

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
September 4, 2022 – 13 Pentecost
Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Luke 14:25-33
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

Our Gospel lessons in recent weeks have been quite challenging. This morning's lesson is perhaps the most challenging yet. Once again, let's remember that Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and the cross. His messages are urgent and demanding, sharpened by his focus on what he is facing himself as he follows God's will.

Jesus turns to the crowd of people following him and says, "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." If we think of the word "hate" in the way we use it today – intense hostility and extreme dislike – who could choose to be Jesus' disciple on those terms? And how can his demand be in any way aligned with the message he preached and lived throughout his ministry, to love our neighbors as ourselves?

Before we go on, we need a short lesson in ancient languages and translation. Jesus spoke a language called Aramaic, which was related to Hebrew. But the New Testament was written in Greek, so Jesus' words recorded in the New Testament are in a language other than the one he spoke. We know that Jesus could read the Hebrew Bible. We know this because Luke reports an occasion when Jesus went to the synagogue on the Sabbath and read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, which was written in Hebrew (Luke 4:16-30). And there is a way of possibly recovering what Jesus might have said, or meant, beyond the Greek words in the gospels. That is to look at the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (called the Septuagint) and see if the Greek word in the gospels was used to translate a Hebrew word in the Bible. In this case, the Greek word for "hate" (*miseo*, as in *misanthrope*, 'person-hater') does translate a Hebrew word (*sana*) that sometimes means "be indifferent to, care less about" rather than absolute hate. For example, in the story of Jacob, Leah, and Rachel in Genesis (29:30-31), Jacob loves Rachel, but Leah is "unloved" – the Hebrew word that is translated by our Greek word as "hate." It is not that Jacob "hates" Leah in the sense of intense hostility and extreme dislike, but Rachel is far more important to him, and that seems to be the sense that Jesus is conveying in his very strong statement.

So, let's paraphrase the beginning of this morning's lesson in light of all this information about translation. Jesus said, "Whoever comes to me and does not care less about father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, than he or she cares about me cannot be my disciple." Jesus and our love for him must come first, but that does not mean that there is no room for others or for our love for them. In fact, our love for Jesus can inform and guide and strengthen our other loves, as long as our priorities are in proper order.

Then we hear some homely examples about being prepared. Who begins a major building project without calculating how much it will cost? Who plans to go to war without planning strategy and calculating risk? Only foolish people behave this way. Jesus warns the people following him to think ahead about what discipleship may cost. For the choice to follow Jesus will be costly, both in ways a person can foresee and in unexpected, unplanned for costs.

Finally, Jesus says, “none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” The Greek word translated “give up” means “to separate oneself from and leave behind.” Elsewhere in the New Testament the word means “say farewell” as in taking leave of someone. So, the final sentence in this morning’s lesson, following as it does from the examples Jesus just gave, would seem to mean, “Following me could cost you everything, so you had better be ready.” Jesus had just said to his followers, “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” Jesus is on the way to the cross. He knows the cost he is about to pay, and he isn’t pulling any punches when he speaks to his followers about the costs they may have to pay if they choose to follow him.

Today is the first Sunday in the weeks the church has designated as the Season of Creation. During this season we will be reminded through our prayers of our responsibilities to care for God’s creation as faithful stewards. We will be called to repent and to live more carefully. We will be called to remember how our behavior and our decisions affect the well-being of others. In this morning’s lesson from Deuteronomy (30:19-20) God spoke to Moses in these words: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him.” With regard to creation, it is urgent that we choose life, for the sake of others who live on the planet now and for those who will come after us. Choosing life may be costly, will be costly, but it is the right choice.

To begin this Season of Creation, I would like to read you a story. It is a story from a book I love, one that I highly recommend to you, for yourselves and for the children in your life: “Children of God Storybook Bible” by the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu. It is a “children’s book” with wonderful illustrations by artists from all over the world. Archbishop Tutu wrote the words based on many well-loved stories from the Bible. He captures the heart of the stories and brings them to life. Each one ends with a short prayer. From time to time, I read a story from this book and spend time looking at the illustrations, and I always feel refreshed.

Listen to Archbishop Tutu’s story of how God gives life in “The Creation” from chapter one of Genesis.

(Due to copyright considerations the story is not printed here. Please refer to the book which was published by Zonderkidz in 2010 and is available for purchase online.)