

Proper 18 Year C 2019

“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”

I mean, give me a break! You know, we’d like to get some new members hereSo how’s that for a marketing slogan? In our age the experts say the church is in decline... churches all over the country struggle with budgets; declining membership.... Our culture, alas, is no longer a church going culture... and, we’re approaching stewardship season. What were the lectionary gurus thinking?... So how’s this for a sales pitch?... “You can’t follow Jesus unless you hate your family.”

Needless to say, this is another Sunday in the lectionary cycle when the preacher usually chooses to preach on Paul, or the reading from Deuteronomy... anything to avoid these difficult words of Luke’s Gospel. Luke is on something of a roll; just a few weeks ago he has Jesus saying that he doesn’t come to bring peace to the earth....but division.... So what’s going on here? Maybe it’s the so-called ‘hard words’ of Jesus to which we need to pay particular attention. Remember, God doesn’t reveal Godself straight on... God appears in irony and paradox... on our peripheral vision ... sometimes in hyperbole; in phantasm... in any case, I think it’s always true that God reveals Godself via the engaged human imagination.

So first, let's back up and look at the whole of Luke's gospel once again. We are approaching the end of year C in the lectionary, which means that beginning in Advent, the first of December, we will cease our readings in Luke, and move to year A... Matthew's year. So, I think a bit of a review might be helpful.

If you wish to remember anything about Luke, remember this: That to understand any reading, any teaching, any parable, from Luke's Gospel, you must first recall the Song of Mary that occurs in the introduction of this gospel narrative: It governs everything that comes after it... "Let it be"... she says... let it be that God has looked with favor on the dispossessed of the world... Let it be that for those of faith and Hope, there is mercy and dignity... Let it be that the arrogant and prideful are shown their folly... Let it be that the powers that be and the callous rich are brought down, and the powerless, the voiceless ones, are raised up... let it be that all have enough... Let all this be because that is the very promise of a loving God since the beginning... The promise of a just world, rightly ordered.

So Mary's song sets the stage for Luke's revolutionary agenda... that the socio-economic world is in the process of being overturned; being restored to its rightful order... In Mary's song Luke is using present tense, not future... This is

happening now... not in an apocalyptic future, but here and now... The world transforming before our eyes... every parable, every teaching that follows in Luke serves this song of liberation, this song of revolution... That's the first thing for us to note.

The second, you may remember, is Luke's narrative description of the emerging church, the continuing church, the evolution of the people of faith... beginning with Adam through the line of the prophets and patriarchs and matriarchs... it is extremely important to Luke that Jesus' authority is found in the lineage of the prophets come before him... that this movement he has engendered is not some new-fangled, new-age religious cult; but the reinvention of the ancient Jewish Faith and practice; the worship of the God of their ancestors; a fulfillment of the Torah and the prophetic tradition. Luke traces the faith through the storied history of Israel... through their slavery and liberation, through their heresy and orthodoxy; through famine and exile... And in spite of conquering empires, the church has survived and is still becoming. Being remade... In the person of Jesus, the church is still about its mission of this reordering of creation; honoring the ancient promise... restoring the creation into what God has always dreamed it to be... Luke is also the author of the Book of Acts, which deals with the growth of the church beyond Galilee and Israel into the

lands of the gentiles... Luke is describing the early cosmopolitan church expanding beyond its Semitic roots... So Luke is concerned with the viability of the church... indeed his audience is a church community of Jewish Christians probably in Antioch, maybe Rome, maybe Jerusalem... the church is, in Luke's eyes, taking root, spreading like wildfire, but connected to the sweep of tradition.

And then the other theme running through this gospel is Luke's recognition of prayer as practice... that the predisposition of the faithful is one of heightened awareness... Of paying attention... of keeping awake.... Keeping perspective... Prayer of course takes practice, and discipline, and self-awareness, and empathy... and I would argue that it is most effective and powerful in community....To live in a predisposition of prayer in short takes character... and that's a choice... So much of life is about choice.

So that brings us back to our reading... I've beat around the bush long enough... Unless you hate your family, your very life, you can't be my disciple... Some more hard words from Jesus... What do we make of such a teaching... Well, context will help us here... Luke is, as I have said, very much aware of his tradition, as is his audience.... These are practicing Jews.... There is a passage in the 32nd chapter of Exodus in which Moses exhorts the elders of the camp of Israel in the

Sinai desert to hate and kill their family members in order to demonstrate their allegiance to the one God... This passage is not in the lectionary for obvious reasons (you can look it up)... but the story of the Exodus, and the sojourn in Sinai is legendary, mythological... Like the Arabian nights... imaginative, fanciful.... So this legend is told to make a forceful point to the hearer who would have heard this exotic story told generation after generation....You may remember the rest of the story from Sunday school: The elders are tested for their allegiance, and then Moses goes up the mountain for an encounter with 'I am.' And after a long time Moses comes down the mountain with the tablets of the law. He has just finished convincing God not to destroy these wandering, disobedient, stubborn, stiff-necked people, and what does he find?... He finds the people of Israel in debauchorous reveling, and worse, he finds them worshiping the idol of the golden calf... a calf made from the gold collected from the people... an idol made from their wealth, in short.

Luke knows that this is perhaps the most critical moment in Israel's history... They have a choice... they can choose the God of Abraham... the God of Love who promises a just and merciful world, a world of shared abundance, a world of inclusion and embrace... or they can choose the calf.. The calf, the false God of self-sufficiency.

The gospel text that we just read would not have been lost on Luke's audience. They know the famous story of proving loyalty in the desert... And this for these disciples is another critical time... another critical choice... This passage is all about loyalty folks; a fierce loyalty... The question is this: Do we choose self-sufficiency... do we choose our illusions, our distractions, do we choose a false sense of control... do we worship our families and our family secrets... Do we choose to believe that our own lives are of ultimate importance?... Do we worship the idols of our self-sufficiency? I don't know about y'all but I struggle with all of those things. But the choice here is idolatry, or Love's possibilities.

We are being asked here to live into God's enlightened perspective on things... that the good of the created order is what takes precedence over all other matters of importance... In other words there is no self-interest... that is an illusion... self-interest, perhaps the governing rubric of our time... There is no self-interest... only selfless interest... That is God's perspective... that nothing matters but the greater good... that God, Godself is characterized by giving up God's own life for the greater mystery... That God's life serves the great mystery, the mystery that is Love... That is what taking up our cross means... that our lives only exist for the well-being of our neighbor, our world.... Everything else is subject... everything else only follows.... God is loyal... and we are to be loyal..... and in the context of

the story of proving loyalty in the desert: The stakes are high... The choice is critical; and the choice is urgent.

Brothers and sisters... It's either God, or the illusion of idols that we must choose... and that means, no less, that God is asking everything of us... God wants our lives as the means of restoring this world in which we live... Counting the cost of such a choice is absurd... because the cost is all that we are... because love requires all that we are... Love requires all that we have to give... So the cost is great. That is Luke's point! The cost is great... but know this today, good people, that to live a life of Love is worth the cost... know, remember... that Love banishes fear... Know, remember... that Love can manage uncertainty. Know, remember... that Love thrives in possibility. It is love that brings peace of mind and joy... It is love that transforms and restores... It is love that is the very life of God, not aloof in the heavens above, but alive in this world among us... If we are in love, we are in God... So choose love good people, don't bother to count the cost... Choose love above all else... Love is our loyalty... more than anything... more than life itself.