

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 09/04/2022



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year C

Sunday, September 4th

Luke 14:25-33

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Who cannot be a disciple of Jesus?

In stark contrast to the church-member-as-consumer marketing responses to declining church membership in the post-Christendom era, this week's Gospel lection illustrates how Jesus takes pains to dissuade would be "consumers" of spiritual fads or potential "members" of closed, insular private clubs. Jesus presents insights into the true cost of discipleship. There are three examples of "...cannot be my disciple" we must pay attention to.

Luke 14:25-33

²⁵ Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, ²⁶ "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.

The precise location of this event is not given. We know Jesus is on a journey that will ultimately lead Him to Jerusalem and His appointment with the cross. What appears to preempt this event are the "great crowds" following Jesus. Jesus turns and engages them. Jesus teaches that anyone who does not hate his own family members and even his own life cannot be His disciple. We know Jesus commanded His followers to love even their enemies (Luke 6:27) so we know Jesus did not imply the literal meaning of hate. This may be a literary means of indicating to "love less" (Genesis 29:31,33). Another way to consider the use of "hate" in this context is a disciple must love Jesus to the extent that love for family members seems like hate in comparison. Jesus is clear that a disciple must put Jesus ahead of his or her own life. Verse 27 also implies there is likely to be a worldly cost and suffering that a disciple must bear. While this warning is presented in a negative bent, Luke 9:23f presents the same point more positively.

²⁸ For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, ³⁰ saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' ³¹ Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³² And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. ³³ So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.

Jesus then uses twin parables, which He often does, to illustrate the point that He does not want disciples who are not fully aware of what they have let themselves in for. While these parables are similar, they also make a different point. The first involves a man who decides to build a tower. If he is not able to go beyond only the foundation, he will invite mockery. A would-be disciple must first "*sit down*" (not be in a hurry or decide on a whim) and accurately assess the cost. The second parable is of kings at war. A king with only ten thousand soldiers must think long and hard as to whether he can devise a strategy to defeat a king who attacks him with double his number. If no path to success is possible, a king in such a position does not simply wait for defeat. Instead, he attempts to negotiate a peace while the other king is still a great way off.

In the first parable the builder is free to choose whether to build the tower or not. In the second parable the king has no choice. The king has to decide whether or not he is able to refuse the demands of the more powerful king. Both ways of considering the cost of discipleship are important. Finally, Jesus is clear about the worldly cost of discipleship - anyone who "*does not renounce all that he [or she] has cannot be my disciple.*"

Reflections

In this week's Gospel lection Jesus condemns all half-hearted and ill-considered attempts at discipleship. To be a disciple of Jesus is an all or nothing endeavor. Jesus must be our first priority over all competing relationships, possessions, and self-interests. He challenges us to finish the journey, or not begin at all.

Beginning in the 1970's with the "Me Decade," western culture has become increasingly obsessed with the self: self-help, self-esteem, self-expression, self-actualization, self-image, and self-determination. "I" is the dominant consideration, not "you" or "we." Our culture of individualism has demonstrated an increasing trend towards narcissism. "Get the you deserve" appears to be the standard template for many consumer ads. The whole idea of postmodernism is that any idea of truth is just as valid. Absolutes do not exist. Be the person you want to be now extends beyond the idea of career choice!

Individualism has extended to the church. Church is a predominantly an "I" consideration when it comes to community. Response to authority and God's Word is filtered through the lens of "what I think is true." The idea of following Jesus is now more about WIIFM (what's in it for me?) than the concept of discipleship. The church growth movement (now more urgently expressed as the save the church movement) has unwittingly catered to consumerism. Consumers don't make disciples; they make more consumers.

Jesus invites us to escape our self-centered lives and live a Christ-centered one. Yet before we embrace this invitation as a new form of self-expression or means of self-actualization, Jesus invites us to reflect on the true cost.

