

Homily for Parishes in the Western Region without clergy

Sunday 8th September 2019, Pentecost 13

Readings: **Jeremiah 18:1-11**
Philemon 1-25

Psalm 139:1-5, 12-18
Luke 14:25-35*

Today we are looking at where our true allegiance lies. Some scripture readings put us on the spot and in today's gospel reading Jesus spells out for us, what the basic requirements are for discipleship. This is a challenging reading as our text begins with two discipleship sayings that require absolute allegiance to Jesus (14:25-27). Then Jesus provides two brief stories or parables to illustrate the importance of "counting the cost" and giving up all for Jesus (14:28-33).

Jesus' first discipleship saying is framed in stark language: "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" (14:25). This saying fits thematically with Luke 12:51-53, where Jesus warns of families being divided over his message. Because Jesus in his person and message requires those who would follow him to answer the ultimate allegiance question, it is not surprising that he may inherently bring family strife.

The language of this particular saying, however, raises concern for many. Does Jesus really call us to hate our biological families and our very lives? Two observations are helpful in this regard. First, Jesus is using exaggerated language here as he does frequently in his teachings (e.g., Matthew 18:8-9). The word translated as "hate," here, means "to love less." This becomes clear when we compare this saying in Luke with its parallel in Matthew (10:37): "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." The first allegiance of the believer must be to Jesus. Jesus is not calling his followers to hate their families in terms of emotional response; instead, he calls for undivided loyalty to himself above family loyalties.

The next saying emphasizes the same point about loyalty. Discipleship is defined by following Jesus and "carrying the cross." This phrase indicates that giving up self-interest and competing loyalties are central to discipleship.

Neither of these sayings of Jesus lend themselves to a "low-cost" form of faith. Instead, they stress the high cost of following Jesus.

The two brief parables that follow illustrate this cost by suggesting two scenarios. The first envisions a landowner building a tower, either for storing produce or guarding land and animals (14:28-30). If the landowner has not estimated how much the tower will cost, it is possible that the project will remain unfinished due to lack of funds. The end result will be ridicule from all who see the unfinished structure.

The second story is about a king who assesses the number of his troops in light of the greater number that his enemy possesses (14:31-32). If he cannot win with the number of soldiers he has, the only wise course will be to negotiate with his enemy long before they meet in battle. Jesus uses these two stories to illustrate the necessity of "counting the cost" of discipleship.

Jesus extols a commitment to finishing the discipleship journey once begun or not beginning it at all. Following Jesus is an all or nothing proposition, it isn't something that can be done half-heartedly.

In this passage, Luke's Jesus calls people to a kind of discipleship that is not cheap, not easy, and not to be entered into without deep consideration of the consequences and costs. This passage speaks to the importance of loyalty and allegiance to Jesus over all other competing loyalties, including family, self-interest, and possessions.

Salvation in Jesus is not merely a transaction. It is, at heart, a covenantal relationship. And no relationship lasts without loyal commitments and actions. Because the one who redeems us also calls us into costly discipleship, Jesus' command to "Follow me" is both gift and demand.

The distinctive qualities of discipleship cannot be self-manufactured. While we must display them, they cannot be created by us. As before in his ministry, Jesus uses salt as a metaphor. Salt was one of the most valued commodities of that time. It was used for seasoning and preserving. However, if salt loses its distinctive character of saltiness, what good is it? When food was bland, one would reach for the saltshaker to give it flavour. But if the salt itself is without flavour, what good is it? Living during a time when there was no refrigeration, it was imperative that the meat necessary for one's diet be preserved. But if the salt was not salty the meat would not be preserved.

As salt without saltiness is useless, those who seek to be disciples unwilling to give Christ priority are not worthy to be called "disciples."

Today's reading from Luke's Gospel speaks about loyalty and allegiance. A way to think of it is this: A lighthouse keeper along a dangerous coast was given enough oil for one month and told to keep the light burning every night. One day, a woman asked for oil so that her children could stay warm. Then a farmer came, needing oil for a lamp so he could study. Still another farmer needed some oil for a tractor, so his fields could be ploughed and planted and his family fed.

The keeper saw each as a worthy request and measured out just enough oil to satisfy all. Near the end of the month, the tank in the lighthouse ran dry. That night the beacon was dark and three ships crashed on the rocks. More than 100 lives were lost. When a government official investigated, the man explained what he had done and why. "You were given one task alone," insisted the official. "It was to keep the light burning. Everything else was secondary."

May we choose to give Jesus priority in our lives this week, and when we lose that focus, may God's Spirit nudge us back on track. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.