

Sermon – Proper 18 – Cathedral of the Incarnation
September 4, 2016

Luke 14: 25-33

Last Wednesday I was fortunate enough to have the day off to visit with a friend of mine from Los Angeles who was staying out on Fire Island for his vacation. We met each other five years ago as we gathered as freshman students at seminary and are now the closest of friends. As I was driving out to meet him I was pondering how vastly changed our lives had become in the five years since we had met.

We are both priests although we had very different paths to ordination, we are doing work that we didn't think we would be doing in ministry, we are living in communities that we never envisaged living in and we've both experienced difficult family reactions in following our call. We have both experienced the hatred of a family member who challenged the ministry and work we were called to do.

Expressions of hatred are nothing new for our country. Hate is a powerful sentiment that has bestowed great amounts of violence in our communities. Most of the time hate is born of ignorance and out of that ignorance great damage is done.

So when Jesus says, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciples. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciples,” we might pause to reflect on the use of this powerful word and what it means to carry the cross.

The use of the word ‘hate’ seems harsh but in this context it appears to mean to “love less.” Mathew records this same event slightly differently to Luke where ‘hate’ is substituted by the notion of ‘loving less’. In Matthew 10:37-38 Jesus is quoted as saying “whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those that find their life will lose it, and those that lose their life of my sake will find it.”

Between both these versions of the same event we can experience Jesus calling us to reorder our lives to putting Jesus first no matter what. Now this is not to say that reorienting our lives will cause us to love our families less, rather it will help us to love our families more and with better understanding of how God intends for us to live in family and in community.

The Epistle reading this morning is an interesting example of someone who has reordered his life to put Jesus first, and by doing so, by carry the cross of Christ, reshaped his entire life. Paul, the writer of this short letter to Philemon, was a zealot for his faith, attacking and persecuting those that objected to the Law, and lived life outside of it. But after his experience of the risen Lord on the road to Damascus his life changed dramatically. His life changed from violent zealot

to passionate advocate of Jesus teachings, but his dedication to following Jesus and proclaiming him as Lord, ultimately cost him his freedom.

Paul writes to Philemon from prison about Philemon's slave Onesimus. Onesimus had come to stay with Paul and serve his needs during his confinement. Paul teaches him about the gospel and we come to understand that Onesimus accepted Jesus. In Paul's heart and mind this changed his social status. Previously he was a slave, a commodity to be bought and sold. Now he is a Christian brother in the same manner as his owner Philemon. Paul encourages Philemon to act with a heart of love as a Christian might, to receive Onesimus back as a Christian and "beloved brother" first, and then also as a free man.

Paul would have once violently demanded one's allegiance to the Law. Now he seeks to influence Philemon to act voluntarily in this matter rather than to be commanded. He is encouraging him to act as a beloved brother in seeing Onesimus differently, not as an object or property but as a human being. It's clear that Jesus calls us to put him first, and by putting him first we are prepared to then to carry his cross and to be better brothers and sisters and caregivers to those we live with and amongst.

So like Paul, when we take on the cross of Christ we have to move through a period of isolation and disorientation as we reorient ourselves to a life lived with Jesus at the center. Living in the fullness of Jesus teachings will better help to prepare our families, friends and **us** for the life in the world.

As the children of our community head back to school and to college today's gospel offers a lesson in how to prepare for these new life challenges. By putting Jesus first we seek to understand how Jesus interacted with the world. He loved God and had a heart of love for his followers. He sought out the lonely and dispossessed. He ate with strangers and accepted hospitality as a way of honoring those that offered it. By putting Jesus first in our lives we learn how to respond to new challenges. For me there was no greater challenge than going back to school for I hated reading and writing book reports.

Those of you who have sent your children off to college may have sat them down and had a conversation with them about the many new life issues they will face and what might be prudent courses of action to follow in response. We hope that we have formed them with sound Christian teachings that will help them as they orient themselves to their new lives.

Today we will bless our young ones and their backpacks as they head back to school. We trust that they have been prepared for the journey that lies ahead. We trust and pray that they will find strength, compassion and love for their fellow travelers as they carry the cross of Christ into this new school year.

Parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, sisters and brothers encourage them in their walk of faith so that they may be best prepared for the challenge of life in a learning and social environment that can often be difficult.

Jesus asks us to give ourselves to him fully and to trust God, so much so that he suggests we should sell all of our possessions in order to be his disciples. Putting Jesus first means being ready to respond to how he is working in our lives. When we are weighed down with possessions and worries and stress, we tend to focus on those things more than on what's asked of us by Jesus.

Carrying the cross of Jesus Christ can at times feel heavy and a burden. When we feel this way remember that Jesus offers himself to carry our load and to walk the road with us. We never have to be alone even though at times it can feel that way.

So as we send out these students into the world please hold all of them in your prayers this week as they start this new academic year. May the cost of their discipleship not be a weight to bear but be an enriching time in their young lives.

Amen.