

September 8, 2013

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 14.25-33

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

The Rev'd Noelle York-Simmons, associate rector

The author of the Gospel according to Luke was a good and elegant storyteller. Luke understood the art of telling a story. He situated his narratives and gave them a beginning, middle and end. Luke has complete scenes, full characterizations and motivations that we can sympathize with. In these ways, Luke is often considered the easiest of the Gospels to read.

Luke was a skilled writer of Greek. He was probably a Gentile, but was very familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures and also of Jewish practices. His intimate descriptions of illnesses and maladies have caused some to theorize that Luke was a physician and thus, not a member of the elite class, but of the artisan class, as physicians were in the day.

And while we priests are probably not supposed to say things like this, Luke is my favorite of the Gospels. Some of that favoritism is because of his great narrative ability, some of it is because of his excellent grasp of and use of language.

But even more important than that, Luke is my favorite because of his theology. All of the Gospels and Epistles point to Jesus as Son of God, Lord and Savior. But each has its own way of getting there, and its own take on Jesus' ministry and place in the world. In Luke, Jesus refers to himself as "Son of Man" a whopping 25 times. Luke is also the only one of the synoptic Gospellers--Matthew Mark and Luke-- to call Jesus "Savior".

This is telling, these two titles that Luke emphasizes. Both Son of Man and Savior are relational titles that relate directly to us, humankind.

And Luke emphasizes this human-to-God relational quality of Jesus over and over and over in his Gospel. He opens the question of this relationship with a bang, when Jesus is still in his mother Mary's womb, as she cries "My soul magnifies the Lord!" and describes God's interactions with humankind as miraculous and life altering: he lifts up the lowly, casts down the mighty, filled the hungry with good things.

God, for Luke, is very close and directly influential. God is deeply concerned with the well-being of his created beloved, especially those that human society has pushed to and outside the margins. Luke is our social justice Gospel. And for Luke, God's concern for the least, the lost and the lonely is answered in the person and presence of Jesus Christ, Son of Man and Savior.

For the last couple of weeks, we have been reading some really difficult pieces of Luke, specifically, Luke's call to discipleship. The cost of discipleship, for Luke, is directly related to the benefit received. The benefit is very high, and so the cost is, too.

Some of Jesus' instructions, about hating family members, I believe we can take as a bit of hyperbole for our day and age, but when we situate the texts in their own day and age, it was serious instruction. Jesus was concerned with folks who were trying to hide their faith in a time when being a Christian was costly. He was warning against secretly coming to church then going home and renouncing Christ in order to keep peace in a family that didn't also believe.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is reminding his followers that they can't have it both ways. There is no room for discipleship as a secret. There is no point to Christianity half-lived.

In this morning's reading, that lesson continues. Not only are we encouraged to hate those people that we hold closest to our hearts, we are further bidden to take up our crosses in order to prove our devotion.

The cost of discipleship, in Luke, is very, very high.

For all of his skills as a writer and storyteller, Luke is not a very good salesman. Luke is clearly not concerned with making this whole Christian discipleship thing sound appealing.

As I said, in our pluralistic world today, I think that Jesus' call in Luke to hate father and mother, spouse and kids is a little hyperbolic. It is not as likely that one need be prepared to be cast out of one's family for religious belief.

But we do need to be prepared to make some pretty drastic room in order to be practicing Christians in the world. In order to be followers of Christ, we need to clear out the stuff that gets in the way.

Because once we make the commitment to hoist that cross up onto our shoulders, there's not a whole lot more room to carry anything else.

When our arms are full of cross, there's not really any room to carry around a burden of self-pity. When we are carrying a cross, we don't really have room for lugging around homophobia, bigotry, racism or xenophobia. When we've picked up a cross, we will likely need a trustworthy community to rely upon when the load gets just too great to bear, when we need a break. With our arms and hearts and minds full of cross, we no longer have the room in our lives for those things that get in the way of a journey for justice, mercy and Gospel.

For many years I resisted the idea of taking up a cross. The notion, along with "well, that's my cross to bear" seemed shallow to me, almost as if it devalued the very real, very weighty, very deadly cross that Jesus bore, uncomplainingly.

In recent years, I've been rethinking cross-carrying, mostly in light of what I've mentioned, that when we are full of cross, we are empty of the other junk that gets in the way of a life of lived fully for Christ. When we are full of cross, we have to make very careful, deliberate decisions about what else we will take on, the weight of that cross on

our backs a constant reminder that life is precious, life is holy, life is worth taking seriously and living to its fullest. When we are lugging around a cross, it is awfully hard to blend in and-- I dare say-- it becomes less and less important to us to try.

When we carry our crosses, that is, when we really decide to be disciples, the world gets reordered. The Body of Christ takes precedence and there are very few excuses that stand a chance under that weight.

There are all kinds of ways we can dress this up. There are all kinds of spins we can put on this, to try to make discipleship look like a breeze if only you sign on the dotted line. But Luke is unwilling to do that, and so am I.

Jesus, my friends, was more concerned with disciples that were prepared, that knew what they were getting into, that had studied and thought and prayed. He wanted disciples that would be in it for the long haul rather than those who would show up for a day then flitter away distracted.

Yesterday morning, I reminded the parents and Godparents of these of those to be baptised this morning that we here at All Saints' take baptismal vows very seriously. I reminded them that in a couple of minutes we all together will do all in our power to support these little ones in their life in Christ.

I reminded them that in order for us to fulfill that promise, they'd need to show up. And I'm reminding you, too. In order to fulfill your baptismal vows and the vows we will make on behalf of these tiny ones, and the tiny ones we've baptised for generations, you have to show up, too, to make this a community that reflects God's goodness, to make this a community of all sorts, to make this a community that gives and gives and gives so that there will be something holy here when you need to rest and take.

This is all discipleship. The cost is high, but the benefit is greater. God has made sure of that.