

Pentecost 13C, Proper 18. Luke 14:25-33. September 8, 2019.

What is at stake today of course isn't really who we should hate. The entirety of Jesus' life and teachings lets us put that concern away pretty much immediately. The issue at stake in this text is where we put our trust. The Collect for today helps us see this: Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts; for, as you always resist the proud who confide in their own strength, so you never forsake those who make their boast of your mercy. Where do we put our ultimate trust? To what or whom are we willing to trust our lives? For what or whom are we willing to give our lives?

These two mini-parables, about building a tower and going to war, make it easy to miss something about this string of requirements for discipleship. To be a disciple, Jesus tells the crowd to hate their families and even their own lives and to carry an instrument of torture. And then, "therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." Without the mini-parables, the string goes: hate your family, carry a cross, and give up all of your possessions. This is a surprising continuity for us, with our modern, more sentimental view of family as a sphere of feelings. But for Luke's first audience, prominent meanings of the family would have also included the family as an economic unit and the family as a foundation in a social structure of honor. A major part of your relationship with your family would have related to your basic security in the world. Your possessions and your family were intimately linked—they together told you who you were and told everyone your place in society. Here they are obstacles to discipleship not because they are bad in themselves, but because they are potential rivals to God for where we put our ultimate trust.

We can take it as a given that Jesus is not trying to teach us who to hate. But that doesn't mean that these are easy sayings. Indeed, the whole point is to emphasize that the way of Jesus is hard. Earlier in this chapter, Jesus has been spoiling a dinner party by making a big theological point out of everything, and now he suddenly finds himself surrounded by large crowds eager to follow him. Perhaps they are anti-Emily Post fanatics won over by the disastrous dinner party Jesus is leaving. It is these eager potential disciples who prompt these dire sayings.

You won't find them in any church growth manuals. We don't put them on the promotional material, though I suspect that they could be really useful in youth confirmation classes. But at least there is no false advertising here. The way of Jesus is the way to Easter joy and God's great belly laugh of love and victory, but it goes through Good Friday. And as long as the world is so damned and blessedly ambivalent, as long as we are ruled by cowards and sinners, the life of love is always going to have a door open for martyrdom.

If we ever have the guts and grace to live like Jesus then there's every reason to think that we might die like Jesus. And we might as well follow Jesus' example of being upfront that while most of us won't face that fate, that is what we sign up for at baptism: to follow God's love wherever it leads, even if it's into conflict with the murderous rulers of the age. We may not all have to lose our families, possessions, and lives, but Jesus asks us to be willing to.

I don't know what became of this crowd who were ready to follow before they heard what the cost of discipleship is. Luke just skips ahead, without telling us how many disperse and how many continue with Jesus up the road to Jerusalem. But I hope that some of them came with him, just as I hope that many of us will keep following him as he makes his way through the world, healing and teaching and confronting the powers. Because underneath these hard sayings, that tell the truth about the cost of discipleship, there is also an invitation into a more truthful life.

Jesus doesn't demand our ultimate trust just because he's needy. He demands it because he knows that we are so likely to put it in places that cannot sustain it. In this passage from Luke, he highlights family and possessions—the things that secured a social status for his listeners. The things that make us feel secure and sort of independent. Or at least, dependent only on those things we think that we can control. That same list written for us might look a little different. We would perhaps say social class, wealth, whatever privilege we've managed to inherit or acquire. Or then, other things in which we place our trust, in a more aspirational vein: our own expertise, our charm, our ambition, a political party, the nation itself.

None of these things have to be bad in themselves for them to be too small. And the unfashionable word for an object of ultimate trust that is too small is an idol. Now, I know, we're getting very old-fashioned here, with a sermon about martyrdom and idolatry. But that which holds our trust also carries our hope. And the hopes of the way of Jesus are as big as they come. Our hope is that love will conquer death and its allies and that the reign of God will come and upend the world. Our hope is that everyone will be redeemed including our enemies. Our hope is that God can make even us into saints who somehow participate in God's loving redemption of the world. And for hopes as big as these, in a world as sideways as this one, only God will do to hold our trust. These things that prop us up in the world are often good, but they cannot carry us on the path of Jesus. For that, our trust must be in nothing less than the radical love of God.