

"Total Commitment"
Luke 14:25-33

September 8, 2019

13th Sunday After Pentecost

Remember when sports were just games? In the summer time, kids played softball or baseball. In the fall, kids played football or volleyball. In winter, kids played basketball. Kids practiced some, but most of the fun was in playing the game against nearby schools and teams. Ah, those innocent days are over and seem to have taken place many years ago.

Today's youth sports are different. They require total commitment. Many kids begin, at an early age, of focusing in on one sport alone. They will endure many hours of practice to hone their skills, some of which will be late at night or very early in the morning. They will do extra conditioning and weightlifting exercises to bulk up and be more fit. They will join elite traveling teams and go all over the state and country to play basketball, football, bowl, golf, and other sports. They will miss out on family vacations and family times for the sake of the sport. They will be tired and sore and sleeping much of the time. For many of them, all of their extra money will go to buy equipment, pay entrance fees, and other such stuff. They will be totally committed to their sport and we respect and admire them for that.

Yet all of this self-sacrifice, intensity, hard labor, financial costs, and so on is done to gain something that doesn't last – enjoyment, success, happiness, and, for a very very few, wealth should they go professional. What if we expected such total commitment for the one thing that does last and last forever: our relationship with Jesus Christ as His disciples? How do you think that would go over? Experience shows that it has been rejected

We have such a weak view of biblical discipleship. We think it means believing in Jesus (or believing in God) in the sense that we acknowledge His existence. (Of course, the Bible says that the devil believes in God, too, but that's another story.) After baptism, it means coming to Sunday school while you're young, being confirmed when you are in middle school, and being listed on the church membership rolls. Attending "practice" (learning about your faith and Savior in Bible study) is seen as optional after your confirmed. Participate in the "game" (Divine worship) is equally optional. As far as loving God and serving your neighbor goes, it becomes very sporadic.

Yet should anyone question your discipleship, you would likely be insulted. You would protest and say, "But I believe in Jesus!" On the basis of that vague confession, a ceremony in you went through in 8th grade, and the bookkeeping detail of having your name on the membership list, you would be labeled as a disciple of Jesus Christ. The fact that the level of your commitment to Christ, were it to be displayed in the sporting world, would get you kicked off the team, doesn't really matter. You're just being a good Christian boy or girl, woman or man, in today's modern world.

This is why we don't know what to make of the Gospel lesson for today. It's the kind of text that preachers take a look at and then say, "I think I'll preach on the epistle today." But I didn't choose that option because Jesus has many important words for us to hear. Jesus' words for us today are very hard. We can ignore them at our own peril. We can reinterpret them so they fit what we are already doing. Or, we can actually respond to Jesus' call to discipleship as He desires.

Jesus is calling for total commitment in our lives of discipleship. I would submit that what He says, is not much different than the total commitment we ask for in sports. However, while we admire such commitment to sports, we feel that total commitment to Christ is

unreasonable or not necessary since we have been saved by God's grace through faith and not of ourselves. We think the Gospel means that we are free to do nothing. That is a lie of Satan.

The first point in Jesus' requirements for discipleship is the one most troubling to us. Jesus calls us to "hate" our parents, our spouse, our children, and our siblings in order to be His disciple. If we do not hate, Jesus says such a person cannot be His disciple. The word, hate, disturbs us because Jesus is always preaching love.

Of course, Jesus is not calling us to hate anyone. It is like when someone says, "I've told you 1 million times to do that." You don't reply and say, "No, you didn't. You only told me 27 times, not 1 million." Of course the point being made is that you have been told many times to do something, not a precise number of how many times you were told to do something.

The point in Jesus' words here is that our love for Jesus is to be so huge, intense, and unwavering that our love for the people in our lives should appear to be hate in comparison, not that you should actually hate anyone. That's an awful strong love for Jesus to which we have been called.

The second point in Jesus' requirements for discipleship is bearing one's cross. We hear the phrase "bearing one's cross" so often that it doesn't impact us like it would have impacted the people at Jesus' time. We hear it metaphorically, but they heard it literally. Jesus was traveling on the road to Jerusalem in order to be nailed to a cross. He said that those who follow Him would bear their cross, go after Him, and suffer the same fate – death. This is essentially a call to suffer and die.

The third point in Jesus' requirements for discipleship (and it comes at the end of the account) is renouncing all possessions. This doesn't necessarily mean giving away all possessions, but claiming no hold on them nor allowing them to have a hold on us. This is very difficult for us since we live in a very materialistic society where electronic toys, phones, computers, and other things are so important in our lives that we don't think we can do without them. Yet Jesus calls us, as part of following Him, to let those things go.

I think most of us would like to ignore Jesus' words here or pretend that they don't apply to us today. Or, we would like to give them a watered-down interpretation so that they mean something which is not inconvenient for us. However, Jesus' words are to be taken at face value and do apply to us now.

Naturally, all of these things which Jesus calls us to do in order to be His disciples are difficult. We love our families and the thought of loving anyone else more (especially so that our love for our family seems like hate) is unfathomable. We will allow our families to influence and dictate our behavior, even to the point of disobeying God and we won't think anything of it. For example, I've heard so many people say that they couldn't be in Divine Worship because they had family visiting. My question is, "Why not bring them along to Divine Worship?"

Suffering is universally regarded as something bad to be avoided. There are many in the religious community who like to promise you freedom from suffering if you simply follow Jesus. Jesus says follow me and you will increase your suffering. Therefore, people will avoid teachers who tell them anything about suffering being a part of life as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Accumulating wealth and possessions is a normal part of life in America in the 21st century. Christians are not free from that pressure and influence. For Jesus to say that we

must renounce all claim upon these possessions seems unreasonable and something we certainly don't want to do.

But Jesus is saying here that it is He who sets the agenda for discipleship, not us. You and I are not free to ignore or change the requirements simply because we don't like them. You and I are not free to say that, if Jesus asks us to do something in His Word, we will not do it. We cannot say, "I'll love people, but I'll never love anybody more than my family." We are not free to say, "I'll follow you, Jesus, but if it inconveniences me, hurts me, or causes me to suffer then I'm out of here." We cannot say, "I will give a steady offering for the Lord's work in this congregation, but I will not renounce all that I have. I will continue to enjoy and accumulate toys for myself."

Jesus' response to anyone's refusal to abide by these requirements for discipleship is stunning. He does more than say, "You are not my disciple." He says, "You cannot be my disciple." According to Jesus' own words about discipleship, there are many people in various Christian congregations, including this one, who are not Jesus' disciples, even though they think they are. And if they are not Jesus' disciples, then they are apart from Him and will not go to heaven.

Jesus is saying here that there is no such thing as a part-time disciple, an occasional follower of Jesus, or a Sunday morning Christian. You are either "all in" or, by definition, "all out." There is no compromise or exemption. Jesus is requiring total commitment, something we think is good when it comes to sports, our career, or our children, but think is not necessary when it comes to our relationship with God.

Do you love Jesus so much that love for other people, even those closest to you, seems to be hate in comparison? Are you willing to bear the cross of suffering, even death, for the sake of Jesus Christ? Can you renounce and give up, if necessary all that you have for the sake of following Jesus? If not, you do not have the total commitment which Jesus demands.

You may feel like the disciples did after Jesus said, "How difficult it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven." They replied, "Lord, then who can be saved?" After Jesus' words about discipleship, you may be saying to yourself, "Lord, then who can be a disciple? It's simply impossible. No one can be totally committed like that."

But Jesus is not asking you to lead under such circumstances. He is calling you to follow the only One to be totally committed to the will of God, namely Himself. Jesus is calling you and me to do only that which He has done; to bear only what he has borne for us; and to renounce only what He is renounced for us.

Jesus loved you and me so strongly and so intently that any other love You might have would seem like hatred in comparison. His family relationships here on earth took a backseat to doing the will of the Father in order to save us. You may recall the incident when Jesus' mother and brothers came to talk to Jesus and expected Him to see them immediately. But Jesus did not go out to them but continued to preach and teach. He said "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." (Matthew 12:48-50)

Jesus renounced everything that He had. Not only did Jesus renounce the glory He shared with His Father from all eternity in order to become a slave for us, Jesus renounced every thing which he possessed on earth. You may recall him one saying, "Foxes have holes and birds have nests but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." His only possession

in the world was the seamless tunic which he wore and even that was taken from Him by the soldiers who crucified Him.

Jesus did not simply bear the cross. He was crucified and suffered and died on the cross. As He spoke these words about discipleship, Jesus was on the road traveling to the cross waiting for him in Jerusalem. Suffering was not a possibility for Jesus. It was an inevitability. Let us not think that this was something easy for Jesus to do because He is God and difficult for us because we are people. Jesus' suffering is far greater than any suffering there has ever been, both in its intensity and magnitude.

Jesus knew this and hoped there was another way. In the garden, he prayed, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done." Jesus endured the suffering out of His great love for you and me. He did it, not because it was easy but because it was hard; not because it helped Him but because it helped you. In order to fulfill the Father's will to save us, Jesus suffered.

We may be overwhelmed when we consider the path Jesus took in order to save us: by His perfect life in our place; His sacrificial death on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins; and His triumphal resurrection from the dead to conquer death and give eternal life. We may think our only hope is to imitate Him. But that's the point. The reason Jesus blazed this trail is because we could not. Our only hope in being a disciple of Jesus (that is, going the same place as Jesus and doing the same thing as Jesus) is by clinging to Him.

It means being where Jesus has promised to be – in the midst of His people gathered together in His name. It means receiving what Jesus wants to give – His Word and Sacraments for the forgiveness of our sins, the strengthening of our faith, and the increasing of our resolve to follow Him. It also means to renounce any claim to the things of this world, including family, a comfortable lifestyle, and the material things of this world. Love for these things can only slow us down or lead us away from Jesus.

Living the life of discipleship does not mean hiding in the desert or cutting herself off from the world. Jesus says we are in the world but not of the world. Rather, it involves a whole new sense of priorities. There is nothing wrong with loving our family and other people. God has commanded us to "love your neighbor as you love yourself." He has given more than half of his 10 Commandments to that responsibility. However, our love for God is to be far greater than love for any individual here on earth.

The life of discipleship means accepting suffering. It does not mean seeking out suffering or imposing suffering on ourselves. However, when called upon to suffer for bearing witness to the truth of Christ in word or deed, we do not run from it.

As far as possessions go, let them not get in the way of following Christ. Possess things in order that you might serve God. Do not let things possess you or control you. Renounce any claim or hold they have on you. Rejoice in what God blesses you with, but do not regret things which are taken from you.

Total commitment is something we we admire and praise it when we see it in our favorite athletes, but which we ignore, reject, or explain away when Jesus calls us to it in following Him. But our sinful nature does not have to win. Thanks be to God for the total commitment shown by Jesus Christ in blazing the trail which leads through life, past death, into eternal life. By His total love for us, His complete renunciation of the things of this world, and by His action of bearing the cross, suffering and dying on the cross, and winning for us forgiveness, life, and salvation, we are called to be disciples, shown the way to be disciples, and empowered, strengthened, and enabled to be disciples. Follow Him – totally. Amen