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Pentecost XIII & Proper 18
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Text: Luke 14:25 – 35
Title: It's All or Nothing

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Stephen looked and he just couldn't believe the size of the crowd. And they were all there to see Him. Some of his neighbors said that it was Elijah come back from heaven to prophesy once again, and since Elijah was taken to heaven instead of dying that was possible. Others said that it was John the Baptist returned from the dead to claim his revenge on Herod the Tetrarch, or that He was one of the other prophets who had come back from the grave.

Whatever the truth was, Stephen knew that the stories about Him were fantastic. They said that He healed the sick. There were eyewitnesses who claimed to have seen Him casting out demons, and the Pharisees were all up in arms because He taught with such authority, even as He dared to contradict them! Stephen usually found himself doubting these reports because they were just too hard to believe.

But then, if this rabbi really was Elijah then He should have the power to do such things. The Scriptures told about Elijah raising a boy from the dead, and if Elijah had returned he'd have the power to do great things again. In the end, Stephen decided that that was probably why he was there. He wanted to see a miracle, or at least hear what this new rabbi had to say.

Suddenly, a number of the Pharisees appeared, and they didn't seem happy with whatever had happened inside. Then the owner of the house, one of the higher-ranking Pharisees, appeared in the doorway, and he was chatting with someone behind him. If the rabbi were coming, he'd definitely be walking with that man since he was the host and it was only proper. Stephen shifted to his right for a better view. He was shocked to see that the next man to appear

was one of his neighbors, Phineas, and he looked perfectly normal. But everyone knew that Phineas suffered from dropsy, how could it be him? He didn't have any more time to consider that though because the noise from the crowd suddenly increased even more. There He was.

Jesus of Nazareth stood next to Phineas, and He looked around the large crowd gathered outside of the house. "That's him?" was Stephen's first reaction, "That's the one everyone is talking about?" He had expected someone who looked more important, more special, but this man was just plain, ordinary. Aside from the stories, which Stephen now suspected were blown way out of proportion, there was nothing about this man to cause all of the excitement. He had seen traveling musicians who looked more impressive than Jesus, but then he got a good look at the rabbi's face.

There was just something there. His eyes could only be called intense. They seemed to bore right through him as they looked at him and then moved onto the next person. And then Jesus spoke in a voice that was so clear and commanding that Stephen began to fidget because it seemed to penetrate him to his very depths. The crowd around him fell silent almost instantly, and Stephen could hear it all.

Jesus said to them, "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. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple." Stephen was in shock. This wasn't at all what he expected. This Jesus was talking about hating your family and life, and bearing something as humiliating and shameful as a cross just to be one of His disciples. Who would do something so crazy to follow a rabbi who seemed so ordinary?

And then as though that weren't enough, Jesus continued, "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?

Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’ Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with 10,000 to meet him who comes against him with 20,000? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is of no use either for the soil or the manure pile. It is thrown away. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

Stephen couldn’t believe his ears. This didn’t make any sense. This man was demanding complete and total devotion! Only God could do that, and God wouldn’t demand that he hate his family! Family was everything! There was certainly wisdom in what He said about the tower and the king. That was at least practical, if not common sense. But the rest of it didn’t help him any, and in fact it offended him. Shouldn’t this rabbi be telling him about practical things for his everyday life and telling him what to do to please God? Angry and disappointed, Stephen turned and walked away, leaving Phineas and a few others to follow this ridiculous, radical rabbi.

Here in modern America we’re a lot like this imaginary man that I’ve been describing. Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel reading are not the typically mild and tame teachings that we like to focus on, but they are His teachings regardless of how we feel about them. And if you are to call yourself a Christians then you must be prepared to listen to the voice of Christ whether you like what He is saying or not. You can not choose what you like about God’s Word and what you don’t. There is no grey area. It’s all or nothing, and there is nothing harder for us than that.

You and I would much rather take the easy road and view God just like everyone else. He is always loving, never vengeful, and our very bestest friend who will let us do just about

anything as long as it isn't specifically on the list of the Ten Commandments. We want to believe that He won't ever send anyone to hell because He's so loving, and that He isn't really all that concerned with whether or not we're taking His Word seriously. After all, things like condemning sexual immorality, gossip, slander, envy, and downright maliciousness are things of the past that are outdated today, and that's being so judgmental! What's wrong with a little harmless gossip or envy of someone who has more than me? Jesus was just talking to people back in that time. We don't have to worry about that today, right?

But God makes it very clear that being His child is an all or nothing kind of life. We don't have the luxury of choosing what we like and what we don't like about His Word, and ignoring the rest of it. Being one of His disciples is not a part-time occupation. It's not something that we do for a little while on Sunday morning and then ignore the rest of the week. When we do that, we lose our saltiness and ultimately fail in being one of His disciples. That's why the words of Christ about hating yourself and your family are so strong at the beginning of today's Gospel lesson. Jesus is making it clear to anyone who desires to follow Him that *nothing* can come between you and Him, *ever*. Not even your love for your family. Abraham learned that lesson the hard way when he had to go through the test of sacrificing his only son, Isaac, and that lesson is still one for us to live and learn today. Following Christ is an all or nothing life.

So, how are you doing with your commitment to Him in light of these Words from your Savior? Are you putting anything before your relationship with your Lord? Before you answer, remember the first chapter of I John, "If we say that we have no sin, then we deceive ourselves..." Sin is always connected with putting something ahead of God, and that something is usually yourself. We know that we fail miserably to live up to what He demands of us, and

that the only thing that we deserve is to be convicted of having no saltiness and to be thrown away. Any sin condemns us to that fate. Sin is an all or nothing condition.

But faith is an all or nothing condition as well. It doesn't take a certain level of faith to be saved from eternal death and hell. The smallest amount of faith makes you a full-fledged child of God and an heir of the promises that He made through Jesus Christ. It just takes faith the size of a mustard seed as Jesus says, and salvation will be given to you. It doesn't matter how many sins you've committed or how evil you may have been, Christ's death on the cross was an all or nothing sacrifice. It paid completely for the sins of everyone for all of time. And His Word and the faith that He gave to you and me assures us that it did pay the price for them all, and nothing is left uncovered by His blood. Our entire life of faith teaches us this lesson.

When we were baptized, faith was given to each one of us no matter how old we were, and we were connected to Christ's death as Romans 6 teaches us. And since we were connected to Him in death, we are also connected to Him in the resurrection of the body. Baptism is an all or nothing work of God.

When we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we are completely and fully in the presence of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He has promised that the bread and wine are His body and blood, and there is no room for another interpretation in His Word. He is really there, in, with and under those elements. Communion is an all or nothing work of God.

The time is coming when Christ will return. When He does, He'll throw away those who have lost their saltiness and those who never had it. Those who have even the smallest hint of saltiness will be kept and given eternal life with Him in the new heaven and the new earth. There is no doubt about that. He has promised it, and it will happen. His promises are all or nothing. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.