The Cost of Discipleship

Pentecost 12, September 4, 2022

Luke 14: 25-33 Russell Mitchell-Walker

This week as our Faith Formation Committee met, for our opening devotion we reflected on todays gospel passage by reading it twice and reflecting on some questions: Where did your imagination stop, or the words take you elsewhere? What words or phrases stood out, and what is the Spirit saying to us through this passage? This is a tough passage. We were all stuck on why Jesus would be saying that without hating our families we cannot follow him. How do we deal with this reading? I’m afraid I wasn’t much help at that point in the discussion and reflection. I wondered if there was a translation issue with the word ‘hate’. Other gospels use the phrase ‘love less’ for the same story. However there seems to be more to it than that.

This was one of a few harsh challenges in this passage on discipleship. The passage ends with the statement that none of us can be Jesus’ disciples if we do not give up all our possessions. Jesus is presenting these expectations to the large crowd following him in order that they consider their decision to follow him seriously. He doesn’t want any fly by night followers but only those willing to make the commitment and take the risk. He is on his way to Jerusalem, and knows what the implications are for him and those who follow him. He knows, given that crucifixion is a common punishment that if he is handed over to the authorities that will be his fate. Thus, anyone who follows him needs to be prepared for the same. They need to be prepared to take up the cross as well. As he works toward building a new movement and challenging the spiritual stronghold at the same time, those who wish to follow him must give their complete allegiance to him. Not to family. Not to self-preservation. Not to comfort. Not to possessions. Only to Jesus. He is asking them, and us, to put following him first, as our number one priority. Our possessions, including our family, cannot get it in the way, and if they do, then we need to avoid or get rid of them.

Harsh. Especially for us today. We are not following him to Jerusalem, where he is facing probable death by crucifixion. We know the story and how it ends. So we know the cost of following him, too. But do we? Or are we willing to bear it? Certainly not many of us are willing to give up all our possessions. But are we willing to give up or take note of that which hinders us from being faithful? What does it mean to be faithful today? There is a strong diversity of opinion on that within the Christian community these days. The gospel of Jesus informs us that faithfulness includes the following:

* loving our neighbour;
* forgiveness;
* supporting and loving those on the edges of society, for Jesus this was the prostitutes, widows, tax collectors, and others who were outcast;
* challenging systems that oppress and keep people poor;
* putting love above following the letter of the law.

As I read and reflected on this passage early in the week, I found myself thinking about the reaction to a recent [news item](https://www.cnn.com/2022/08/24/politics/student-loans-joe-biden-white-house/index.html) that US President Biden was forgiving up to $20,000 of student loan debt for those making less than $125,000 per year. Many evangelical conservatives were outraged at this move, saying they work hard and pay their debts, why should others’ debt be forgiven? They seem to have missed the fact that Jesus in the prayer he taught his followers to pray, includes “forgive our debts” and that the Old testament calls for a forgiveness of all debts every 50 years. Jo Luehmann, a theologian and activist I follow on Twitter, commented, making reference to the scripture from today’s reading: “Isn’t letting others be forgiven, our cross to bear?”. It seems that maybe those being critical were letting their possessions and privilege get in the way of being faithful.

Are our possessions getting in the way of addressing climate change? This summer, and indeed, it seems as time goes on, extreme weather events get worse and worse. This week we have seen news reports of Pakistan having had so much rain that one third of their country is under water and over 1000 have died. This followed extreme heat waves and drought there. The heat waves and drought continue in Europe and Asia and are so bad that huge rivers are almost dry. Rivers such as the Yangtze in China, the Rhine in Germany, and the Danube in Romania. When will our leaders, and ourselves, see this climate emergency for what it is and start seriously changing our ways and policies to keep our emissions below a 1.5°C increase? Our comforts and dependence on our possessions, including fossil fuels, may be preventing us from being faithful stewards of God’s creation and caring for the earth including moving to a just transition for all.

There is much for us to consider, in this challenging scripture message for us today, even though we are in a different context. The context of the story in the gospel text, is that Jesus has told a mixture of parables about the nature of the kingdom of God, healings, and ending in the lament over Jerusalem. And then in chapter 14 we have a literal meal with a Pharisee and some teaching and a parable about eating in ways that are radically inclusive and which overturn traditional values about who is invited and honoured at such gatherings. Then we have this teaching about the cost of discipleship. And in chapter 15 there are three parables each pointing to the infinite value of the lost and the least and of the lengths that God will go to restore the lost to the fold. So these harsh words are the meat in a sandwich of parables about the inclusive and loving nature of the kingdom and the lengths God will go to reach us. Which places words apparently about hate in quite a different light. Being part of God’s inclusive community, as followers of Jesus, is the priority for Jesus and the desire is for all to be part of it, even though that may not always be possible.

This gospel message, truly is challenging, both for the hearers in Jesus’ time and for us today. We may not be able to fully live up to this challenge in our present context. However, we can consider how following the ways of Jesus and the message of the gospel is a priority in our lives. We can ask ourselves, when does what we have, or what and who we love, hinder us from being faithful? We can examine what can we do about these challenges, and seek ways to be more faithful to the ways Jesus calls us to. It is not easy, but we also know, the rewards of love and justice are unmeasurable. May we be up to the task to carry our cross, and follow Jesus.