

Season after Pentecost [Proper 18, Year C]

September 8, 2013

Haven Lutheran Church

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

Grace to you and peace from God - Father, + Son and Holy Spirit.

It seemed her boys would argue with each other about anything and everything. It was no different that Saturday morning. Both boys walked into the kitchen as she was putting the first patch of pancakes on the table. They ran to the table and both grabbed the plate. "It's mine... no mine. I got here first. I saw it first..... I'm older. I'm faster." Mom had enough. Time to bring a little faith into this bickering. "Boys, stop!" They looked at her. "There will be plenty of pancakes for everyone. Didn't you learn in Sunday School about how much Jesus loves us and how he wants us to be loving to each other, too?" They nodded their heads reluctantly. "Now what do you think Jesus would do if he was here?" They stared at her. The older brother turned to his younger brother and said, "I'll let you be Jesus first?"

If all it took to follow Jesus was to let someone have the first round of pancakes, I think most of us wouldn't have much of a problem with that. But then Jesus begins to speak about putting God before our most precious relationships and even our own life... And I, for one, begin to squirm. He tells us that before we decide to follow him, we should consider what it might cost us to follow his ways — consider there will be some comforts, resources, popularity, or security that we may need to give up to do what is right in God's eyes. For you see that is what the "cross" we're to carry is : Our cross is "what we do voluntarily as a consequence of our commitment to Jesus Christ." ¹

It's not utterly foreign for us to weigh the sacrifices and costs of our choices. If preaching today, maybe Jesus would have offered examples like these: "What parent wouldn't count the financial cost and time for

their family before signing up a child for the traveling soccer team? What person offered a certain entry-level job doesn't have to consider if he or she is willing to work every weekend their first year? What person joins a gym or buys a car without first determining if they can make the monthly payments?" To any of those instances we would likely say, "Well, yeah.... you'd be a fool to jump into something without considering if you can live with the consequences". So in making such decision we weigh priorities and our willingness to make sacrifices for what we think is important. Is a competitive traveling sports team going to be good or important for my child at this time? If so, the budget is juggled and the team schedule gets inked in on the calendar. If the job could lead to the kind of work I really like, then I just have to rearrange my life for a year so I can work on weekends. If getting into shape or a new car is of great importance, then we'll find a way to cut other expenses so we can afford it. We make choices all the time after "counting the cost," usually by deciding what is most important to us at that juncture of time or life. There is where we feel the pinch when it comes to following Jesus.

Is faith in Jesus only a head thing ---- accepting a series of truths and beliefs? Is faith in Jesus only a heart thing — something that brings me comfortable and makes me feel good? Most of us would probably agree that it's both — beliefs and a heart-felt attachment. But Jesus pushes us today to realize that beyond what we think and feel about our Lord is whether they effect **how we live**. Many of us have checked off "Christian" on forms most of our lives. What Jesus says today is that to be his follower is more than a title, more than a set of creeds or our feelings about God or being in church, as important as they are. To be a follower of Jesus means to put our Lord and God's ways first as we set priorities and make decisions. And there is where the costliness of

discipleship begins to move from an abstract notion to a life-shaking reality.

If the love of God is to come before all other earthly loyalties, than it will touch our relationships, checking accounts and our standing in society. Why? Because when the Lord comes first, your life is forever being re-shaped, re-formed, made new by the love and grace of God. There is no part of life or a decision that isn't informed by that transforming love of God. We begin to see things differently. And that will inevitably mean that I will find myself at odds with my Adam and Eve willfulness... I may risk the loss of a friend if I refuse to join in activities I know are wrong... I could get kicked out of certain organizations if I choose to put my faith before it.... I may forego a promotion if it will mean even more time away from my family... I may not have the latest fashions or phone or technology because that money is needed to feed the hungry or make a difference in the community. Most of us will not find ourselves in circumstances in which we will be killed for our faith but there is no way for anyone who follows Jesus to miss making sacrifices as God's partner in bringing about God's kingdom dream.

Let me be clear. This costly discipleship of which Jesus speaks is NOT about our eternal destiny ---- God has already taken care of that. What Jesus is talking about is "the caliber and character of our Christian lives" The abundant life and way of discipleship that Jesus both promises and announces takes practice and sacrifice — not to earn God's grace but to live into the discipleship life that grace makes possible. The assurance of our salvation is not all there is to the Christian life — It is also about the way we live our life in response to God's graciousness.² Let me also be clear that we will never be perfect disciples on this side of eternity. But that is no excuse for not trying again and again to be what God created us and enables us to be. God

will pour power and gifts into stumbling, stubborn, bumbling disciples who seek to live out a love of God and neighbor.

One of the many memorable stories from the events of 9/11 was the report of Deena Burnett's last conversation with her husband Tom, who was on United Flight 93 that tragic day. After learning two other planes had crashed into the World Trade Center, Tom told his wife, "I know we're going to die," he said, "But some of us are going to do something about it." And what they chose to do with what remained of their lives saved the lives of many others. It took courage and sacrifice.

We all can say, "I know I'm going to die." But we can also say that we have Jesus assurance that death will not be victorious. By God's grace, mercy and love, we have eternal life with our Lord. So Jesus asks, "Since you have the gift of God's love and eternal life, what are you going to do about it?" We call ourselves Christian and have the gift of eternity and God's love — So what? If it doesn't inform our living than it's a gift unopened, an invitation unanswered, a discipleship unlived. How are we each going to live and use our lives, day in and day out, until they end so others may also know the love and grace of God? It's not easy to keep God first. It takes courage and sacrifice and lots of practice. But God will give us all that we need — God's unfolding Word, a meal of forgiveness and God's very life and a community to bolster, encourage and nudge us. Jesus says follow me.... Choose life. It won't be easy but it will be worth the peace, purpose and joy you will know.

Linda M Alessandri 9/6/13

ENDNOTES

1. Alan Culpepper, "Luke" in *The Interpreter's Bible, Volume 9* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) , p. 236
2. A quote and a paraphrase from David Lose, "Cost of Discipleship" posted September 2, 2013 on www.workingpreacher.org