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Luke 14:25-33

### **The King Coming from Afar**

Large crowds were traveling with Jesus. You would think he would be pleased. Isn't that what leaders want? But, "Turning to them, he said, 'Whoever comes to me and doesn't hate father and mother, spouse and children, and brothers and sisters—yes, even one's own life—cannot be my disciple.'"

Why did Jesus use the word "hate?" And he uses it for our most significant relationships, even our relationship with ourselves. If a large crowd was traveling with you and you wanted to reduce their number to where you might be standing alone, this would do it. What did he mean?

Let's start with what we mean by "the self." I am a constellation of relationships past and present that form me. You are part of me, and my mother, my wife and children, my friends and family, and those I may think of as my enemies. This network is me. If I get Alzheimer's disease and forget my past and present relationships my "self" fades away. Could Jesus be saying that discipleship means putting Jesus in that mix and giving him primacy?

Jesus, who is God's embodiment, looms so large that he takes precedence over all others. Jesus stands between me and my relationship with my father, mother, spouse and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even my own self. I don't have an immediate relationship with anyone except Jesus who empowers and relativizes all my relationships. Loving him first allows us to love others better.

Jesus used the word "hate" to jolt us into seeing how bringing Jesus into our network of relationships changes every relationship. He uses the word "hate" to open a gap between me and any other person and then fills that gap with himself.

The hymn "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" captures this experience though it often gets sentimentalized and loses its vibrancy. With this decision every relationship past and present is placed into the mimetic force field emanating from Jesus. Everything is colored, influenced, and shaped by the magnetism of his presence. I am not running my own life anymore and yet I am more me than ever.

He then says, "Whoever doesn't carry their own cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." Just when we think that following Jesus involves relinquishing all authority, that we are just

puppets on a string, Jesus adds that we each have a cross and we must assume responsibility for carrying it if we want to be his disciple. What could he mean with this?

Jesus carried his cross when he refused to resort to violence as a way of avoiding his suffering and death. Instead he carried his cross. He took violence upon himself rather than inflicting it on his persecutors. He forgave. Does he mean for us to do the same? Listen to his words again. "Whoever doesn't carry their own cross and follow me cannot be my disciples." Could he be urging us to refrain from retaliation when we are attacked as a way of stopping the contagious spread of an escalating eye-for-an-eye? Violence is the most contagious and lethal disease known to the human species.

We are the crowd traveling with Jesus and we always have a decision to make as to whom we follow. He doesn't court us with soft music and seductive words. He doesn't overwhelm us with spectacle and drama, demanding we make an impulsive decision.

In the Nuremburg Rallies in Germany in the 30's Adolph Hitler came on the stage in a flourish of power after the crowds had been primed for hours. Anger and belligerent rhetoric stirred the crowd into frenzy as Hitler spoke of nationalism and the humiliation of the German people by the Allies at the end of WWI. The crowd caught the contagion, lost touch with their individual identities and coalesced into a force ready to take on the world and destroy those labeled as enemies within. Everyone there felt excitement as they lifted each other from their depression and despair. They were all his disciples ready to do his bidding.

Jesus doesn't want us to lose touch with our thinking and be under the influence of the crowd around us. He asks us to go inward and do careful calculations before deciding whether or not to follow him.

"If one of you wanted to build a tower, wouldn't you first sit down and calculate the cost, to determine whether you have enough money to complete it. Otherwise, when you have laid the foundation but couldn't finish the tower, all who see it will begin to belittle you. They will say, 'Here's the person who began construction and couldn't complete it!'"

Do you see how this is just the opposite of emotionalism, of using group mimetic pressure to coerce a decision? We were right to be suspicious of this sort of religious and political manipulation. Jesus' approach is just the opposite. He uses our fear of belittlement to steer us toward thoughtful reflection.

Many of us have never really thought about making a conscious decision to follow Jesus after careful deliberation. We just assumed it was a belief system or religion that we happened to be born into and we could go along with or not. Many of us did go along but now more and more of us aren't. We didn't really understand that being a disciple meant something specific that we

had to choose. We didn't know there was a cross to carry that entailed a commitment to non-retaliation and forgiveness. We have to think about this and Jesus said we should.

Strangely, the last image Jesus uses to communicate what we must do if we want to follow him has a king thinking about going to war against another king. The king calculates how many soldiers he has and how many the other king has and there are twice as many of them. If our king decides he can't win, though he may decide he can and go ahead anyway, but if he decides he can't, he will send a negotiator to the other king when the other king is still a long way off to discuss terms for peace. Jesus' concluding sentence is "In the same way, none of you who are unwilling to give up all of your possessions can be my disciples."

If we want to be a disciple there has to be a change in our relationship to everything we possess. In short we have to give up possessing. Everything we think of as ours; I own that, that person is mine, that's my wife or my church, or my son or my money, all of that has to be given up. We give up our possessing so that we can receive it all back as gift, as pure grace, as belonging to the king who is coming. We negotiate terms of peace with a king far stronger than us who is inevitably coming. To negotiate peace is to become a disciple.

Along these lines, Laura and I are in the process of setting up a new will. As part of the process we are creating a trust called the Truby Family Trust. When we have finished this process neither Laura nor I will own anything. We will have given up all our possessions, or our possessing, because all our possession will belong to this new trust, this new entity, that is the two of us together.

Becoming a disciple is much the same. Private and personal ownership of all our possessions and relationships gets transferred out of our possession and into a new entity headed by Christ who gives everything back to us as gift. He is the king coming from afar who has overwhelming power. But here the metaphor breaks down, for the power the king comes toward us with is the power of love and in the end love overwhelms us all. Amen.