

Date: Sunday September 5, 2010

Scripture: Luke 14:25-33

Title: “The Discipleship Choice”

The Message of Scripture (Sermon Thesis): Jesus uses hard and harsh words to make a startling point about the challenges of discipleship. We must be ready to choose.

The Sharing of the Good News (The Sermon Purpose): God finds us, always, wherever we are and keeps encouraging us with messages of “follow me” (Luke 14:13). The undistracted love of God is today’s good news.

(Remember, it’s all about God!)

Are you familiar with the cartoon Lockhorns? If you are, you know it is about the daily life of a husband and wife. I saw one of the cartoons this week when the wife, Loretta, says about her husband, Leroy: “Leroy sure didn’t turn out to be Mr. Right. He’s not even Mr. Good Guess” (Creston News Advertiser). Well, working with this morning’s Gospel from Luke, I feel like I’ll be doing good if I can be Reverend Good Guess.

This morning’s lesson is part of Luke’s travel section. That is the twelve chapters between the Transfiguration story and the Passion story. In the travel section Jesus is walking relentlessly, ominously toward Jerusalem. Now just previous to today’s verses, Jesus had been dining and teaching with the inner circle. That was last week’s focus if you recall. But now all that changes. In the middle of the 14th chapter, Jesus goes public and is quickly surrounded by large, enthusiastic crowds. These folks have heard about this new superstar who tells great stories

and heals people. Most everyone is eager to join his parade. How wonderful to be reaching the masses.

What Jesus has in front of him with these crowds is every church growth guru's fantasy; large numbers of hungry people ready to be fed by the gospel. All Jesus has to do is to woo them, entertain them, and give 'em tempting glimpses of power and comfort, success and happiness, and then he can literally haul them in like fish in a net. With just a little marketing technique Jesus could easily break the membership statistics for his denomination and receive all kinds of kudos. But instead, Jesus offends them, and offends us, with harsh words. Instead of feel good faith, Jesus offers demanding discipleship.

Reverend Susan Andrews writes that if we were to step inside some of the sanctuaries of the modern mega churches we might not know we are in church. I'm sure we can all picture these settings. The seating is generally theater style, very comfortable, and graded upward for easy viewing. In many of these churches there are no visible crosses. Why would there be. After all, a symbol of torture and sacrifice does not appeal too many of today's Generation X'ers or Baby Boomers for that matter. In some of these mega churches organs have been replaced by rock bands and synthesizers. Mega churches are very good at providing what are called Seeker Services. In other words, worship experiences that are designed to draw in unbelievers and strangers to the faith. Often times in these services there is no bulletin, no traditional church words like confession or offering or sermon, and no stained glass windows. They don't want to do anything to cause the new

worshippers to be confused or feel like they have a lot of questions. The thinking behind all of this is clear and makes a certain amount of sense. In order to draw new believers in, we must be careful about what we say and how we say it and all the talk of responsibility or commitment or discipleship needs to be soft-pedaled, especially at first. After all, what all of us are looking for is meaning and comfort and joy and fellowship which the gospel *does* provide. But, unfortunately, or fortunately, that is only half the story. Today's scripture lesson is the very heart of Luke's gospel. But I guarantee you that you will never hear this text used in the "seeker friendly" worship services offered in the mega churches of the 21st Century.

Today's passage is an easy one to run from. Like Reverend Andrews, I thought twice about using this text, here, today. We very possibly could have folks here thinking about Immanuel as their church home or others coming to see what worship is like in general. This passage in Luke really isn't such a great text to invite people to make church a regular part of life. Jesus sounds downright scary. "Whoever does not hate your family . . . cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross . . . cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not give up all your possessions . . . cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:25-33). In eight verses, Jesus manages to demolish the entire American Dream, the perfect family, the pursuit of self-fulfillment, the material comfort of home and cars and technological toys. Why would *any* of us want to follow this guy?

Now, another thing that church growth experts tell us is that a preacher should never bore people with exegetical analysis, with Greek word study, or with lofty

abstract theology. What people want are vivid images and heart-warming stories. But I can't help myself today. Here goes word study, analysis, and theology, but for listening to all that, I'll through in heart-warming story.

Right out of the gate, let's get to this issue of hate. Does Jesus really mean hate as offered in today's passage. Is that really what the text is saying? Well, the only possible translation of the original Greek version is "hate." But remember that Jesus spoke in Aramaic - not Greek - and there really isn't an accurate Greek word representing what Jesus is trying to say. The Semitic word "hate" is not a violent word of emotion but instead more a description of a way of being. "Detached" would be a better translation. Detach from your mother and your father, your sister and your brother and your children. That is what Jesus is saying. In comparison, this same passage in Matthew (10:37) is worded a bit differently. "Whoever loves father and mother, or son or daughter, more than me is not worthy of me." This can still be confusing and challenging, but not quite as bad as hate.

So, what are we to make of all of this? Well, Jesus is using a bit of hyperbole in order to make a point. This is a passage about priorities and loyalty, about starting and finishing, about being a follower and a disciple, and about being true and faithful. This is a passage about life. Jesus is trying to tell us, with absolute and shocking clarity, that our relationship with God needs to come first in our lives (Andrews) if we want to achieve real life. Kind of like the old "Got Milk" ads, Jesus wants us to "get life"; the life that he offers.

Reverend William Willimon tells of a day while he was the Chaplain at Duke

University and an angry father started shouting at him over the phone saying that he held the chaplain personally responsible for corrupting his daughter. The father had sent his daughter to Duke University so that she could get a good education and go to medical school. But now this foolish girl was talking about spending three years serving the poor people in Haiti all because of a feel good mission trip that she had experienced with Rev. Willimon. After an awkward pause, the Duke Chaplain responded: “Now, just a minute, sir. Didn’t you take your daughter to be baptized? Didn’t you take her to Sunday school and worship when she was growing up in your home?” The father answered, “Well, sure we did. But we just wanted her to be a good person. We never intended for all that to do this damage” (Willimon).

Like that adult daughter, we all have choices to make in our lives about what we believe to be important; choices that others may or may not agree with. Dr. Rachel Remen writes about one such choice. She had a young man for a patient who had become separated from his ski party and had spent three days in below zero weather but had managed to survive. He had been hospitalized for several weeks because of frostbite and progressive gangrene in his feet. After time, the left foot began to improve, but the right foot never did. Amputation was at hand. But the young patient refused. He wouldn’t lose his foot.

Slowly he became sicker because of the toxins from his foot flooding the rest of his body. His family and friends were desperate, but he would not change his mind. The situation came to a head one evening when for the third or fourth time a group of doctors, Dr. Remen included, stood by his bedside reviewing and

warning him about his worsening condition. Finally, his fiancée, overwhelmed by the thought of his death, tore the engagement ring he had given her from her finger and thrust it on to the black and swollen little toe of his right foot. “If you want this foot so much,” she screamed, “why don’t you marry it!” “You have to choose. You can’t have us both.” The small bright diamond cast against the rotting tissue of the dying toe sparkled. The young man said nothing and closed his eyes. The woman ran out. The doctors left. The next day, the young man scheduled the surgery.

Months later and two weeks before the wedding, Dr. Remen asked the young man why he had finally changed his mind. He said that seeing the diamond on the toe had shocked him. His girlfriend had been right. Her dramatic gesture helped him to see that he was more attached to keeping his foot, and trying to be right, than he was to life. And so in response to her plea, this young man literally choose life and while that may seem an easy choice to us, perhaps some of our challenging choices seem just as easy to others.

Dr. Remen goes on to write that attachment of any kind has its source in personality, while commitment comes from the soul. Modern life has made us people of attachment rather than people of commitment. Attachment is a reflex, an automatic response which often may not reflect our deepest good. Commitment is a conscious choice, to align ourselves with our most genuine values and our sense of purpose – our calling. True survival may require a letting go of, a detachment from, everything but life itself (Remen) and that will surely require making a choice. Today, Jesus is reminding us once again that we are called to follow him, and make

no mistake, that calling involves choices.

Friends, be assured that none of us can completely embody the demands of the gospel. None of us can completely figure out how to afford the very high cost of genuine discipleship. None of us can completely let go of distracting attachments. But God can and God does. God loves us unconditionally just as we are. God nurtures us when family pressures have drained us dry. God keeps seeking and forgiving us when we get separated from the real meaning of life and buried in the obsessions and possessions of our anxious living. God finds us, always, wherever we are and keeps encouraging us with messages of “follow me” (Luke 14:13). The undistracted love of God is today’s good news.

I give us permission today to choose to hear these words from Luke for what they are; an invitation, a possibility, and an opportunity for abundant living. Know that within this community of faith there is room for all of us no matter who we are or where we are on our unfolding journey toward Jerusalem; our unfolding journey of discipleship. On this communion Sunday, there is room for us all at the table. And in that regard, I am, Reverend Right. Let us pray.

Lord,

We give you thanks for the gift of abundant life that you offer us. We are often distracted and attached to that which is less important and unfulfilling. Be patient with us as we find our way to follow your call and to make the choices necessary in doing so. For your unyielding love, we pray with grateful hearts.

Amen.

Offering: Jesus invites us into disciple by giving up our possessions. What we give today, whatever it is, is a sign of our fuller devotion. The ushers will please . . .

Dedication: Lord, we ask that you accept and bless what we give this day along with our renewed commitment to spread your love throughout the word. We pray in your name, Amen.

Benediction: Go forth blessed by God who welcomes our partnership in the gospel; the good news of true discipleship and true life. Go forth, Amen and Amen.

Sources:

Andrews, Susan Reverend; Lectionary Homiletics; www.goodpreacher.com; 2010.

Holy Bible – New Revised Standard Version; Harper Bibles: San Francisco; 2007.

“Lockhorns”; Creston News Avertiser: Creston, IA; 2010.

Willimon, William Reverend; “Pulpit Resource”; Logos Productions: Inver Grove Heights, MN; 2010.