

Sermon † September 4, 2022

Luke 14:25-33

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So just like that . . . the summer is all but over. Tomorrow is Labor Day, the "unofficial" end of summer. The "official" transition comes in a few weeks when autumn arrives.

The older I get, the faster the calendar seems to move. Nothing remains static . . . everything is always changing. And I guess that's the way it's supposed to be. Change is what makes our lives real . . . and vital . . . and meaningful.

We cannot stop inevitable change by attempting to live as if life is the same year in and year out. We cannot eliminate the risk of error or else we'd end up doing exactly nothing. We cannot rule out the possibility of some kind of relational pain; if we try it, we end up with no meaningful relationships at all. We cannot correct our grief by being continually angry either at life or at God.

And then we hear the words of Jesus, *“Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple . . . none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.”* That is, change . . . change your ways

To be a disciple . . . is to embrace change. And it can't always be about us. We are a part of the larger picture, the larger family. Our understanding of life's value and beauty must be shaped by a knowledge of what goes on in society and in history as a whole.

Life continues to flow; life "goes on" as they say—is not stopped by whatever crises may be going on in our own lives. Life really does go on, and that is good.

Have you ever known life in such richness that you would be willing to risk the loss of your life so that some other person or persons might taste at least a bit of what you've celebrated?

† That is why women risk childbirth.

† That is why living folk donate organs and bone marrow for their loved ones.

† That is why—well before the methods of AIDS transmission were clear—some people took chances helping those who were dying with this modern-day leprosy.

† That is why some missionaries have in the past and today are willing to take the gospel into areas of the world that are unsafe, places in which they know they are in danger; but for the chance of leading one person to know the love of God in Jesus Christ, it is a risk well worth taking for them.

You cannot do this kind of thing when you are fixated on the latest place you stubbed your toe or the most recent example of someone not doing things just the way you want them done.

The ability to focus on a cause greater than ourselves gives us the kind of perspective we need to go along with life's flow.

- ✦ The lawyer is doing much more than just trying to win a case; he is helping to make some contribution to justice.
- ✦ The businesswoman, in addition to making a fair profit, is selling a product or service that is making a contribution to someone or some institution.
- ✦ The parent is doing more than changing diapers and reading bedtime stories; he is helping to create positive self-esteem in a human being who will be equipped to deal with the complexities of adulthood and who then will be in a much better position to make a contribution to society as a whole.
- ✦ The doctor is doing more than finding the right combination of medications; she is making a contribution to a patient's wholeness.
- ✦ The educator is doing more than finding out the simplest ways to assess student abilities; he is imparting knowledge that students may use to think through life and be happier or stronger or more accomplished because of it.

These people are making all the difference in the world by investing themselves in a greater cause than what is immediate or even obvious.

It is in this context that we can gain some understanding of the Old Testament story of Abraham's thinking in his willingness to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, in response to what he believed to be the directive of God. The story teaches that God provides for us in our most trying hours, when what we hold dearest of all is in danger of being taken away from us.

We cannot run from God or from the crisis; running being one of our typical ways of moving to stop life. If we will go with the flow, however, relying fully on God as we go, we will certainly learn about how faithfully God provides for us and of the richness of life past our encounter with distress.

To help us with "the larger picture," we need to be committed to something greater than ourselves—some cause, some task, or—in Christian perspective—some person, namely the person known as Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus was committed first to God and then to humanity as a whole. He was willing to lose his earthly life for the sake of the gospel's; that is, for the sake of persons in need of the good news of God's love.

In order to tell the whole story of God's love to the sinful and wicked generations of human beings, Jesus died. It was not an easy thing for him either. But he was willing to do it for God's sake and for ours.

As the probability of death began to dawn upon him, he talked about his own dread with his disciples. Painfully, he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and [the Son of Man] must be killed . . . He said all this quite openly.

And, remember, Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. Peter said to Jesus, *"Are you out of your mind? This is not what's supposed to happen with the Son of God, the Messiah. Have you forgotten your Old Testament! You're going to be a great political conqueror. You're going to save your people from Rome. Remember, Jesus? You're just a little tired now. We haven't had much rest lately. A good night's sleep will do you a world of good."*

But Jesus said, *"Peter, you are saying what the devil says to me. You're trying to get me to forget what I may be able to do not just for those of you whom I know but also for other people who need to know of God's love for them. What I'm about can't be political, and it can't be narrow. I must be faithful to God, and I must honor God at every step; at this time, it probably means that I will die. Our people don't want to know the new part of what God is saying, but I can't ignore it or forget it no matter what."* And he didn't.

In the midst of our constantly changing lives, we need to be reminded that Jesus calls us to those same kinds of values—a commitment, first to God, and then to others in need of the good news of God's love; and not just in a vague, simply "humanitarian" way, but with all we are. That is why Jesus used the words and the images that he did.

*"Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."*

With those very words, Jesus is calling you this very day to a cause greater than yourself.

He is calling you into relationship with God and to the life of Christian discipleship. If you let go, you *will* find life. To follow him, you will have to let go of life as you now know it.

It may mean finding faithful ways of doing what you do in light of your role as a Christian. It may mean taking risks you never thought you could take.

Jesus is calling you to take up a cross that could be any or all of these.

How will you respond?