

Sermon for Sunday, September 4, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

It's a troublesome passage,
the gospel reading for today,
Jesus at his most outrageous and challenging.
Hate your parents,
give up all your possessions,
what on earth
was Jesus thinking?

Certainly he wasn't trying
to persuade people to join him.
In fact, it seems quite the opposite.
Which seems strange,
given that the things we seem to hear most often from his lips
is "Follow me."

So what do we do
with a reading like this?

I think that this is one of those times
when it's helpful
to hear the reading in context.
Because when you listen to what comes
beforehand,
Jesus' words
it begins to make
at least a little
more sense.

Chapter 14 in the gospel of Luke
begins with Jesus
healing yet another person
on the Sabbath,
to the consternation of the religious authorities.
But they were still intrigued enough with him
to invite him to dinner,
and it was there that he spoke the words

that we heard last week,
about where you choose to sit
when you're a guest at dinner,
and that slightly uncomfortable saying
that those who exalt themselves
will be humbled
and those who humble themselves
will be exalted.

And then, between last week's gospel and this one,
Jesus told a parable,
one that's also recorded
in the gospel according to Matthew,
about a wealthy man giving a great feast
and inviting all his friends and neighbors.
But one by one
they began to make excuses.

One
had just bought a piece of land,
and decided that it was more important
to go inspect it
than to come to the feast;
another
had bought some oxen
and wanted to see
how well they worked together;
another
had just got married
and his mind was on other things
than feasting.

And so the man giving the feast called his servants.
"The food is ready, but all the guests have cancelled.
I don't want to waste it.
Go out, and find me some guests,
anyone
who will come.
Search in the streets
for people who could do with a good meal.
Invite people who are struggling, or disabled,

or just don't often get to have
a fancy
meal.

Don't just look in the usual places; go as far as you need to go
to find people for my feast!"

Jesus told that parable
while they were all
sitting at the fancy dinner
put on by the religious leaders.
And you can imagine the conversation that followed.

And it wasn't long
before
the news spread out into the streets.

And the crowds began to build,
people clamoring to hear this visitor
who turned everything society holds dear
upside down,
and who invited the people
that no one wanted to invite
to join him.
And that's when
he spoke the words
that we read
today.

Let me read it to you again.

"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. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. 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? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' 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? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a

delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.”

It's shocking
this short speech of Jesus's.
Talking about hating your family
and carrying you cross,
as gloving away your possessions.

But let's start
with the part that does make more sense,
the part in the middle.

Because of course,
that sounds
eminently sensible.
In fact, we wish the real estate speculators of the last decade
had paid more attention to Jesus.
Who would plan to build a tower
without estimating the cost
and making sure he could afford it?

And perhaps a few governments
should pay attention to Jesus's next example.
Who would go to war
without assessing
whether they have the firepower
to win?

In both cases,
Jesus expects his hearers, and us along with them, to say,
“No one!”
It's common sense.

It's common sense
to make sure you can afford to build the building, common sense
to make sure you have a chance
at winning
the war.
Don't start something

that you can't finish.

But what if the thing you are starting
isn't a building or a war
but following Jesus?

And that's where his examples come in.

"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.
Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.
None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."

Of course he's overstating things.

This is hyperbole: Jesus is exaggerating
to make his hearers - and us - pay attention.

The crowds have been following him,
but for many of them, they are just there to see the latest miracle, to hear him
bait the religious leaders.

But really following him,
taking him seriously
and choosing him
isn't just a matter of jumping on the bandwagon.

It means
a total change
in priorities.

If your family is your highest priority
it will have to take second place
to Jesus.

If being thought successful is your highest priority
it will have to take second place
to Jesus.

If having lots of things is your highest priority
it will have to take second place
to Jesus.

To follow Jesus
is to put Jesus first.
Before everything
else.

And those are tough words
for us to hear.
Because we tend to think of our faith
as just one part
of our lives,
one of the things
that we juggle and balance and try to fit in.

But what Jesus says
is that our faith, our following him,
is at the very center, the very core
of our lives.
Everything else
is secondary.

Following Jesus
isn't just something that you can choose lightly.
You need to be aware
of what it will cost;
you need to be
prepared.

You see, on the one hand,
Jesus, like the man who put on the great feast,
welcomes everyone to follow him;
on the other hand
he wants them to know
that this isn't for everyone.

He's not interested
in people who make great promises
or public professions.
He's interested
in those who have thought about this deeply,
and are willing to do
whatever it takes.

Remember that other parable he told,
the one about the man who had two sons,

and asked them to do something for him?

The first one said,

“Sure. Right away.”

And then did nothing.

The second one said,

“No. Can’t be bothered.”

And then changed his mind,

and went ahead

and did what his father had asked him.

And, Jesus asked, which one did what his father wanted?

Obviously the second one.

Because all the promises in the world

are of no value

if you don’t follow through.

And here Jesus is saying to the crowds,

Following me might sound great. But think it through. Are you really willing to do what it might take?

Especially if

what it might take

is everything.

It seems

incredibly demanding.

Far beyond

what any of us

might be willing to do.

And yet here we have Jesus asking it of us.

So what do we do?

Perhaps another way to think of it is this.

Jesus has incredible gifts to give us.

But it’s really hard for us to take hold of them

if our hands

are too full.

Sometimes

we need to put something down

or hold it a little less tightly.

Sometimes
we need to make space
for Jesus
at the very center
of our lives.

And what so many people have found who have done that
is that the other stuff works out.

You don't actually have to hate your family. In fact,
your family life may be fuller and richer
in the light of Christ's love.

You don't have to give up the things you do best and hunt round for things that are
burdensome.

Instead, recognize that God is the one who created you,
and learn to use your gifts in Christ's service.

You don't necessarily have to throw away all your possessions,
but remember that God has blessed you with what you have.

Don't be greedy. Use what you have wisely, in ways that will help to bring about
God's kingdom on earth.

Follow me, says Jesus.
It will be costly.
But it will also be
an incredible blessing.
Follow me.