

Sermon Draft

Text: Luke 14:25–35

Sermon: “Christ First”

Most people picture Jesus as a calm, nonthreatening, warm fellow. The kind of person you like the first time you meet. He doesn't get ruffled or easily agitated. However, this is not the picture of Jesus in Luke 14, at first glance. In last Sunday's Gospel Jesus said, ***“Anyone who exalts himself will be humbled.”*** Then this week he cranks up the pressure with the shocking statement, ***“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple”*** (v 26). A call to hate the very people we were created to love is jarring. It gets our attention, just as it was meant to get the attention of the crowds gathered around Jesus.

Some would say that Jesus' call to discipleship in Luke 14 is a little radical. Not able to stand the tension of the text, we might be tempted to explain away the tension. Rather than dodge the tension, I want to challenge you to allow the tension to do what it's supposed to do: bring our daily lives in alignment with our faith life. Sometimes when we have a pain in our hip, our lower leg, or our shoulder, a chiropractor, with some pushing, twisting, and pulling, brings our spine back into alignment, and the pain goes away. The pushing and pulling is the tension of our text. What we believe and what we live can get out of alignment. Living in the tension of this text brings us the alignment we need. We discover that living Christ's call to discipleship means giving up everything for Him.

Our text begins with the statement that large crowds were gathered around Jesus. It's important to note Jesus is not talking to the disciples. He's talking to masses that followed him, pressing in, not because they wanted to be involved, but because they wanted to watch the action. They're interested but not committed so Jesus issues this shocking ultimatum: ***"Hate your father and mother, give up everything you have, take up your cross and follow me."*** In other words, the life we are called to live in Christ necessitates our active and uncompromising participation.

The crowd has been just passive spectators to the kingdom of God. It's time for them to wake up and join the mission. Discipleship is not a spectator sport. It demands participation. It is both costly and active.

The cost of discipleship can be shocking to our ears as we hear Jesus say, ***“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.”***

The call to discipleship is a call to hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters. While it’s clear that Jesus is speaking in hyperbole and not literally, we shouldn’t take the statement lightly.

In Luke 16:13, Jesus clarifies his reason for using the term “hate.” He says, ***“No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”***

That's what it looks like when we faithfully follow Jesus. It looks like living out our faith, sharing the Gospel, and defending the truth, even when the rest of the family or friends aren't, even asking us to tone it down. Faithfully following Jesus is standing up and speaking out the Gospel truth, even when we fear the consequences. Now discipleship is not the same thing as acting like a jerk, being rude, judgmental, or condescending. Our most effective weapon in the kingdom of God is love.

We can't shout people into heaven, but we can't remain passive and silent and expect them to wake up to the truth. The call of discipleship is costly, and today is the day to wake up and start living by boldly speaking the truth about our Savior to those who do not know Jesus.

Yes, it feels safe to have one foot on the dock and one foot in the boat. You don't want to miss the fun of a journey, so we tentatively step one foot into the boat. But if the boat starts to go crazy, we're not fully committed; we can always get back on the dock. That is, until the boat starts moving—creeping away from the dock. At that moment we realize that having one foot on the dock and one in the boat is the absolute worst position to be in. The moment of choosing has past. Now we have one choice, though it's not really a choice. Our only option is a very wet future. Following Jesus is like that. We cannot have one foot anchored in the things this world values and another foot anchored in the things that God values.

God makes it clear that the cost of discipleship is not just surrender of our family. Jesus calls us to surrender everything. ***“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.”***

As with our relationships, Jesus is not calling us literally to give away everything we have and to hate living. He is calling us to view all of God’s good gifts from the steward’s perspective. If I’m the owner, the well-being of my property and my relationships is dependent on my work and my diligence. This means my focus is on my stuff. I’m not focused on the things of God. By surrendering ownership to Jesus, I manage and care for his good gifts, but I know that their safety and well-being are in God’s hands, not mine.

This way of thinking aligns our priorities with God's priorities: people before stuff, eternal before temporal. It also releases us from the anxiety and stress we can experience because of our stuff. While the cost of discipleship can be shocking to our ears, the activity of discipleship would have been terrifying to the hearers in the crowd. Luke 14 is the call to carry our cross. Jesus continues, ***"Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple"*** (v 27).

Imagine what this challenge must have sounded like to the crowd. Jesus is not calling them to a metaphor; people were literally being crucified along the roads between their towns for being insurrectionists. A call to carry the cross was a call to live life as if judgment had already been passed and now each step they took was a step that brought them nearer to the place of their execution.

This was the worst possible death known at that time, and now this kind, loving Rabbi is telling them that to follow him is to choose such a death? While the challenge may be uncomfortable for us, it must have been terrifying for the crowd.

So what do we do with the anxiety and tension, with this radical call to follow Jesus? Living in the tension begins with understanding the true source of the tension. Jesus' call is not the source of the tension; our sin is. We were created to walk with God, without distraction or compromise. Remember in Genesis, before the fall of humanity into sin, how Adam and God walked together in the garden in the cool of the day? It is sin that pits two loves against each other. It is our weakness that drives us to love one and hate the other. Rather than blaming Christ for setting impossibly high standards, blame our sinful, broken lives that have made our separation from God seem normal.

Yet, the tension we feel in this challenge is a good thing. We rejoice that our life in Christ rests upon his perfect love, undivided devotion, and unwavering sacrifice. Jesus did what we could not do. Through his death on the cross, he defeated sin and conquered the grave. This victory and new life he gives to us as a gift. For in Baptism, our old nature was drowned, and we have been given new life in the Spirit (Romans 6:1–11). In this new life, by the Spirit, we find the will and the strength to follow Jesus with undivided attention and unwavering conviction of our life as a living sacrifice to God.

We rejoice knowing that the tension we feel is a reminder of the new life we have in Christ. Heaven is our home. Because of our new life in Christ, we are strangers in this world. If we were not born again through water and the Word, we would care little about Christ's call. We would not feel the tension.

That we feel the tension is a reminder that we have new life in Christ, and that new life, like a new patch of cloth sewn to an old garment, is tugging at the seams of our old life.

We can rejoice because we were created to answer this call, to live lives focused on God, our Creator. Discipleship without singular focus, without sacrifice, without death—death to self and death to the flesh—is like salt that is no longer salty. ***“Salt is good,” Jesus says, “but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile”*** (vv 34–35a). It serves no purpose and offers no benefit. It is time for us to stop sleepwalking through life, being passive spectators of the work of the kingdom of God.

As Jesus turned to the crowds in the text, he now turns to us, not to put a burden on our shoulders but to invite us to set free the life given to us in Baptism by focusing our life on following Jesus without fear of consequence or challenge.

Today, Jesus calls us with unflinching clarity to take up a life of unwavering devotion to him and his kingdom mission, to surrender all as we take up our cross to follow him.

Amen