

The Rev. Dennis J. Reid
 The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost | Luke 14:25-33
 St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Sinking Spring, PA
 September 8th 2019

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

"Now large crowds were traveling with Jesus."

Luke begins this part of Jesus' story with a brief word of commentary, that indeed, Jesus had a whole bunch of fellow travelers around him at this stage in his journey. It almost feels like a throwaway line -- that it doesn't bear much significance on the overall scope of the story -- but there's a lot going on in this little introduction.

Apparently, even in the ancient world, news traveled fast. By now, word of Jesus' many miracles and healings would have meant that his reputation preceded him, and people from all over the whole region weren't just expecting him as he moved through the countryside -- they actually came along with him. Can you imagine being one of the twelve disciples? The daily grind must have gotten to them. Each day in Jesus' presence must have been unimaginably wonderful, yet it also brought with it the crowds. If you're one of the twelve, you've now seen Jesus feed thousands of people via miraculous bread and fish multiplication *twice*, the number of unclean spirits exorcised from people probably became difficult to count, and oh yeah, there were probably very, very few moments of freedom, of leisure, of being away from these pressing crowds of people, crowds that seemed to follow you everywhere only to continue to grow.

I do wonder if the twelve ever resented the crowds. After all, they were there first, weren't they -- they were chosen to follow Jesus. Like the laborers in the vineyard, they'd been there since the beginning -- but here come all these other folks trying to get a piece of the action without, maybe, as much of the commitment. Again, hear Luke's words: "Now large crowds were *traveling* with Jesus." Had the crowds all been equally committed, I imagine Luke would have said, "Now Jesus' growing number of *disciples* followed him wherever he went." But that probably wasn't the case; it very well may have been that the crowds were there because they'd never seen or heard of anything like this before, and they were hoping to see the next unforgettable moment from Jesus.

And then, almost on cue, Jesus gives it to them, in the form of a really tough pill to swallow:

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

To hear Jesus' words about the hatred of family as literally true is, at best, unimaginative; at worst, to miss his point entirely. But, as a phrase, it is not without its shock value. Yet without the benefit of hearing in his voice what must have been a note of generous exaggeration, we are left to ponder the great gap between love and hate and then consider if what Jesus truly meant is that no love that we know in this life can possibly compare with the kind of love that *comes* from God and that we *owe* to God. God must take such a place of honor in our lives that even our closest loves -- those who are most dear to us -- place a distant second. And if our loves for them -- for our spouses, our children, our parents, our grandchildren, our siblings, our friends -- are the greatest loves in relationship that we know in this life, how much more might the boundless, unconditional, complete love of God mean to us?

You will certainly have your own reaction to Jesus' words. But to stay with Luke's setting for this story, imagine how the crowds must have felt; imagine how they would have reacted -- the crowds who were ready for miracles and wonders coupled with kindness and compassion. The crowds who, perhaps for weeks or months, heard such good things about this guy. The

crowds who were really enjoying this ride they were fortunate enough to be on.

And then reality sets in, that maybe there's a little more to this Jesus than free bread and good preaching. And, I think, for many, that also meant that there was little more reason to keep traveling with him. Luke doesn't quite say it this way in how he tells the story, but when Jesus began to tell the hard truths, the ones that, deep down, we know to be difficult but accurate, you can almost hear Luke narrating and saying 'and after these difficult words, *fewer* crowds were traveling with Jesus.'

But that probably wasn't a big problem for him. After all, Jesus' goal wasn't to have huge crowds following him. He didn't need the ego boost. Instead, he was looking for disciples, those who truly would follow not just where his footsteps fell -- not just watching the miracles and healings and hearing his words -- but staying on the Way he traveled -- loving God, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, listening and acting on his Word. There is a not-so-subtle difference, and to be fair, the road is not an easy one. The disciples, the ones who were there from the beginning and who really believed this stuff (when they actually understood it), knew this road but still had to make a choice: will I stay on this road of discipleship, or will I leave with some of the crowds? Because really, we, like they, are no different. There are days when we travel alongside Jesus because it's kinda fun, and there are days when we are *disciples* in his Way.

And for Jesus, his Way would take him to Jerusalem. And in some fashion, we who follow Jesus follow him there and onto Calvary; he knew the cross awaited him, and we who know this story know that it awaits us as well -- as witnesses to Jesus on his cross -- as a place of deep, unbearable sadness at the death of our innocent Christ, as a place of reckoning for the sin of the world, as a place to confront the very nature of shame and death -- and then, because of Christ's resurrection, to see the cross ironically and wonderfully as the way of life for the world. That is the way of the cross, a way that you and I and every disciple must face and ask ourselves 'will I follow Christ down this road and pick up my cross, or will my following at some point lose interest, unable to take the next step, deciding against it after considering the immense price?'

Said another way -- am I in this for the benefits or because of the cost?

We are called to pick up our cross and follow Jesus, not just to admire him from afar. That is the cost he asks of us and the cost that makes many follow him at all. Because in the cross we no longer see death, the image of finality and our ending, but rather we see Christ and his love, a love so great that it conquered death and opened for us the Way of life, the Way that he asks us to follow, and thankfully, the Way that he has promised to walk with us this day and always.

Amen.