

The Temptation of an Easy Road
Luke 14:25-33
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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Just a couple weeks ago we read a passage from Luke where Jesus was quoted as saying, “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!”¹ And now today we hear Jesus saying, “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.”²

What’s up with this Jesus?

Again, we tend to react wondering where our soft and tender, loving and welcoming Jesus went. Again, we tend to wonder if Luke is misquoting him. Again, we tend to question if this Jesus is someone with whom we want to be associated. After all, who wants to hang out with someone who is constantly causing strife, who is encouraging division and hate?

But, instead of either dismissing this text or dismissing Jesus, let’s dive into this text and see what we can learn...let’s even discover where *we* hear things differently than the people around Jesus would have.

Perhaps the place we need to begin is with the word that the NRSV, NIV and King James versions of the Bible all translate as hate. I don’t know about you but when I hear the word hate, I hear my grandmother’s voice telling me in no uncertain terms that we don’t use that word, that it is hurtful and vicious and inappropriate. Hate – a word that the Oxford dictionary defines as to “feel intense or passionate dislike.”³ That is the feeling to which my grandmother responded

¹ Luke 12:51, NRSV.

² Luke 14:26, NRSV.

³ <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=hate>

when she gave me that lecture. That is the toxic feeling that all too often leads to hurtful actions and behaviors.

And yet, that translation doesn't really capture what the original language meant. Jesus wasn't telling people that following him was about feeling an intense and passionate dislike for others. Rather he was talking about priorities. When looking at other translations of the Bible, the ones that really represent best what he meant are versions like the Contemporary English Version which reads, "You cannot be my disciple, unless you love me more than you love your father and mother, your wife and children, and your brothers and sisters"⁴ or the Message which reads, "Anyone who comes to me but refuses to let go of father, mother, spouse, children, brothers, sisters – yes, even one's own self! – can't be my disciple."⁵

And we can be honest and say even this is difficult for most of us to imagine. We don't need the word hate for this to be a challenging text.

In Bible study a couple weeks ago we had an honest conversation about this with people admitting that if Jesus walked in the room and said that in order to follow him we had to leave our families, many of us would be left behind.

It's simply not our experience of what faith asks. And at some level we can be grateful for that. After all, we have lived in a place where being Christian is an easy choice to make. In fact, we have lived in a nation that for most of its existence has shaped itself around the worship times, holy days, and practice of the Christian faith. And in so many ways, many that we can't even identify, we who call ourselves Christian have benefitted from that reality.

And yet, the downside to an experience such as ours is that we have too often forgotten that our faith *actually asks* something of us. We have too often forgotten that following Jesus

⁴ Luke 14:26a, CEV.

⁵ Luke 14:26, The Message.

isn't an easy road. We have too often forgotten that if we are fully living our faith, risk will be involved. We have too often forgotten that being Christian asks more of us than just sitting in a pew of our choosing in a congregation of our choosing and getting filled with messages of God's love and acceptance so we can make it through another week in this old world.

So, even though it makes us uncomfortable, we *need* to hear passages like this. Because for many Christians across time and space, their reality *has* been about being willing to give up the things that were most important to them, about being willing to risk, even their own lives. From the early church martyrs killed by the empire because they spread a word about worshipping someone other than the emperor, to modern day people like my seminary classmate who fled China in order to assure her own safety and freedom, even leaving her daughter behind until a few years later they could get her moved as well...so many, many people have known the risk of living a life committed to Jesus.

And it is important for us to really consider the truth of this commitment. It is important for us to ask hard questions about how committed we are...about what situations might cause us to choose something other than our faith...about how much we are willing to risk in order to be Christian...and about what it really means to be Christian, not as a label, not as a sign of church membership, but as a way of life, a way that follows the model of Jesus.

This summer my family and I went to Adventureland. Like other amusement parks, along with height requirement many rides have warning signs at the entrance. These signs often read something like: Guests with the following conditions are prohibited from riding this ride – recent surgery, heart trouble, high blood pressure, neck or back trouble, pregnancy. These signs aren't intended to scare anyone. But they are intended to tell you the truth – that there is risk involved in choosing the ride. And that's what Jesus is doing here as well.

It seems like too often we hear passages like the one we are reading from Luke today as if they are meant to scare people away. We think that Jesus is here, having called all these people to follow him, only to try to push them away with scary stories.

And yet, if we look carefully at this text there are a few things worth noting.

First, and I think we named this a few weeks ago, back in Luke 9 we heard that Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem”⁶ – in other words, we are in the part of Luke where it has become clear, at least to the writer and to Jesus, that the authorities are not going to listen, that they are not going to embrace his teachings and follow him, but rather than the more he talks about God’s wide embrace and extravagant love, the more he cares for people even when that is in conflict with the letter of the law, the more his life is at risk. So, Jesus knows, in ways the people around him don’t yet see, the risks that they are taking even being near him.

Secondly, it is important to note that while there are other places in scripture where Jesus seeks people out, where he invites them to follow, in this story, the crowds have simply gathered. Perhaps in the way that any of us might cross the street and walk down the block because we notice an unexpected crowd...the way we might stop and listen when we happen upon an interesting speaker on the sidewalk. Jesus looks around and sees that a crowd has gathered and he essentially says to them, “Do you know what you are here for? Are you here to observe? Are you here because you think something festive is happening? Or are you really here because you are wanting and willing to change your life and even to risk it?”

The same question comes to us. Are we here because it’s what we’ve always done on Sunday morning? Are we here to check the task of attending worship off our to-do list? Are we

⁶ Luke 9:51b, NRSV.

here because the singing and praying and seeing familiar people bolsters us and makes us feel good?

Or are we here because we are truly committed to this thing Jesus is doing? Are we here because we really believe that God's way is a better way? Are we here because we know that above our stuff and our power and our positions and even our loved ones and our own life, living in ways that build up God's kin-dom, in ways that value all people, in ways that fight for the rights of those who have been kept voiceless matters? Are we here because we are so committed to following Jesus, even on this difficult road?

Are we here because we are ready to let the way of Jesus and the heart of God not only comfort and coddle us, but change us and help us become brave and generous, compassionate and courageous? As Fred Craddock wrote, "What is demanded of disciples,...is that in the network of many loyalties in which all of us live, the claim of Christ and the gospel not only takes precedence but, in fact, redefines the others."⁷

Jesus wasn't trying to scare anyone away. But he also knew that following in his ways, in the ways of God's heart, was not a decision to be taken lightly. And so, words that are difficult are important.

Are we ready to not look at Jesus from a distance? Not use God for our own purposes and comfort? Are we ready to let our lives be changed and to risk things that matter to us in order to follow? Are we willing to give up the temptation of an easy road and instead choose the road that Jesus learned leads to the cross?

As we consider that question, let us pray together. I invite you to respond, "Forgive us, O God" when you hear me pray, "God, we are often tempted by an easy road."

⁷ Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 182.

Leader: God, sometimes the truth is difficult. Sometimes we don't like to admit that we really want loving you to be easy. We really want following Jesus to be a walk in the park. Sometimes we don't like to admit that we want you to be there for us but don't really want you to ask much of us. God, we are often tempted by an easy road.

People: Forgive us, O God.

Leader: And so we ask that you would give us the courage and commitment to truly follow you. Make us willing to stand up for those who are pushed aside rather than turning the other way. Make us willing to speak out on behalf of those who are blocked out rather than just taking our place at the table. Make us willing to risk everything that we may live for you. God, this is hard because we are often tempted by an easy road.

People: Forgive us, O God.

Leader: So, forgive us, and move us, that we may be those whose lives truly reflect the life of Jesus. Amen.