

“Pliable Discipleship”
(Jer 18:1-11, Luke 14:25-33)

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9/4/22

The Warning

Today’s Gospel reading is designed to dispel the idea that following Jesus is about taking the safe and easy path through life. As he speaks to his followers, Jesus could be compared to a Sherpa guide, pointing to the top of Mt Everest from the base camp. He is saying, “If you want to get to that amazing summit, you better check yourselves tonight and make sure you have what it takes. Because you are going to face some serious challenges in order to get there. And we don’t want you to get half way up and find out you can’t go any further.”

For those who would be his followers in reality and not in name only, Jesus warns that the journey ahead is a challenge that will test them to the core.

The Challenge of Possessions

And right off the bat, he presents them with a major challenge. Oh, by the way, “None of you can become my disciple, if you do not give up your possessions.”

Talk about knocking our legs out from under us! People through the ages have struggled with this question. How can a person live without

having ownership of anything at all? And what counts as a possession that we are to give up control over? Jesus obliges us with an example that probably represents the last thing we want to give up possession of, and that is the special consideration we have as members of a family. “Whoever does not hate father, mother, brothers and sisters and even life itself, cannot be my disciple,” are the words he uses.

Several weeks ago, I brought up Jesus’s frequent use of strong language like this and I think the same explanation applies here. Jesus is using shocking language as his way of creating an emphasis. It is his way of letting us know that favoritism toward family members is something he is strongly against.

Back when my son was a small boy, he was on a soccer team. The coach of the soccer team also had a son who was on the team. Over time it became clear that the coach was using the team to groom his own son and had little real interest in developing the other players. He gave him more playing time, subbed him in at advantageous times, designed plays that would feed him the ball. And it was demoralizing for the rest of the team, who felt as though they were nothing more than a supporting cast.

Jesus will have none of this kind of bias in favor of family members. Following him demands the same impartiality of us that is characteristic of God's love.

As a minister, I have had the opportunity to learn how difficult this kind of impartiality is in a vivid way. Over the years, I have spent a fair amount of time with people who have had a recent death in the family. In each case I sought, with varying success, to set aside my distractions and bring my whole heart to the task.

But nothing could have prepared me for the day that death knocked on the door in my own family. It was a huge, life changing event. And it seemed as though I had been struck down to my knees and all the happiness had been suddenly sucked out of my life. I wondered how I would ever outlive the suffocating grief and insecurity that I felt.

It was a huge lesson, because my first temptation was to imagine that my grief was somehow singular and more painful than anyone else's; that nobody had ever experienced the loss of anyone so precious. I seemed unable to care about anything other than licking my own wounds.

Of course, I also knew in my heart that this was not true; that my experience was not singular and that, just because I could not experience another person's loss with equal grief, did not mean that it wasn't there. I just never fully understood the depth of what others were going through, until it happened to me.

And when we come to this understanding, which I think every thoughtful person does, then Jesus again demands of us an impartiality; that we not allow ourselves to pretend that our grief or pain is greater or more significant or deserving of consolation than the pain of others.

To get to the summit of the mountain Jesus sets before us, is not an easy climb.

Material Possessions

What are some of the other possessions, Jesus might be referring to? The house? The car? A place to lay one's head? It's to imagine being possession-less in our society. Giving up having a place to sleep or the financial security to feed and clothe ourselves doesn't make sense. On the other hand, I don't think that the impracticality of what Jesus is calling for is a reason to ignore his words.

It seems to me that the only way to make sense of this is to consider that what Jesus is really asking us to do, is give up believing that any of the things we can possess are the foundation on which our lives can be built; that the ultimate foundation of our lives is not material.

Consider all the people who have lost their homes to natural disasters or lost everything as a result of financial problems. We watch them with fascination as they are interviewed following their losses. And I suppose our fascination has to do with our curiosity about how we too would respond, if everything we owned was taken away in an instant.

It seems to me that either we will feel that we are completely alone and in despair or that the only thing left that can fill the void is God; if God so chooses to enter that void and use it. Because there is nothing else left that can fill it.

And in faith we, as followers of Jesus, assume that God will fill that empty space, and it will become unquestionably clear that none of our material possessions was the essential foundation for our lives after all; that God is the one and only essential foundation and that by God's grace there will be a new day as full of grace as any day that is past.

Perhaps in a paradoxical way, the Summit of our “spiritual Everest” is reached in the moment when all our possessions are stripped away and God alone becomes our all in all.

Our Shared Past

I feel as though one of the possessions that we have lost is our secure connection with the pre-covid world. And I fear that this has left us sharing a certain unconsolable grief. For most of us, the vast majority of our lives was lived in that world. It wasn't a perfect world. Many problems that exist now, were already with us then. But we also had a sense of continuity with many things in the past that we cherished.

We were somehow still connected with a time when Democrats and Republican legislators socialized together, where a family could live comfortably on a single income, where kids could go out and play in the neighborhood without supervision. We still felt as though we were living in a world in which shared values like humility, hard work, kindness and generosity ordered and gave meaning to our lives, where good people did not lie to each other or subscribe to crazy conspiracy theories.

Somehow Covid felt like a decisive blow, separating us from the better part of our past and, I think we are inwardly grieving. The world and culture that is coming into being seems to be less kind and patient, less understandable, more unstable, and there is an acceptance of cruelty and selfishness that is frightening.

The Potter's Wheel

How should we as Christians respond to this loss of valued possessions? Should we double down and try to restore the past? I think that we have to let go of that cherished possession as well. Rather than try to fill the present with the past, I think we should be like Jesus and sit with our emptiness in a possession-less way, and let God fill the void and speak to us through it.

The story of the Potter's Wheel can, I think, help us adapt to this world in which so much is changing and so many of our cherished possessions are being lost.

The thing I like best about this story is the way human beings are described as being like clay. I like it particularly because it represents human beings as pliable and reshapeable. As long as we are soft clay, we can be reshaped without losing our integrity.

Very often, I think the tendency in our society is to see religious people as quite the opposite. We tend to think of religious people as being rigidly and inflexibly committed to their views, as though any kind of change must signal some betrayal. According to this view, it is admirable to live a whole life and go to the grave with a faith that is unchanged in any way from the faith first learned in Sunday school. It is as though stubbornness were being equated with moral strength. But stubbornness can just as easily be a sign of moral weakness, of an unwillingness to let go of things that no longer work or of a denialism that is out of touch with reality.

The vision of God as the Potter working his clay celebrates a different kind of strength; the strength to be pliable and reshapeable in God's hands.

God doesn't take Jeremiah down to the pottery store to see a row of hardened vases, finished and ready for sale; vases that, if dropped, will shatter into pieces. Instead, God takes Jeremiah to the workshop out back, where the pieces are still in process, being shaped and reshaped to suit God's needs. And this is much more true to the reality of who we are in relationship with God. Because as long as we are in this life, we

are not finished pieces. We are all pieces in process, being shaped and reshaped by God's hand as God confronts us with the challenges of life.

And I'm sure that part of the work of those shaping hands is to make us aware that what gives us value is not the possessions we accumulate or even the material of which we are made. What gives value and true purpose to any clay vessel is the empty space within; the space that exists to hold and pour out the wine of the Holy Spirit. And the same is true of us.

"The Summit of the Mountain" – convey it's beauty. A perspective that you can't get otherwise. I don't think anyone who has been there regrets the effort. But getting there is not without its challenges. rue for us.