

We're Number Two!

Luke 14:25-33

September 9, 2007

I.

I did not plan it this way. I realize you have a letter in your service bulletins from our stewardship chairman asking us to increase our pledges, and then you just heard a Gospel message telling us to give up all our possessions. I assure you that any connection between those two things is coincidental.

But this Gospel message is important. And its importance is not in taking literally the things that Jesus said, but rather in understanding why he said them and what he meant.

Imagine for a moment a candidate for public office. We have seen several presidential debates on television during the last few months. What if one of those candidates said, "Vote for me and I will increase taxes, I will lower wages, prices will go up, and you might lose your home."

What would you think about that? Would you vote for that candidate? Is that, in effect, something like what Jesus was doing in today's Gospel reading? I don't think so.

To get a better sense of the reading let's change the scenario. Suppose you were on a ship that was starting to sink, or an airplane that was losing altitude, and the captain told you to "get rid of all your possessions, throw everything overboard." That would change things, wouldn't it? You probably would do what the captain said.

What's the difference? In the first case, listening to the candidate, it's likely you would be thinking only about material things. In the second case, where the ship or plane might be going down, you would be thinking of your life.

I believe the second case is more like what Jesus said. He never promised us material gains or profits in this world. Instead he promised us life. Everything that he taught and preached throughout Scripture was focused on how we are to live our lives and love one another in preparation for the coming of God's kingdom, and the chance to live forever in God's presence.

II.

Sometimes, however, Jesus used strong words. Sometimes he gave extreme examples, or used emotionally charged ideas to communicate with the crowds around him. We heard this in other readings when Jesus said things like those who "drink my blood abide in me" (Jn. 6:56), or "if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out" (Mk. 9:47), or "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Mt. 10:34). These all have meanings apart from the literal words.

And it's also important to understand the context in which he made some of these statements. Here's a good example of the importance of context. I suppose most of you have heard William Shakespeare quoted for the proposition that "the first thing we do [is to] kill all the lawyers." We see it on bumper stickers, tee shirts, and even coffee cups.

But let's look at the play itself. It's from Part Two of King Henry VI, Act IV. The Duke of York, portrayed as a sinister person, wanted to overthrow the rightful king and seize power. The evil duke had hired a gang of convicts and lowlifes to stir up a phony rebellion that secretly would be organized so that he would be able to suppress it and look like a hero. He thought this would elevate him to power.

But then these devious plotters were discussing how they could gain the throne for themselves, and were concerned about ordinary people getting in the way. They wanted to impose their will

on the people and prevent them from rising up in opposition. One of these scoundrels, Dick the Butcher, offered a solution and said, "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers."

As a result, Shakespeare's real meaning was not critical of lawyers at all; it was just the opposite. He implicitly was praising them. Shakespeare actually held lawyers up as guardians of the rule of law, defenders of freedom, and supporters of the people. And he placed the words that seemed critical of lawyers in the mouth of a scheming villain.

So we see that context is important. Words that are not understood in relation to the setting in which they were spoken can be misleading, not only in Shakespeare but also in the Bible.

III.

So, let's look at what Jesus said. And this, of course, is the same Jesus who said such comforting things as "come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Mt. 11:28), and "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness" (Jn. 8:12).

Today, however, Jesus said three things to the people that might not seem so comforting on first impression. He said that to be disciples they had to hate their family members; they had to carry the cross and follow him; and they had to give up all of their possessions. This isn't the way that a preacher today would invite people into the church, is it? And if not, why not?

First, let's look at the context. In Luke's Gospel Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, to his death, and he was aware of what was going to happen to him. He knew that because of his teachings, and because of who he was, he would be mocked, scourged, and crucified.

And the Gospel tells us that large crowds were traveling with Jesus. Some probably were disciples while others probably were thinking about it. Jesus wanted them to fully understand what they would be getting into if they actually accompanied him into Jerusalem and allowed themselves to be identified with him in front of the Romans, and the Jews who opposed him.

So Jesus did what we have done as parents. He spoke emphatically to be sure there was no ambiguity or confusion. We have done the same with our children. And sometimes our kids claim we send out conflicting messages. We tell them we love them, and then we say things that they think are harsh but that we know are for their own good.

That's why Jesus said what he said on his fateful journey to the cross two thousand years ago. He wanted people to understand the potential costs. That's why he also used the analogies of how someone planning to build a tower first would estimate the expenses, and how a king planning a war first would consider the military strength of each side.

And when he referred to hating family members, he did not use that word as we understand it today. The Hebrew verb for hate does not mean to despise, or even to dislike. It means to love less, or to value less highly, or to leave aside. Thus, what Jesus really was saying was that to be his disciples the people had to love him more than they loved their family members. They could not value worldly relationships more than their relationship with him.

This idea also was behind Jesus' instruction that people must carry the cross as they followed him. He was asking them to allow his teaching, and the sacrifice he knew he was about to make, to govern their lives. He called for total commitment, self-denial, and obedience because the stakes were high. Discipleship could lead to martyrdom. Jesus wanted disciples, not camp followers. He wanted those in the crowds to be dedicated believers, not groupies.

Finally, he made it clear that following him meant leaving worldly things behind. He told the people they had to give up their possessions. The key words here are "give up," not "their possessions." He did not mean they actually had to dispose of their possessions, but rather

that they had to give up their attachments to them. They could not allow possessions to interfere with their commitment to him. The place of possessions in their lives had to change. He was primary, possessions were secondary.

IV.

I said earlier that the stakes were high for disciples in Jesus' time. They still are high today, but in a different way. In America, people no longer are persecuted because of their religious views, but the consequences of acceptance or rejection of Jesus are the same. The basic principles Jesus set forth still are valid and do not change, although we apply them in a twenty-first century setting.

We still are called to put Jesus first, and not to let other relationships, even our family relationships, draw us away from the faith. We still are called to carry the cross, and to give Jesus first priority in our lives. And we still are called to recognize that our possessions are not really ours but are gifts from God, and we are just stewards of them. In modern jargon, we might be called to "look out for number two" because Jesus is number one.

But these things are not chores or burdens. Although Jesus spoke of the costs of discipleship because of the cross, we are able to live into the joys of discipleship because of the same cross. We are blessed in ways not apparent to Jesus' followers at the time. The crucifixion and resurrection had not yet happened. They didn't know about the joy and hope that was just over the horizon. We, however, do know. The Good News had not yet been published to the people when Jesus was still alive. For us, however, through the Holy Spirit we know the truth.

And part of that truth is that Jesus asks us to give him first call on our lives. He wants us to make faith in him our first priority, and he wants us to know that as we live in faith in this world we will have gained eternity in the next.

V.

But even though that might sound hopeful and encouraging, we invariably find that, on our own, we just cannot do everything Jesus says every day, all the time. We struggle when we try to do it alone. That's why Jesus left the church behind. That's why we live in a community of worship and faith here at St. Thomas.

If you're like me you start your morning absolutely convinced that you are a good Christian, that you know what Jesus wants you to do, and that you know that you can do it. So far nothing bad has happened, prospects for the day are good, and there is every reason to be optimistic. Then, you have to get out of bed.

And if you're like me the world creeps in and that's when things start to go awry. I might think that I have tried to count the costs of discipleship, but there always are cost over-runs. The world brings its own change orders. In some way or another, at some time or another, I fall short as we all do.

But if we take the meaning of today's Gospel to heart, if we make Jesus number one and give him priority in all we do, then we will bring the meaning of this Gospel to life. We will be answering his call to live our lives in him. And we can do that through the church, not because it is organized religion but because it is Christ's body that he left for us. And I have a whole different sermon on the problems of organized religion. That will be another time.

In short, Jesus Christ is the greatest gift that God could have given us, except for our very lives. He calls us to accept that gift, to use that gift, to appropriate that gift into the core of our being, and through faith to pass it on in the sense and spirit of true discipleship. *Amen.*