**Love More**

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**Texts: Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Luke 14:25-33**

“There was once someone who did such amazing things and said such wonderful things that people followed him.” This is the way that the lessons about parables begin in Godly Play, a curriculum for sharing scripture stories with children.

And this is the way that we enter the story today. See, Jesus has been going around doing and saying amazing things – healing people, embracing the excluded, challenging unjust systems, standing up to the oppressors, feeding the hungry, welcoming the ashamed, empowering others for faithful work, calming the storms of life, and telling stories that gave hope in a society where peace was maintained by force and the economic disparity was wide and deep. He tells stories filled with love and grace and paints a picture of the coming kindom where everyone thrives and no one has to be left out.

So, you can see why this guy’s got a following. Everywhere Jesus goes, amazing things happen, and people follow him just to see what will happen next. There’s a scene in The Incredibles 2 where Mr. Incredible, a superhero hidden in plain sight as an ordinary human, comes home to find a neighbor's child, who has witnessed the real Mr. Incredible in action by accident, just sitting on his trike watching him. When asked what he was waiting for, the child exclaims, “I don’t know…something amazing, I guess.” That’s it…the crowds don’t know exactly who this Jesus is, but they know he’s amazing and they don’t want to miss it.

So, today’s text must have been shocking to them. They’re travelling down the road, the excitement is electric, they’re ready to hang on every word. And Jesus says, “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.” (v. 26)

Well, then.

Now, as Mitzi Smith, professor of New Testament at Columbia Seminary, says in her commentary on this passage, “No one considers hate a fruit of the Spirit; rather, it is commonly viewed as the antithesis of love.” After nine weeks of work with the fruit of the spirit, can you name them with me…love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control…yep, no hate. So, what’s up with that, Jesus?

So, since for many of us, this was likely the first and last thing we heard in the scripture reading today, let’s take a minute to deal with it. The word for hate in Greek, *misei*, is less “intense hostility” or “a wish for ill will” as it is “a sense of valuing something much less than another” …it’s used in comparison. In Hebrew, which Jesus would have known and spoken, it’s idiomatic… “Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated” (Romans 9:13), for instance, doesn’t mean that God wanted Esau to suffer ill will, but that Jacob was favored. Or when the text tells us that Leah was hated (Genesis 29:31), it’s more that Rachel was favored more or Leah was loved less.

Matthew also relates this story, but tames it a little, saying “the one that loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me” (Matt. 10:37). But Matthew has Jesus speaking to the disciples, and in Luke, it’s to this huge crowd of followers. Luke likely chose the more inflammatory words on purpose to shock these listeners, this crowd caught up in the excitement and thrill of the moment, and today’s listeners, the church, sitting here years later in a complacency built from time and security, reminding us how serious this decision to truly follow Jesus is.

Now this is a Bible verse that has caused no end of discord in our house after our children discovered and latched onto it. Hey Mom, do you love Jesus more than us? The answer is not easy, but it has less to do with humans in front of me and more about how humanity chooses to live. If my children tried to persuade me to live in a way that was contrary to Jesus’s way, I would not do it, because I love Jesus’s way more than the ways that contradict it. And when they choose a less faithful way, I will tell them so, because I cannot allow that love to be silent. I will hope and pray that they choose to walk this way with me, but I will not follow them away from Jesus.

Let me ask a different way: if you were asked, for sake of family or friendship, or for gain at work or community, to choose to follow untruths, to perpetuate divisions, or to cause harm to others, what would you choose? What do you love more?

Luke’s hyperbolic speech is meant to make us realize that being a Jesus-follower is going to involve daily choices about where we put our allegiance and when we choose to push back against the kingdoms of this world, even when our friends and family may be on the other side.

Jesus has already told them that to become his followers means to “take up their cross daily” (Luke 9:23) and he doubles down here, “whoever does not carry the cross cannot be my disciple” (v. 27). Being a disciple is a daily struggle and daily renewal of our commitment to truly be kindom builders everywhere when it would be so much easier to lay down the cross and do what our society tells us we should want – power, wealth, and uniformity. Being a disciple is a daily struggle to choose to trust Jesus even when his way is not the way of family, friends, or tradition. It doesn’t necessarily mean that you have to walk away from or destroy your loved ones, but that you don’t allow yourself to be complicit in hurtful actions or inactions or in the spreading of hatefulness or untruths.

Okay, Jesus follows this with two parables, both exhorting the listeners to consider the cost of discipleship. If you build a tower, make sure you have the means to get the materials, lest you be unable to finish it and be subject to ridicule. And if you go to war, be sure you have the force you need, lest you just get trampled in the battle.

But friends, Jesus isn’t calling us to build towers out of bricks and mortar, he’s inviting us to be a part of the building of the kindom of God in the world. When others are erecting brick walls and iron fences, Jesus is calling us to build bridges and beloved community. And Jesus isn’t commanding us to wage war on a battlefield, he’s calling us to be fierce defenders of true shalom, protecting the peace and wellbeing of all. When others are building war machines, Jesus is calling us to the fierce defense of peace.

If you’re going to be a builder of the kindom, are you willing to build it to completion…to really build a society where social and economic systems don’t determine human worth, to really build a community where possessions and power are shared equitably and everyone has a chance to thrive even when they didn’t come from privilege? Are you willing to pay more so that the people who make your clothes and your food can earn a living wage and thrive? If you’re going to challenge earthly kingdoms, are you willing to stand up and speak truth even when everyone tells you to sit down and be quiet, to refuse to be complicit in the oppression of others by supporting ethical producers even when it comes at a personal cost? Are you willing to defend the downtrodden by standing with them and giving up your privilege so they can be heard? And with every choice you make, refuse to give in or give up until the kindom has come?

Jesus knows what those crowds don’t understand yet. Soon it will be his church that will be his hands and feet and heart in the world. We are being called to do those things that Christ did – healing people, embracing the excluded, challenging unjust systems, standing up to the oppressors, feeding the hungry, welcoming the ashamed, empowering others for faithful work, calming the storms of life, and telling stories that give hope in a society where peace is maintained by force and the economic disparity is wide and deep. As long as there are people are suffering, we are called to be Christ together in ways that will deeply irritate the rich and powerful because it challenges their security and way of life. Jesus was a radical force, a grassroots leader who sought to create a fair and just world for all people. We tame him as just our personal savior, but he calls us to join him in the work of salvation for the world.

I have to admit when I saw that this was the lectionary passage for the day, my first thought was, really…on Rally Day, when all the families are gathered and we are celebrating the beginning of the new Christian Formation year after a summer away? But then I wondered if it wasn’t the perfect text for the day we are jumping back in and making our choices about what we will do and participate in this year.

Today we are the excited crowd, full of enthusiasm and just waiting to see what will happen next. But how will we clothe ourselves for the task of loving more? How will we strengthen ourselves for the daily challenges and choices we make as to how we live as citizens of kindom not of this world in midst of this world? How will we use our time and choose what we prioritize each day?

Today, Jesus calls us to take stock, ensuring we have the knowledge, resources, and community we need to do this work. Maybe that’s recommitting to daily devotions or regular attendance at worship where we practice kindom living together. Maybe it’s getting new perspectives by wondering together about faith in Christian Formation. Maybe it’s coming together to support each other through the political and personal storms swirling around us? Maybe it’s getting involved in a mission team because we can do those miraculous things of healing and feeding and uplifting others when we do it faithfully together as the Body of Christ. What do you choose this year to give you the strength to love Jesus more? Amen.