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“Choosing Life”

A sermon by Katherine Higgins

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

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Deuteronomy 30:15–20; Luke 14:25–35

Gracious and loving God, silence within us any voice but your own, so that hearing we may believe, and believing we may act in accordance with your word and your will for us, for the building of your kingdom. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

I am delighted to be here this morning. I'm grateful to Marilyn and others for the invitation to preach. Over the past year or so I have enjoyed getting to know this congregation and its faithful witness in the city of Durham. I will admit to you, though, that I agreed to preach *before* I read the lectionary texts for this morning. Before I encountered this provocation, and wondered if this really is the best message for a guest preacher to preach on a Communion Sunday to a congregation in the midst of transition. This is not Jesus at his most polite or his most big-tent, welcome-all-comers self. This is Jesus with an edge. This is feather ruffling Jesus, who reminds us that following him is costly business indeed.

This passage begins with Luke telling us that large crowds had gathered around Jesus and were travelling with him. By this point in Luke's gospel, Jesus had gained some notoriety: he had been casting out unclean spirits and fevers, calling disciples, healing lepers and paralytics. He'd been stirring up trouble with the religious authorities by challenging their teaching on fasting, ritual cleanliness, and Sabbath observance. Jesus had taught on the plain and on the mount, and he fed

five thousand hungry people with just a few measly loaves and fishes. I get the sense that Jesus has grown skeptical of the crowds and their motivation for being near him – because this teaching seems designed to winnow the crowd. To call out those who were there just to see a spectacle. Or potential calamity. Or gain some wealth or status.

Now if Jesus had been the kind of church-growth expert that we read about today, he might have taken a different tack. He might have considered making lattes for the crowds. Or offering after-school programs. Or been a bit more... I don't know... *seeker* friendly. By the way, if you're interested in what Jesus might have done to build a movement, just Google "church growth," and you'll be inundated with sites like: The five most important church-growth principles; ten enemies to church growth; 60+ innovative church growth strategies from the life of Paul. And you may not be surprised to learn that this section of Luke was not included in one list of the top 35 Bible verses about church growth.

No. In this passage we see an image of Jesus who is decidedly uninterested in the size of his following. Rather, he is interested in developing followers who are committed, even to the extent of hating father and mother, brother and sister, spouse and children, and even life itself. Now scholars and biblical interpreters seem to agree that Jesus' use of the word "hate" was somewhat of a rhetorical flourish, and that in this context, "hate" is used to describe a lesser form of love. That is, the hated thing is not necessarily despised itself, but is subordinated to a greater love. And so, those things around which we order our lives and our identities – namely, our families – no longer have the privileged position when it comes to being a disciple. Becoming a disciple involves a radical reorientation of our lives. As Jesus said, "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." This is a difficult invitation, indeed, and especially because we know where he's headed: To Jerusalem. To Golgotha. To the cross. To death. Is this really what he is asking of his disciples? Of us?

And then Jesus tells two mini-parables to drive home the point about calculating the costs before embarking on a project. The builder is subject to ridicule because he began building – laid the foundation, only to discover that he did not have the

resources to finish. And the second mini-parable is uncannily apropos of our current situation: a king who considers the cost of going to war – sizing up how his troops compare with the enemy’s troops before determining whether to attack or seek peace.

As you all know, there is a good bit of counting of costs going on right now in Washington and around the country, as Congress decides whether to support the president’s desire for a short-term, targeted military attack in Syria, following the death of nearly 1500 civilians as a result of a chemical weapons attack. The costs being considered include the number of troops, the strength of the armed forces, the potential loss of life. But there is also credibility to consider. Political capital. Our relationship with our allies – and with our enemies for that matter. Our ability to secure important resources. The likelihood of moral injury. Human suffering seems inevitable in this situation and is already present. But whose suffering is most costly? And how long are we able to stand in the face of it? Counting costs is not only about knowing the bottom line. It’s about knowing our values and prioritizing them. Jesus said “blessed are the peacemakers,” and also that he sought out and lifted up those who were marginalized, victimized, and those most vulnerable. Which vision do we prioritize?

As a Jewish man in first-century Palestine, Jesus knew the Hebrew Scriptures. He knew the religious law, the Torah, that he often challenged; he had read Deuteronomy. In the part of that book we read today, Moses and the Israelites stand on the brink of entering the promised land, and Moses tells them to “choose life.” Moses knew that he would not make it across the Jordan with the Israelites – just as, surely, Jesus knew that he was also heading toward certain death. Moses’ parting words challenge the Israelites to make choices for life and prosperity – for security and stability – by maintaining their end of the covenantal relationship with God. Moses tells them, “Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors.”

And yet Jesus – the one who came so that we may have life and have it abundantly¹ – demands of those who would be his disciples to hate even life itself. Hate again. That secondary-form-of-love word that signals to us that Jesus is asking us to prioritize following him even above the preservation of our lives. Jesus is asking us – demanding us – not to make an idol of life. There are echoes of an earlier statement made by Jesus: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?”²

Christine Pohl highlights the tension in these two texts. “A vibrant relationship with God holds the promise of flourishing, prosperity, and long life. By contrast, the future Jesus offers seems hard – to follow him we must live as if we are anticipating crucifixion. Is it possible to choose life *and* pick up the cross? Somehow both invitations are part of Christian discipleship.”³

The life of Christian discipleship that Jesus calls us to is a hard life. A costly life. It’s a risky life indeed because it means setting aside the things we cling to for safety, for security in order that we might live wholeheartedly. Jesus’ injunction to “count the costs” is not insurance against facing vulnerability, or weakness, or ridicule – even death itself. He is not suggesting that by planning ahead we can avoid pain. Jesus is asking us to radically reorient our lives and our values, making room for the possibility that vulnerability and pain, weakness, ridicule and even death on the cross may hold the key to new and abundant life. Isn’t that good news?

Some of you may have heard the story of Antoinette Tuff, who made the news a couple of weeks ago.⁴ Tuff is an elementary school bookkeeper in Decatur, GA who spent hours talking with an armed gunman who entered her school intent on

¹ John 10:10b

² Luke 9:23–24

³ <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2188>

⁴ http://www.salon.com/2013/08/22/the_story_the_right_hates_antoinette_tuffs_courage/

wreaking havoc. Tuff was compassionate, empathetic, willing to see both the humanity and the pain of a young man in crisis. She shared her own story of heartbreak and despair with him, sharing also the promise that things will get better. She told the mentally ill 20-year old that she loved him, as she persuaded him to put down his weapons and surrender to police. When it was all over, Tuff admitted that she had been terrified, but that she was “praying on the inside” as her pastor had taught her. Staring into the face of destruction and death, Tuff chose life. She chose life – not with clanging cymbals or noisy gongs. She chose life with compassion and love, embracing her vulnerability in order that she might keep her sights set on the humanity of the gunman.

Frederick Buechner described what makes a Christian – or what we might call a disciple: “Some think of a Christian as one who necessarily believes certain things. That Jesus was the Son of God, say. Or that Mary was a virgin. Or that the Pope is infallible. Or that all other religions are all wrong. Some think of a Christian as one who necessarily does certain things. Such as going to church. Getting baptized. Giving up liquor and tobacco. Reading the Bible. Doing a good deed a day. Some think of a Christian as just a Nice Guy. Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me” (John 14:6). He didn’t say that any particular ethic, doctrine, or religion was the way, the truth, and the life. He said that he was. He didn’t say that it was by believing or doing anything in particular that you could “come to the Father.” He said that it was only by him – by living, participating in, being caught up by, the way of life that he embodied, that was his way.”⁵

In a few moments, we will be invited to this table – set by Jesus, prepared for you and for me. At this table we remember the cost that Jesus paid – the cost of his own body and blood – broken so that we might have abundant life. At this table we remember and celebrate the promise that suffering and brokenness will not have the last word. Even death cannot overturn God’s good news – that new life and restoration are possible even for us. In the mystery of the sacrament, God’s grace is made known to us, strengthening us and preparing us for lives of commitment and

⁵ Buechner, Frederick. *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC*. New York: Harper Collins. 1993. p. 16.

discipleship. So consider the cost. And then come to the table. Because there is good news here for you, and life. Come. Amen.

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