First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

9/4/22

It Ain’t Cheap!

Luke 14:25-33

**25**Now large crowds were traveling with him, and he turned and said to them, **26**“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. **27**Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. **28**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? **29**Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, **30**saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ **31**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? **32**If he cannot, then while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. **33**So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

As I was preparing today’s sermon and looking at the various commentaries on the text, the word that almost every commentator immediately jumped to, in order to try and explain what Jesus is actually getting at here, was the word “hate.” It’s an ugly word, for sure, and it conjures up some pretty negative imagery in our twenty-first century minds. That imagery can be fairly benign, as in I hate spinach (that would be me), or I hate cabbage, or I hate the color red. The imagery can be considerably less benign, however, when we use the word to describe less than positive feelings about those of different races, different ethnicities, different religions or different sexual orientations. When we say we hate something or someone, especially when we use it in the context of supporting our own biases, we are using the harshest language available to us, and there’s not a whole lot of room left over for compromise or backtracking, one that word leaves our lips.

Hearing Jesus use the word “hate” is shocking, to say the least. It’s not the language we traditionally associate with the Prince of Peace, and it can be difficult for us to square the use of this word with everything else we know and love about Jesus’s teachings.

So, what the heck are we supposed to make of the use of this particularly harsh language by our Savior? Mitzi J. Smith, a New Testament professor at Columbia Seminary, puts it this way: *I propose that Jesus does not refer to a hate toward family members in the sense of an absence of love, but Jesus is addressing the consequences and sometimes contradictions and challenges that occur when one chooses to follow God, as Jesus does. It is similar to the statement Jesus makes in Luke 16:13: “No household domestic servant can serve two masters; for they will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other.”* Professor Smith goes on to say that, *“…Following God can and sometimes does interfere with putting family above compassion for the most vulnerable in society and above the justice and love of God.”*

We live in a culture that encourages greed over giving, hoarding over sharing, and overabundance, for the sake of overabundance, as a marker of social status. Yet, we are called to put the Gospel above all else; above our love and acquisition of possessions and wealth, above our own selfish wants and needs, and even above our relationships with family and loved ones.

I’ll be the first to admit that these are difficult words to hear, and words that are equally difficult to preach. I love my “things” as much as the next person and hearing that I have to give up all my possessions in order to be a true follower of Jesus, can be a tough pill for me to swallow. And, I’ll also admit, there are times when I find myself bargaining with God on this one. “Hey God, I really could use a new iPhone, what do you think about letting me of the hook and let me skip tithing for a few months?” Or, “Ya know, God, I could really use a vacation right about now, how about I skip that donation to the homeless shelter for a while, do you think they’ll really miss it?”

The fact is, that when I get into bargaining mode, it’s not because my phone doesn’t work or that I really need to fly off to some exotic place to enjoy time off. It’s that I’ve succumbed to what our culture tells me I need in order to be happy.

Jesus asks the crowd to count the cost of following him just as they would count the cost for building a tower. The one who fails to count the cost, cannot complete the building project and will suffer ridicule for his incompetency and shortsightedness (Luke 14:29-30) Further**,** what king would go to battle with insufficient troops? What is the consequence of not counting the cost? Caught with his pants down, so to speak, the king must wave the white flag of surrender long before he reaches the battle line and submit to his enemies on their terms (14:32). These brief parables require that the crowd traveling with Jesus, use their common sense; they do not have to be builders by trade or kings to identify with the stories. The moral of the parables is that not one of them can be Jesus’ disciple *without* giving up all her or his possessions (14:33).

But builders cannot build and kings cannot defend their kingdoms without sufficient resources. So, what is Jesus talking about?

Jesus started this teaching by asserting that his disciples must be willing to hate their family members and life itself, and he ends with telling the crowd that they must relinquish all their possessions. Perhaps Jesus is speaking to a relatively wealthy crowd here. He did just leave a dinner at which the guests were among the upper crust and not the poor or diseased. In the Acts of the Apostles, considered the sequel to Luke’s Gospel, the believing community is encouraged to sell property and contribute the proceeds to the community so that no one among them lives in poverty (Acts 2:45; 4:32). In Luke, Jesus is pleased when the chief tax collector Zacchaeus pledges to give half of his possessions to the poor and to make amends to anyone he has defrauded (Luke 19:1-10).

Jesus’ admonition that the traveling crowds relinquish their possessions (they are not a possession-less people, apparently, but perhaps wealthy) is then, a challenge to reject greed, hoarding, and overabundance for the sake of overabundance and in favor of sharing and the elimination of poverty and its effects.

Jesus understands that there are consequences associated with following him, with conducting one’s life in the way that he does, and he understands that carrying the cross means that one must be willing:

* to champion the cause of the poor;
* to view one’s calling as more expansive than the confines of Temple or church;
* to sometimes buck traditions—and those who view those traditions as infallible;
* to live a life of relative poverty, unwilling to take bribes and to amass wealth on the backs of the oppressed and unaware;
* to struggle for the alleviation of poverty and a living wage for all at the expense of one’s own privilege; and to expand one’s conception of “family” to include neighbors far and near.

Carrying the cross is a daily struggle and the commitment must be renewed every day when confronted with the temptation to lay it down (Luke 9:23-25). Perhaps what Jesus means by hating family is we are to refuse to live by narrow, exclusive ideas of family when it comes to meeting human needs and contributing to the wholeness of all human beings.

It is the Lucan Jesus that tells the parable of the Good Samaritan, expanding the boundaries of neighbor love that transcends religious affiliation, ethnicity, race, and other socially constructed categories (Luke 10:25-37). The one who loves mercy more than life (i.e., the risk-taker for justice) is the one who will extend mercy to the stranger/neighbor in need.

Compassion is not the absence of fear but the overwhelming, undeniable summons to engage in acts of love and justice. If we accept a narrow view of family which values life more than the justice and love of God, we will not take risks for the most vulnerable in society; we will not privilege the justice and love of God above social position, wealth, celebrity, and applause.

So, being a disciple of Jesus ain’t cheap; it comes with a cost that we all should measure very carefully before we take up that cross. If we are not willing to bear the cost of showing mercy to the stranger or the neighbor in need; if we are unable to expand the boundaries of love beyond our own wants and needs or beyond our immediate circle of family and friends, then what’s the point of claiming to be Christian?

We, here at Soda Springs Presbyterian Church, are really good at showing mercy to the stranger, we’re really good at helping our neighbors in need, and we’re really good at showing the love and compassion exemplified by the Good Samaritan story. I’m very proud of what we’ve done and what we continue to do. But it does raise a question. Are we, individually and collectively, doing everything we possibly can to fully shoulder the burden of the Cross? Is there more that we could be doing to expand the boundaries of love and mercy?

If we are not willing to expand on what we already do as a congregation, and as individual followers of Jesus; if we put limits on our compassion, or conditions on who is in and who is out, if we are not willing to pay the price of discipleship, each and every single day then, truly, what is the point of calling ourselves Christian? Something to think about.

AMEN