

Year C, September 8, 2019
13 Pentecost (Proper 18)
Christ Church, Mexia

Our gospel reading this morning starts with Jesus walking through the countryside. Things are pretty much normal. Over in Rome, Caligula is well on his way to being made Caesar. On the British Isles, a little village has been founded that will eventually be called London. In Israel, Jesus recently chastised the Pharisees and increased his teachings through the use of parables.

Luke tells us that large crowds were traveling with him on this day. The word traveling is a poor choice of words for what is happening. Traveling sounds like they are all doing things together. A different translation says, “One day when large groups of people were **walking along with him...**” (Message Bible)

Traveling here means just walking in the same direction with someone. Many of the people in the crowd were going along to see what was going to happen but they were not dedicated to or involved with Jesus. Today we would probably call them “rubberneckers.” They eventually start talking about following Jesus. Jesus hears this talk among the crowd and stops. If they want to follow him, that is fine. But it was necessary that they understood what “following” him, what discipleship with Jesus meant. So Jesus speaks the words we heard read this morning.

He begins his teaching with a challenging statement. Imagine Jesus saying, “Whoever does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters....” This is one of those verses that cannot be understood outside of context and time. The verse is confusing; it is almost dangerous and has led to some gross misunderstandings and teachings. If you take it away from the events that were happening in this passage, you can get into a world of hurt. Let’s see if we can get an understanding of what Jesus is saying.

I believe that we have an example of what the verse is trying to get across to us right here in this church. A few Sundays ago, the church was privileged to watch Alan & Pam celebrate their 50th anniversary by renewing their vows. They stood up and pledged their life and love to each other anew. If you went around and asked those present that morning what they remember, I am sure you would get many different replies. Some might remember Alan and Pam’s vows, and some might recall Fr. Ray’s liturgy, others might be reminded of the song from their original wedding that the choir sang. But, one thing that you would hear repeatedly is that Pam loved Alan and Alan loved Pam. That is where Jesus begins his teaching – with an understanding of earthly love between two people. But then he says if you “don’t hate” them... Let’s look at that word “hate.”

Just as there are several Greek words in the Bible for the English word “love,” there are also various words to express “hate.” In some places, the Bible talks about rage as hate, sometimes malicious and unjustifiable emotions toward someone or something is called hate, a few times the writers describe an act that is an outward expression of an inner feeling as hate. But Jesus doesn’t use any of those words here.

The word that is translated “hate” here has reference to having a choice. Let’s say I place before you a slice of pecan pie and a slice of cherry pie and asked you to choose one. You take the cherry. The word for “hate” that Jesus uses here would refer to the piece of pecan pie that you left. In this instance, you could say that you hated pecan pie. In reality, you don’t hate pecan pie, but at that moment you preferred cherry over pecan. It is a matter of choice and preference.

So back to Pam and Alan. Pam and Alan love each other. But, to follow Jesus, Alan would have to choose between Jesus and Pam. He could stay with Pam and fulfill the duties, pleasures, and obligations of being a husband, or he could make arrangements for Pam and leave to follow Jesus. In that case, the Greek would say that Alan hated Pam. Alan doesn’t hate Pam, but Alan chose another calling. That is what Jesus is referring to when he says, “hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters...” Another translation reads *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.* (Luke 14:26 – The Message Bible)

Jesus is saying to be a follower of his, you have to make a choice, a difficult choice. You have to leave your present life and take on a new life as a disciple. “Do you know what that means,” he asks? Jesus now begins his real discussion – what is the cost of being a disciple? “Let’s have no misunderstanding,” he tells them, “being my disciple will cost you and cost you dearly.” The references to building a tower or castle and to the king going into a battle are just illustrations about making the right decision. What he is getting at is that you don’t start something before you sit down and work out the details. This is something to consider before making the decision.

Just like building a structure or going into battle, becoming a disciple is a decision that you need to make only after you have examined the requirements, the cost, and the consequences.

What is required to become a disciple? Jesus tells us that to be a disciple, we must “carry the cross and follow me.” The verse should read, “carry his own cross and follow me.” Jesus isn’t talking about the everyday trials and tribulations that we all endure. He makes it very personal.

Carrying or bearing a cross is a phrase that has become so common that it has lost its meaning. We see it as something that we have to put up with, something to bear in our life. “Being too tall is just the cross that I have to bear.” “My wife’s bad cooking is the cross that I must bear.” But that is not the meaning of the phrase “carry or bear my cross.” When Jesus carried his cross up Golgotha to be crucified, no one was thinking of the cross as symbolic of a burden to bear. To a person in the first century, the cross meant one thing and one thing only: death by the most painful and humiliating means human beings could devise.

Today, we view the cross as a symbol of atonement, forgiveness, grace, and love. But in Jesus’ day, the cross represented nothing but torturous death. Because the Romans

forced convicted criminals to carry their own crosses, bearing a cross meant carrying your own execution device while facing ridicule along the way.

Therefore, to bear your cross means being willing to die to follow Jesus. But, that gives us two phrases that we need a clear understanding of; “to die” and “to follow.”

Trying to define death and dying medically is quite a challenge. It seems all of the definitions and discussions that I could find had footnotes, caveats, and warnings in them. One source told us that death was “The end of life. The cessation of life.” *Footnote:* These common definitions of death ultimately depend upon the definition of life, upon which there is no consensus. Another source informs us that death and dying is “The permanent cessation of all vital bodily functions.” *Footnote:* This definition depends upon the definition of “vital bodily functions, upon which there is no consensus.” On and on it goes, no real explanation.

If medicine can't give us a definition of “to die,” maybe the Bible itself can do it for us. Looking at all the times “death,” “die,” or “dying” are used in the Bible and reading the etymology of the original words, we find one common factor. Whatever death is, it always seems to involve separation; the separation of two things, e.g., body and soul, man and God, man and family, etc. It seems that death doesn't always mean the end of something living. Sometimes it is a separation or the end of one thing and possibly the beginning of another.

So, for this study, let's accept death as meaning the end of something or the separation of two things.

And what does “to follow” mean? It isn't to go along with. It means to obey, to agree with, or to do the same things. To bear our cross means to be so dedicated to obeying Christ that all else doesn't matter. To follow him means to love Christ to the point that we are ready to sacrifice everything that we have to do what he asked us to do.

But, what did he ask us to do? “Oh, I worship the Lord. I come to church every Sunday to worship Christ,” some people say with an air of religious self-satisfaction. The problem is Christ never asked us to worship him. He asked us to love like he loved and do the things he did. How do you love Christ? In the hieroglyphics of the ancient Egyptian empires, the word “love” is represented by fire. Why fire? Because fire is always active, it is always growing, and it is always moving. Just like a flame of fire, love is active. Love is an action, not an emotion. It is the motivation behind what we do. It is our actions. But Jesus has a little more to say about that. This is where the lectionary cuts off a little too soon. Verses 34 and 35 are Jesus' warning about our actions. We hear these verses frequently but rarely do we put them in context to see what they are saying.

Jesus starts talking about salt, a widespread element in the deserts of that area. He tells us that salt has a purpose, and when it doesn't do its job, it isn't good for anything. Jesus told his servants, told us that we are “the salt of the earth.” Suppose that, as Christians, we make a profession of self-sacrifice; we supposedly make that choice to follow, to obey him, but then, we do not keep our promise. Then we become like that savorless salt,

which can only be used to build roadways where nothing is meant to grow. In other words, the Christians who are not genuine are sure to be despised. They are crushed down by a world whom they have vainly tried to deceive.

Today we see so many examples of people calling themselves Christians but consistently do unchristian acts. From the highest offices in the land to the lowliest of jobs, claiming to be a Christian puts you on display and under a microscope. The world watches. Not to support but to sabotage. Not to admire but to admonish. The world is waiting for another Christian to fail. If we go to church on Sunday to praise and worship yet live a life that doesn't put that praise and worship into actions in our lives, then there is no reason for the world to believe the gospel. If we speak the words of life on Sunday and then speak words of hatred, prejudice, or bigotry on Monday, then the world sees no need to know our Savior.

Last week is gone. What happened is now part of the pages of history. But ahead of us there are 10,080 minutes before we meet again. How will we use those minutes? What will the world say of us next Sunday morning?

The Apostle John left us some very poignant words when Christ, through him, spoke a triad of love.

John 3:16

This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. (MSG)

I John 3:16

This is how we've come to understand and experience love: Christ sacrificed his life for us. This is why we ought to live sacrificially for our fellow believers, and not just ... for ourselves. (MSG)

John 13:35

This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples - when they see the love you have for each other. (MSG)

In the name of the one God, Creator, Sustainer, and Comforter.

Amen

Luke 14:25-35

Now large crowds were travelling with him; and he turned and said to them, "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. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. 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? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, "This fellow began to build and was not able to finish." Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit

down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

'Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure heap; they throw it away. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'