about counting the cost, we get. But why exactly is Jesus discouraging these "large crowds" of people from being his disciples? And where are *we* in the story?

One of my favorite preachers and scholars, Fred Craddock, writes: "Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, but what is the nature of the journey? Is it a funeral procession? Apparently only Jesus has seriously faced the issue of his death; the Twelve certainly have not yet grasped it....Is it a parade? Obviously this crowd thinks so, oblivious to any price to pay, any cross to bear. The crowds swell; everybody loves a parade. What does Jesus have to say to hasty volunteers? In sum, his word is, Think about what you are doing and decide if you are willing to stay with me all the way." (Fred Craddock, *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Luke*, p.181).

Still, was it necessary for Jesus to be so harsh with those in the crowd? "You can't be my disciple unless you 'hate' your father and mother, spouse and

children, brothers, sisters, yes, and even life itself.” Well, that isn’t quite as bad as it sounds. Craddock points out that “[t]o hate is a Semitic expression meaning to turn away from, to detach oneself from.” Jesus is telling the crowds to make “secondary” to him all other allegiances and attachments. I like the way Eugene Peterson in his Bible translation, *The Message*, sums up Jesus’ words in this text: “Simply put, if you’re not willing to take what is dearest to you, whether plans or people, [or possessions], and kiss it goodbye, you can’t be my disciple.” (p. 160)

I don’t know about you, but I pretty much have trouble kissing anything goodbye. I want to follow Jesus, be his disciple, but I have never done a good job of getting rid of, detaching myself from, whatever it is that gets in the way between Jesus and me. Maybe you, too, know the problem. And yet what this text is about is Jesus asking any potential disciple in the “large crowds” – in this large church? – not to even bother to sign up, unless we are “willing to stay with [him] all the way” to the end.

It’s pretty clear that the original 12 disciples did not exactly have a good track record in this regard. Take Peter, for example. A pastor in Minnesota, in an article about confirmation, has written, “Like every other confirmand, [Peter] “promised that he would never desert Jesus....Jesus knew better, and told him so: ‘You’ll deny me three times.’ A week later,...our resurrected Lord showed up

[behind locked doors] and announced peace. Not long after that, Peter decided to go fishing for fish, instead of fishing for [people], as Jesus instructed. Once again, Jesus showed up, full of so much forgiveness that he cooked Peter and the other disciples breakfast." (Paul Koch, "The Miracle of Confirmation Sunday," *The Cresset*, Trinity 2016, Volume 79, No. 5, p. 43) Just before Jesus washed his disciples' feet, earlier in John's Gospel, we're let in on a secret about Jesus: "Having loved his own who were in the world, [Jesus] loved them to the end." He loved Peter and the whole batch of them, "to the end," despite their failures to "stay with [him]." And Jesus, our crucified and risen Lord, loves us, too, "to the end" – despite our failures to detach ourselves from those things that get in the way of our fully following him. He hasn't made us breakfast on the beach, but there is the supper he has prepared for us here, full of so much forgiveness and love. And he keeps calling and re-commissioning us, as he re-commissioned Peter on that seashore, to follow him and feed his sheep.

I read a blog on line this week called *Working Preacher*, in which the author said that probably the biggest "disconnect" or "detachment" that "most Christians experience" is the detachment between church on Sunday and the rest of their week. "Ask them," the writer, Dr. David Lose, went on, "how often they think about what happened Sunday when they're trying to work through a

problem at home or a challenge at work....Then ask them if they think that what they do is holy and sacred.” (David Lose, “Your Most Important Sermon,” *Working Preacher*, Sunday, August 29, 2010)

Part of the reason for this “disconnect,” Lose continued, is that we’ve “been trained” to think that when Jesus talks about “carrying” or “taking up the cross,” Jesus is “referring to...significant suffering or sacrifice, preferably on behalf of the faith. But what if it’s simpler than that?” Lose asks. “What if it’s more ordinary?” And then he quotes Bible scholar Alan Culpepper: “The language of cross bearing has been corrupted by overuse. Bearing a cross has nothing to do with...painful physical conditions, or trying family relationships. It is instead what we do voluntarily as a consequence of our commitment to Jesus Christ.” (Alan Culpepper, “Luke,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Volume 9, p. 236 – as quoted by David Lose in his blog)

If this is truly what “cross carrying” means, “what we do voluntarily as a consequence of our commitment to Jesus Christ,” then what occupies you the majority of the week *is* holy and sacred. Studying hard and being a good friend to your classmates. Serving your neighbor to the best of your ability in your daily vocation, whether that is in teaching, health care, law, real estate, finance, the non-profit sector, whatever. Mourning with those who mourn and rejoicing with

those who rejoice. Volunteering in a food pantry, or including the food needs of the poor on your grocery list. Making a Grace Care meal and delivering it to a fellow member. Calling or visiting someone homebound. Tending to your children, your grandchildren. Being there for siblings or parents as they face end-of-life issues, or the loss of a life partner. Being a conveyor of grace, rather than judgment in all your dealings with others. Seeking the common good, not just your own. In our Old Testament reading today, Moses said, “Choose life!” He said it to God’s people after God, Life itself, had already chosen them. When we, God’s “chosen” through Christ Jesus, choose “life,” it always includes “life” for more than ourselves – even when it is so tempting to think, “Why bother?”

This Labor Day weekend, take a moment to reflect on one way you have been a disciple of Jesus Christ this past week, one way you might carry the cross, follow Jesus, in the week to come. For the truth is that during the week you are involved in holy and sacred work, and that “God is at work in [you] and through [you] for the sake of the world God loves so much.” (Lose, *ibid.*)

And, oh yes, there is another truth: that even when you and I are attached to the wrong things, Jesus remains “attached” to us through baptism, and will love us, his own, to the end. For there was a strange “tower” of sorts visible on the horizon outside of Jerusalem one Friday many, many years ago. Those who

passed it by mocked and ridiculed the one who hung there, even though there was no miscalculation on his part, no failure to count the cost of his being there.

He was there to charge to his account all the cost-cutting we have done in our lives, all the cross avoiding. He was there to build from that odd-looking platform with the two cross beams something of substance, a community of disciples, people who believe that it's never too late to risk starting over again, to follow Jesus.

In Jesus' name. Amen