September 8, 2013 – 16th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 18)

© Jean E. Mornard

Here we go again! Another difficult passage. Luke just doesn't let up on us with regards to discipleship, does he? In today's Gospel, Jesus tells his followers to do three things in order to follow him. Number one, hate your family, which sounds pretty harsh and maybe impossible. Number two, carry the cross and follow him. And number three, give up all your possessions.

Another notable thing about this passage is that the exhortations are all in double negatives – whoever DOESN'T do these things CANNOT be my disciple. It's not just that you SHOULD do these things in order to follow Jesus, or that they are a good idea, but rather that they are non-negotiable requirements.

So let's try to unpack some of this. First of all, before we all despair of never being able to live up to such a standard, I think it's a good idea to remember who Luke was trying to reach in his Gospel, namely a Gentile audience. In Luke, and especially in Acts, there is often a tension around Jewish law and Jesus. The Jews knew very well what following God meant. To live according to the Torah meant a significant amount of personal commitment and sacrifice. Perhaps this is one way that Luke describes the lifestyle of a follower of God for his Gentile audience who has had no traditional frame of reference up to this point.

Also, as I've mentioned before, family means something different in first century Palestine than it does to us today. The family was more than just the group of people you have Thanksgiving dinner with. The family was your political, social, and economic identity. To be cast out from your family, or to be widowed or divorced and to have your family's support removed was devastating – in some cases virtually a death sentence. So for Jesus to say that you have to hate your family – for YOU to cast THEM off – would have been absolutely shocking. Almost unthinkable.

And maybe that's his point, or one of his points. The passage says that large crowds were now traveling with Jesus. Usually when there is a large group like that, you have varying levels of commitment. Here's an example. In my misspent youth, I liked the Grateful Dead. For those of you who don't know, the Grateful Dead was one of the original acid rock bands from the 60s, and they had a huge devoted following of people who were called Deadheads.

Whenever a group of my friends at the time got together to do music, which we did a lot, there were always a lot of Dead songs. I was also in a band for a while - a folk-rock-country-reggae-blues band – and we also did a lot of Dead covers. And I even traveled to a few of their concerts when they played in the Midwest.

But I wasn't a Deadhead. The audiences at Dead concerts consisted of Deadheads, who went to EVERY concert all over the country, a few pretty devoted fans like me, and some stray people who wandered in not knowing what they were getting themselves into.

As an example of what a true Deadhead was like, a really good friend of mine, who was the drummer in my band, didn't go to my wedding because he was going to a Dead concert that weekend. In a sense, he "hated" his family in order to follow the band.

Jesus undoubtedly had followers who were just tagging along for the free food, or the excitement that Jesus generated wherever he went, or whatever reason draws people to crowds. But when push came to shove, or when the going got rough, you know they would quietly slip away and pretend they never knew that rabble rouser from Galilee. They just weren't true Jesus-heads!

Ever since Jesus had set his face toward Jerusalem in Chapter 9, he's been more and more driven and serious. He no longer has time for the half-baked promises of reluctant followers. It's time for real commitment! He needs to know who his true followers are.

Which brings us to Jesus' second requirement – "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." Luke doesn't mention the Cross very often in his Gospel – only three times in fact. Once is in Chapter 9, just before setting out on the last journey to Jerusalem, where Jesus is talking in private to the twelve apostles and letting them know what they're in for. The second, is at the crucifixion when Simon of Cyrene is made to carry the cross.

And the third is this time. Now he's telling the crowd what his true disciples already know, since they heard it in Chapter 9 – that to follow him means to be willing to give up your very life for him. It's almost as if he's TRYING to drive the lookie-loos away. I can just imagine with each new pronouncement that he makes, a few more people slink away trying to look casual like, "Who, me? No…er…I was just going to the store and got caught up in this crowd."

And finally, to cull the last stragglers from the herd, he tells them they have to give up all their possessions. ALL of them! Their houses and cars! Their iPhones and snowmobiles! Their Vikings jersey and that foul ball they caught off of Justin Morneau's bat! Everything! This might be the hardest thing of all, especially if we carry this passage forward into our own time. Not only do we love our stuff, but it defines who we are and our place in the world. It's our new political, social, and economic identity.

Basically, what it all boils down to, is that Jesus is telling us in three different ways that we have to be willing to give up our whole life in order to follow him. We have to give up our support network, our safety net of money and possessions, and our actual physical lives. Not asking much, right?

The Gospel says, "…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?" Each of has to decide, clearheadedly and with complete understanding of what's involved, whether or not it's worth it to be a follower of Christ. It's not easy to give up all we have and take up our cross, but I believe with all of my heart that it IS worth it.

One thing to consider is that out of all of this sacrifice arises a new family, a new support system, a new safety net. Old ties and connections are reforged in the image of the perfect union of the Trinity. We are all members of the Body of Christ now, with the head of that body being Jesus, himself. We are Jesus-heads, and being a Jesus-head means we have access to all the joy, all the peace, and all the love that God has to offer.

Oh yeah, it's worth it! Let's go out there and tell everyone we meet!

Amen.