

Proper 18C 2019 SSP

St. Luke 14:25-33

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Let's begin with the harsh and I assume if you're with me the off-putting statements by Jesus in today's Gospel, about the necessity to hate one's parents and family and indeed one's own life in order to be his disciple.

For starters, the statement is softened somewhat in Saint Matthew, where Jesus says his disciples cannot love parents and family more than they love him in order to be his disciples. Secondly, Jesus is not speaking of emotions; he speaks of priorities. He is saying that the Kingdom of God is about life, and to choose it means putting all other good things on a lower level. For example, as in he who would save his life will lose it; and he who loses his life for my sake and the Gospel's will save it. Third, when you add up all the other things Jesus said, you gain still more perspective; namely that Jesus is putting the Kingdom of God first and foremost – as in Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and then all these (other) things shall be added unto you. I hope this helps, because it's the only way I can understand these hard sayings.

Then Jesus goes further on, speaking of counting the cost of being a disciple. He uses the example of building a tower and not being able to finish. Or facing an adversary in war, and not having enough strength to prevail. In other words, when we choose to be Jesus's disciples, we need to see if we are prepared to pay the price and go the distance.

So I think what we are faced with today is really the question of sticking to our discipleship and persevering. About a decade or more ago, a classmate of mine from Yale Divinity School, a Presbyterian minister, did a survey of his classmates who had entered parish

ministry at graduation (Class of 1971) and were still in it. Most YDS graduates at that time did not go into parish ministry, perhaps a quarter to a third of us did. My classmate's question was, After all these, nearly forty, years, what has sustained you? I answered immediately that there were two things, God and Nancy Mead.

Let's just say the Nancy Mead part was her unstinting faith and support of my calling from the first day until now. Then the God part I unpacked into four categories: Holy Communion on Sundays and Major Holy Days, daily Morning and Evening Prayer, tithing my pledge to Christ through the Church, and Sacramental Confession. Though I'm an Anglo-Catholic and my old friend is a Presbyterian, he understood me at once. Each of these categories are applicable across denominations and, I would add, are not confined to the clergy exclusive of lay people.

Holy Communion keeps us sacramentally in touch with Jesus. Morning and Evening Prayer keeps Bible-reading, Psalm-saying and daily prayer alive, pledging keeps God involved where our treasure and priorities are, and self-examination/confession keeps our repentance up to date. These comprise the "God" part of what has sustained me in the faith and ministry. One keeps the faith over the long haul through such means of grace.

Our church is a long-haul church. The Book of Common Prayer and the traditions of the Episcopal Church and Anglican Communion, all part of the catholic tradition of Christianity, are designed to help individuals and congregations go the distance.

But in all this there can be a danger. If you pay attention to the language of the liturgy and the Prayer Book, you can't fail to notice that it assumes that the users and participants are believers, committed disciples of Jesus. How else could we receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ unto everlasting life?

In the Book of Revelation, the Lord says to one of the Seven Churches, the Ephesians, that while he commends them for their long-term faithfulness, he says they have lost their “first love” (Rev 2:3-4). They have, in keeping the faith, become calloused. This can happen to people individually and corporately. What good is it, to be orthodox and faithful in things, while losing the warmth of the love of Christ that won us to Jesus in the first place? And this problem obviously can be reversed. What good is it, to be flush with new enthusiasm for the Gospel, and then to burn out and quit?

If we think of the church, or our lives, as a house, then let’s think of the heating. We need a fire. But if the fire is not controlled, it will burn the house down. It needs a fireplace with a good system of burning – heat, fuel, air. But a fireplace with no fire is dead and cold. This it seems to me is the issue in the Gospel between spirit and form. Both are essential.

Were my Presbyterian friend to come to us and ask us, After all these years, what has sustained you, I think the considered answer would be very important. Saint Stephen’s is soon to present itself publicly for the process of a search for a new Rector. Groups of parishioners will gather to answer the vital question: What is it about Saint Stephen’s that I cherish, that you and I, that we, cherish? What improvements would we like to see? What qualities do the answers to these questions imply regarding a priest who might be the right fit for our next rector?

We’ve come a distance from the harsh questions that began this sermon, but counting the cost and going the distance are what Saint Stephen’s and its people are about. Let us keep asking ourselves, After all these years, what has sustained us?

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