

Sermon – Luke 14:25-33; Deuteronomy 30:15-20
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
13 Pentecost – Year C
7 September 2025

“Add It Up, Let It Go”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Several summers ago, we found ourselves at the base of Amicalola Falls in Georgia. At over 700 feet, Amicalola is the largest cascading waterfall east of the Mississippi, and there is a trail to the top. There was no way we were not going to take the trail. The trail is only about a mile long and involves some easy switchbacks at the start. But to gain altitude you have to go, well, up. And going up requires stairs. Lots of them. But you can't say you weren't warned. There's a sign. Top of falls: 425 steps. Difficulty: Strenuous. 425 steps is about 35 flights of stairs. 425 steps doesn't sound like a lot. But it feels like a lot by the time you're done. I recall our children being unamused at discovering a parking lot at the top of the falls. Sure, we could have driven, but where is the memory-making family fun in that? Plus, our car would've been right there, meaning we would have missed walking back down the stairs in the downpour that came out of nowhere. 425 strenuous stairs, each way. But the sign made it clear. The journey, while very well worth it, would not be easy.
2. The same can be said of following Jesus, who has difficult words for us on the journey today. If you want to become Jesus' disciple, it would be wise to count the cost. Would not a builder or a king do the same? But what will be required of *you*? You cannot follow Jesus without giving up your possessions.

You cannot follow Christ without hating parent, spouse, child, sibling, yes, and even life itself. Difficulty: Strenuous. Is this journey even worth it?

3. What, we might well wonder, is Jesus up to here? There are, it seems, three basic ways of hearing what Jesus has to say. First, we could take him literally; to follow Jesus requires hatred of others. This, frankly, seems off-brand. Jesus' gospel is consistently one of love. Love of God, love of neighbor, and all that. So, second, we can assume it's all a bit of hyperbole, that Jesus doesn't mean what he's saying. But dismissing the words of the Word of God is rarely a good idea. We are left with a third option. In the Old Testament, at times, the word "hate" is used to mean "love less." To follow Jesus is to love all others less. As biblical scholar Diane Chen puts it, "To become Jesus' follower, one's preference – loyalty, love, and priority – must reside with Jesus over all people and things one holds dear." Even, I would add, over one's own life. This, Jesus proclaims, is the only path to real life. This strenuous trail, one step at a time, is the way we follow the One who is the way, the truth, and the life.

4. About 1,400 years earlier, the people found themselves on the verge of the Promised Land. After centuries of slavery in Egypt and decades of wilderness wandering, their difficult path was almost over. But a new one was beginning. They are told that, in the land, they will have a simple choice, life and prosperity on the one hand, death and adversity on the other. Will you choose life or death? Seems easy enough. But we know from biblical history and from our own lived experience that we all too often choose death. Our Cornerstones Bible study resumed this past Wednesday, and one member pointed out the incredible practicality of this passage. It's not about eternal life; neither is it particularly theologically abstract. God is telling the people, telling us, that we have choices in how live in this world, how we organize our lives and arrange our society. And while we talk a good game for life, too often we allow systems of death, violence, and war to win the day.

5. Two Wednesdays ago, this room was filled with schoolchildren and their teachers. As we do each Wednesday at Grace, we gathered for chapel. To sing songs and pray prayers and hear God's Word for the day. We are not alone in this, of course. At the very same moment, the schoolchildren of Annunciation in Minneapolis were also gathered in worship and prayer. But where our kids left chapel and made their way to math and science and ELA, the children of Annunciation were left with lives torn asunder by yet another school shooting. Malia Kimbrell's daughter, Vivian, was shot that day and will carry bullet fragments in her body for the rest of her life. Malia spoke out, passionately and persuasively, wondering why our society and its lawmakers place a higher value on semiautomatic weapons than on children. She implores us all to pray the prayers, think the thoughts, and then to do the things. To act. Her words are an echo of Deuteronomy. We have set before us life and death. Will we not choose life?
6. There is so much in these days, friends. So much. Violence in schools and in our streets. Wars without end or, frankly, any real purpose. A federal government tweeting out what seem to be threats of war against its own cities. Where does it all end? I don't know. I do know that following Jesus wasn't advertised as being easy, just that it's the only hope we have. This day, each day, is set before us the same choice. Will we work for life, or will we work for death? The way to follow Jesus is clear, and he does not demand our allegiance without first, freely and fully, given himself to us.
7. We follow the One who took up his cross for our sake. The One who proclaimed life and love even as our world took everything from him. In his resurrection, God has vindicated the victim, given hope to the oppressed and freedom to the frightened. Jesus demands our loyalty, yes, but in letting go of everything, we find ourselves with hands open, ready to receive the gifts of our God. The risen One stands before us again today, declaring the victory of

life, of love. The victory won for us by Jesus Christ. You are forgiven. The ways of sin and death no longer hold you bound. Keep walking, friends. Jesus journeys with you. Eases your burdens. Lightens your steps. Keeps your life. Choose life, friends, in the name of the One who has chosen you. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.