

**Sermon: September 4, 2016      Luke 14: 25-33**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley**

We live in a world where many voices counsel us to drop everything, to hate our old lives and find a new, exciting path. Those voices can be everything from get-rich-quick schemes, to advertisements that sow the seeds of dissatisfaction in order to sell us more stuff, to addictions that promise to fill our gaps, to the call of ISIS to bored suburban boys in Canada who want the excitement of a life that counts for something. At first glance, Christ's edgy words about family might look like just one extreme voice among many, but they are anything but.

I almost never preach from analogy, but I'm going to make an exception today, because today's gospel lesson about hating our families and even our lives in favour of discipleship comes across as so extreme that I think we need to face it a little bit at a time.

So in order to warm us up to what Jesus is intending for us, I want you to imagine something that fits right in here in fitness-conscious Canmore. I want you to imagine yourself starting a rigorous, guided program of health and fitness. The instructor, clearly someone who practices what she preaches because of her personal strength, endurance, and that "glow" that seems to exude from the robust, tells you that there are several thoughts and behaviours that you must let go of in order to have success in this fitness program.

Sedentary physical habits need to change. Emotional eating needs to end. Self-thwarting behaviours need to be countered. Long-beloved excuses need to leave the building.

And hardest of all, for those of us who grew up in a household where Mom prepared a creamy, buttery, sugary dessert once or even twice a day, plus an equally unhealthy snack before bedtime, we now need to turn our back on what Mama said if we truly want a new way of being.

Your instructor is clear that she's not going to be policing this. She's not going to be checking up on you each day in case you have milkshake on your breath or a bit of onion ring stuck in your teeth. She's just spelling it out: if you are more committed to your old ways than to this new goal, if you need the comfort of familiarity rather than the unfamiliar landscape of change, you will not succeed. Not because she forbids you from doing these things or will exclude you from the group if you do them, but because it just isn't possible to maintain the old patterns and make headway.

Oh, and one more thing: she wants you to succeed. She wants you to say yes over and over again to healthy living. But you're the one that needs to make those decisions. She's there to train, guide and support you, but the choice is up to you.

End of analogy... but please let the analogy lounge a while in your heart and mind as you hear once more these words from Jesus: Luke 14:25-33 (NRSV)

<sup>25</sup>Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, <sup>26</sup>"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.

<sup>27</sup>Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

<sup>28</sup>For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it?... <sup>31</sup>Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider [his resources].

<sup>33</sup>So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.”

These blunt words were addressed, not to the Pharisees or his enemies; they were not a rebuke for someone who tried to catch Jesus up in his own words. These words were a reality check for a group of people whose presence with Jesus indicated a desire for change.

Nobody traveling with Jesus would have mistaken his words or his style as an endorsement of the status quo. He knew the ancient scriptures, he had spent much time in the familiar surroundings of the synagogue, he loved the everlasting God, AND he knew that something in the lives of his people was deeply broken. Those who wanted things to stay the same in their nation and their lives were not drawn to even listen to him, let alone do what he said, so the first thing we can assume about the audience addressed by Jesus – including the first readers of the gospel of Luke - was a yearning for change.

A yearning for change, but how much commitment to it? As the gospel of Luke indicates, the number of people following Jesus was starting to increase: Jesus was getting “trendy!” And as the entourage got bigger, he needed to distinguish his core followers from the hangers-on. To borrow a phrase from my friend Rev. Vickey Gibb in Houston, he needed these people to decide if they were followers or fans. As Rev. Vickey preached in her sermon on July 10<sup>th</sup>, “Sometimes, being a follower of Jesus... interferes with our life. Sometimes, I want to be a FAN of Jesus, not a FOLLOWER; ‘cuz if I’m a FAN I can stand close enough to Jesus to get all the benefits, but not so close as that it will require me to do anything. Being a follower, COSTS.”

So Jesus uses a couple of analogies, as a gut-check for his newly-minted followers: the analogy of a builder who counts the costs before starting a project, and of a ruler who sizes up his likelihood of victory. Jesus might also have included words about taking up our cross to follow him, though this sounds more like something that Luke would have said after the crucifixion, than something Jesus would have been angling at, at this point in his ministry. One way or another, with such a crowd building, he needed for them to be serious about this venture.

But the kicker, for many of us, are his “either/or” words about family.

**“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.” (Luke 14:26)**

Pastor Brian Stoffregen, a Lutheran Pastor and bible commentator, has helpful words to say about this. The first word he wants to unpack, is HATE. “Hate,” he writes, “is a Semitic expression meaning ‘to turn away from, to detach oneself from,’ rather than our animosity-laden understanding.” The “hate” being mandated here, then, is to practice non-attachment to those things that are dearest to us: to not be ruled by the choices of our spouse and children, the lessons learned in childhood, even our self-identification. One recent version of the Bible, Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*, follows a similar pattern of thought in translating Luke 14:26, “Anyone who comes to me but refuses to let go of father, mother, spouse, children, brothers, sisters—yes, even one’s own self!—can’t be my disciple” but most translations follow the older, harsher wording.

The second word Brian Stoffregen wants to unpack, is CANNOT which is used three times in this scripture three times: if you don’t turn away from family you cannot be my disciple – if you fail to take up your cross you cannot follow me – if you love your possessions too much, you cannot be one of my disciples. The word cannot, writes Brian Stoffregen, is better translated “not able to” and does not denote something you are physically incapable of. This word refers to “something the person is able to do but chooses not to do.” The word “cannot,” then, does not suggest that God or Christ in some way prohibits us from following because we haven’t passed the test; nor does it suggest that there is some pre-existing condition that makes it

impossible to follow. It simply states a cause-and-effect: if you can't draw yourself away from dysfunctional old ways of being, then you're the one who is basically tying your own shoelaces together then tripping over them. We do need to rely on the grace of Christ to successfully accept his call, but we also need to get ourselves out of the way.

But even as we encounter these helpful words to unpack the words "hate" and "cannot" in this passage, why, oh why, does Jesus take aim at families? Why is there a specifically harsh injunction against something that most religious traditions, including most Christian congregations, work so hard to strengthen?

The best way I can answer this, is to rewind about 25 years to when I was in small-town Ministry in Saskatchewan. Without any resources within 200km that did pre-marriage counselling, preparing young couples to be married was part of my job, and I nearly always started our process by asking them about the things they learned by observing the parents or parental figures in the house they grew up in. How were decisions made? Were these things negotiated between parents, or did one parent have the final say or the only say; did children have a say, or not? Was it permissible to change one's mind after a decision was made? How was intimacy shown, how were strong emotions handled, how were conflicts resolved...or were they? Did anyone ever apologize? (Was it always the same person?) Was there a strong emphasis on traditional gender roles? Was it safe to ask difficult questions?

Frequently, in those pre-marriage sessions we didn't get around to talking about anything else, for we learn so much just by watching our parent or parents in our formative years. And I almost always found that people carry with them a mixture of responses to those lessons learned from their parents: things they accepted, things they absolutely rejected, and things they would like to reject but seemed to have seeped in to their lives in spite of their objections.

I think that this kind of gut-level assessment is what Jesus is advocating in the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke. Starting with those things that we learned in our family of origin, he calls all who follow him to take a look at those deeply-held learnings, and re-think anything that gets in the way of following his way of inclusion and reconciling love. So if we grew up in a household where nobody ever apologized for anything, or if your family of origin defined itself by insulating itself from people different from you, Jesus says, "you're going to find it awfully hard to follow me if you keep tripping over *that* old thing."

In addition to that old family stuff, I think Jesus also had in mind anything that we hold so closely that it can potentially get in the way of walking his path of love. He warns us about measuring our success as a parent by success of our kids. He calls us to detach from our possessions; if we love our stuff more than we love our neighbour, what kind of world is that going to make? And it goes beyond that, to examine our self-understanding. If something in the way I view myself gets in the way of my following the path of Shalom, especially if I am burdened by self-talk that is either negative and defeatist, or self-aggrandizing and egotistical, then it's time to release that – whether that's through counselling or prayer or other means of behaviour modification. We need to come to a new understanding of self, that is capable of receiving the abundant living that Christ has promised.

Just two days ago, in a daily devotional post not specifically related to this scripture, Catholic contemplative theologian Richard Rohr wrote about learning how to let go—"how to let go of your attachment to your self-image, your expectations, your very ideas. [As we do the hard work of letting go, we] redefine success as foundational happiness and contentment... [which] has everything to do with living right here, right now, and knowing a beautiful and fully accepting God – who is, this very moment, giving to you." That's what Jesus is getting at, in calling us away from our preoccupation about self and family, and towards his path of costly, life-affirming love. Though his words appear divisive or even dangerous, the sharpness of his words is mainly

to wake us up and shake us up, not to shun our families or deny the beauty of gift of life. He calls us to go into the hardest places and the most emotional attachments – the lessons and connections and messages received in childhood, the self-understandings we still live by – and ask hard questions of them. He calls us to examine our current relationships, family connections and friendships and loyalties, in case something in them is life-denying rather than life-affirming. And in all of it, is His promise of light, and life, and love.

In the presence of fledgling disciples who wanted a change in their lives and the life of their people, Jesus said that deep changes start with honesty: an honesty that faces the patterns and self-talk of our lives, and releases things that are no longer serving us, even if we have held them deeply for a long, long time. Christ has done everything that we need to have life, and to have it in abundance, but we have to clear the path to make sure we aren't stumbling over obstacles of our own creation as we seek to follow that amazing, difficult path.

And just like that fitness instructor at the start of our sermon, there is no Divine benefit if we fail in this journey. Jesus wants us to succeed, to have life, to keep saying YES and YES and YES as we face choices between ways that mire us in the muck or drive us to distraction, and his vision of a world where all people have what they need to live life to its fullest. By the grace of Christ that is a worldview we can be part of; only we can keep ourselves from it.

And so we are called to go deep – to do the scary work of releasing old ways, even favourite ways – to step into a future defined by love – and to do all of it in the loving presence of our Holy companion, Christ Jesus. By his gracious love, may this be so. Amen.

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