

## **Pursuing God: Dedicated**

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

Luke 14:25-33

September 8, 2019

Westminster Presbyterian Church

It is Sundays like this, in the past, when the Gospel text has Jesus telling the crowd, that to be his disciples, they must hate their mothers and fathers, wives and children, brothers and sisters, that made me glad I sitting in the congregation and not standing in the pulpit. So, be careful what you ask for, because the discipline of preaching each Sunday and following the lectionary texts, means that more often than not I will have to wrestle with tough texts like this one.

My Bible buddy, Kathy, was sure it was a typo. Jesus, who is God's only Son and who is indeed one with the God who gave the ten commandments, one of which was "honor your father and mother," is surely not doing an about face and commanding that his disciples hate their parents. The shepherd who chastised his disciples for sending the children away, who gathered the little ones to him for a blessing, was surely not now telling the disciples to hate their own children?

I did a brief review of translations to see if the NRSV had it wrong, but the NIV, CEB and even the King James versions all agree, Jesus said, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple." So, I decided I needed to do a little word study with the original Greek. *As if I could do a better translation than generations of Bible translators.* It turns out, according to at least one Bible

scholar, the word used here for “hate”, *miseo*” doesn’t mean anger or hostility, but simply means if one is faced with a choice, one must follow Jesus every time. Furthermore, the biblical scholar claims, Jesus is just employing a the ancient Semitic rhetorical device of hyperbole (exaggeration) to make his point. Pastor and Bible translator, Eugene Peterson, provides the softer translation I am hoping for in his paraphrase The Message Bible, “Anyone who comes to me and refuses to *let go* (Emphasis added) of his mother and father, wife and children, sister and brother.... cannot be my disciple.”

Still, it is a hard word, for us and for the crowd that was following Jesus. They were like the fans in the stands at the many college football games played yesterday. Some were there for the party. Some were there to cheer on their favorite team. Some knew the names of all the players and could quote all the stats. But only eleven guys were on the field playing the game. Eleven guys who were willing to come out for two-a-day practices in the middle of July. Eleven guys who went to bed early when their friends were headed out to frat parties. Eleven guys who had been playing football since little league days. Eleven guys who have probably missed some family vacations and even some family funerals and certainly some family meals, all for the sake of the game.

Jesus is the coach turning to the crowd, saying, “Are you going to sit in the stands or do you want to come play the game? Here is what it takes to go all the way.

It’s a hard word, but not a surprising word for those who had decided to follow Jesus, not just to hear a great story, or to witness an amazing miracle, but to learn from him, to be like him. For when he had called, they left their tax collecting and their fish gathering and their fathers and their mothers, and followed. They

followed Jesus even when the religious authorities questioned him, and the crowds didn't understand him. They followed him. They listened to him. They learned from him.

It's a hard word, but not a surprising word, even for Jesus' mom. For while she still held him in her arms, Simeon had told her, "this child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed... and a sword will pierce your own soul, too." If she were in the crowd that day, she would not be surprised by his words, because he was after all teenager who told his worried parents after they had searched three days for him, "did you not know I would be in my father's house?"

It's a hard word, but not a surprising word, from the Son of God who gave the first commandment, "I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other God's before me." For even loyalty to family may be an idol that stands between us and God, between doing what is proper and doing what Jesus would do.

It is a hard word, but not a surprising word, from the One who was willing to give up his own home, to carry his own cross, to give up even his own life, for the sake of his love for the whole world, sinner and saint, upper cast and outcast, friend and foe.

He asks us, are you going to just wear the tee-shirt? Or are you going to do what it takes to play the game? Are you willing to put me first? To follow me? To do what I do? Choosing to follow my teaching over your devotion to your family, your possessions, your pride, your very life?

I don't know about you, but it is hard for me to step out of the crowd, and say, "Yes, Jesus! I want to join your team." First of all, I'm confused. Isn't my care for

my family one way I show that I am a disciple of Jesus? Second of all, I like my things and I value my reputation. And third, I'm beginning to see where this is all going... what was that you were saying about a cross? It's a lot to swallow in one bite.

Jesus knows, many in the crowd will turn. Shouts of, "hosanna!" will turn to cries of, "crucify!" He knows that even those who left their nets and walked all the way will ask stupid questions, fall asleep praying in the garden, run away when the soldiers come. But he also knows that they will be the ones who will tell the story, feed the sheep, baptize and teach, make more disciples, go to prison for their faith, show up every day to feed someone who can't feed themselves, measure the wood and build the houses, leave their homes to secure the battlefield.

When theologian Henry Nouwen was a child, he dreamed of becoming a priest. His mother made him a little robe and provided him with a miniature pulpit, font and altar. He pretended to baptize and to preach, even to serve communion. When he grew up he did become a priest, and a professor at Notre Dame, Yale Divinity School and Harvard. Then he joined the community at L'Arche, a community of severely disabled people and their companions. Nouwen spent his last decades wearing not the bishop robes his mom had dreamed of and he was certainly capable of, but the pants and sweaters mores suited to his singular devotion to the feeding, washing and caring for his companions and friends at L'Arche.

And who, upon visiting the boyhood home of little MLK in Atlanta, would have imagined that the preacher's son who played on Auburn Avenue would be the man who would write letters to Birmingham church leaders from a jail cell?

A Chinese proverb states, "The journey of 1000 miles begins with one step." Jesus wants his disciples to know what will be required of them, but he also knows it is a task they will take one day at a time.

Jesus tells two stories to illustrate the kind of decision that the crowd of would be disciples has to make. The first story is a building story. "Who among you would start building a tower without first sitting down to figure out how much it will cost?" As the former owner of a 1890s Victorian home who was enamored of its history and dreamy about its potential, this is a story I can relate to. And must confess, I would be the one who would go headlong into a building project without fully figuring the investment of time and money it would take.

My life-long friend, Jack Palmer, shared a bit of building wisdom with us early in our marriage, that we have found almost always to be true. Jack said, "when you have a building project at your home, estimate how long it will take you. Then, double that. Then move it up one degree of time." So, if you think it will take you 3 hours to install that new toilet, it will actually take 6 days.

This truth did not mean that Jack sat on the sofa watching other people build. In fact, Jack is a master builder and home renovator who has spent much of his time and money giving new life to old spaces, and Jack teaches others to do the same, by coming alongside them, when they are courageous enough to lay a new floor or replace an old tub.

Jesus knows the full course of the road ahead of him. He knows the cost of building the household of God, of waging the war against the enemy, and he is ready to go all the way. Keeping his eye on the goal. And he invites us to step out of the crowd and go with him, one step at a time, day by day. Listening to his words. Learning his stories. Seeing who he talks to. Watching what he does. Being his disciples, his students, until we learn to

... welcome the stranger,

... touch the outcast,

... speak up against injustice,

... lay down our pride and even our lives,

... to love our moms and our dads, our sisters and our brothers, our spouses and our children, our neighbors and our friends, and even our enemies as he does.

A friend of mine recently shared that her daughter had given her heart to Jesus. A monumental decision to step out of the crowd and follow the one who gave his heart to her. But that is not a one-time decision. It is a decision that she will make each day and in each moment. McKenzie will make that commitment again and again. When she walks into the lunchroom, she will ask herself, “who would Jesus sit with?” When her parents admonish her to be careful about the company she keeps, she will remember the company that Jesus keeps. When she wakes up on Saturday and wonders whether she will swing a hammer at the Habitat build or go to the mall with her friends. When she writes a letter to her congress woman urging her to vote for compassion over security. This decision to give her

heart to Jesus is one that might one day dismay her mother, as much as it makes her proud today. It is a decision that as she makes it again and again, day by day, step by step, will shape her into the image of the one she follows, her teacher, the one who laid down his life for her.

The teacher invites us out of the crowd and into a life-long learning opportunity. He promises, that the road ahead will not be easy and there will be many detours to pick up lost sheep, and do things your momma might not approve of, and your boss might think is foolish, and the authorities might say is dangerous. But also Jesus promises he will be with us all the way, helping us to know the next right thing to do, answering our questions (even the stupid ones), forgiving our missteps, bearing our shame, and welcoming us at last into the joy of his kingdom. For he is the one of whom the Psalmist was speaking, when he wrote, “you hem me in, behind and before... I come to the end and you are still with me.”

Amen.