

Sermon: Problem Jesus
13 Pentecost, Year C
Luke 14:25-33

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Why did you come to church today? Maybe looking for answers to life's problems? Maybe to be comforted in your pain and troubles by our loving Lord and your church family? With the week's news of an epic hurricane, one more mass shooting and deadly xenophobia in South Africa, you most certainly didn't come to church today to encounter more problems! But preacher Will Willemon says, "Jesus is not always the *answer* to all of your problems. In fact Jesus became the *cause* of a lot of your problems after you met him."

Today we encounter "problem Jesus." If we were ever to have a "bring your family to church Sunday", this Gospel passage we just read would probably NOT be our first choice! Jesus says, 'Whoever comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciples.' (v.26) Does he really say to hate our family members? Oh, Jesus, really!? Don't we hate it when Jesus says something we don't want to hear?

The good news is that sometimes Jesus exaggerates to make a point. The figure of speech is known as hyperbole. (Hyperbole comes from the Greek *huper*, which means "above" or "beyond" and *bole*, a "casting" or "throwing". Hyperbole is a "casting beyond" or exaggeration. A teenager might say to her mother, "You always criticize me!" or we might say when we are hungry, "I'm so hungry, I could eat a horse." The intent of this kind of exaggeration is to focus on the essence of the message.

In other places in Scripture, we hear Jesus say things like, "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away... (Matthew 5:29) and "You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel." (Matt. 23:24 If we took that literally we'd be in some serious trouble. But back to our problem Jesus of today's passage. "Don't be hatin', Jesus" we want to say! What are we to make of his admonition to hate our mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters? Didn't Jesus say elsewhere that we were to *love* our neighbor as ourselves? Isn't that what God is all about – loving?

If hyperbole's point is to emphasize a particular message, what might that message be? The beginning of the passage tells us that large crowds were traveling with Jesus. What were they looking for and why were they following him? At this point in the story Jesus has been teaching how to follow him: he's taught the followers about the importance of humility and hospitality, faithfulness. He's healed many in his path. And now he's teaching that there is a great cost of discipleship. How many of that large crowd will end up following him all the way to the cross?

Jesus implies that disciples need to put God first, ahead of everything else in life, ahead of our jobs, ahead of our reputations, ahead of our education, even ahead of our families. Seems as though problem Jesus is being a bit extreme, don't you think? In a culture where we are often taught to put family first, this teaching can sure be uncomfortable. Putting God first will mean

a reshuffling of priorities, of going places and doing things we never imagined, like praying for the very people we despise, like forgiving those who harm us, like giving our money away to those in need, like entering impoverished situations when the Spirit nudges us, indeed in seeing God's creation in fresh ways. And following Jesus will mean the examining of our own lives to see what areas we need to relinquish to God's realm. God is asking for total dedication. Total loyalty. Not just wishful thinking but serious consideration and decision making.

Cost indicates a giving up of something to acquire something else. Jesus uses the examples of how one would calculate a building project and estimating the cost before starting the project and estimating the cost of war before a king ventures into it to help the listener focus on the end goal. The cost of discipleship, the cost of following Jesus all the way to the cross, is BIG. In fact it is problematic if we think we are to go it alone. Or all at once.

What keeps us from following the one who loves us beyond our knowledge and understanding. Are we willing to live lives of complete devotion? Can we even do the things God requires of us? Isn't it too difficult?

The answer is Yes, it is too difficult. On our own. But the nature of salvation is that we are saved by God's grace. Are we weak? Yes, much of the time we are very weak, but when we follow Jesus, we find that God's Spirit gives us the strength to follow him. Is it dangerous to follow Jesus? It absolutely is. For as you already know, his path leads to the cross. And who would willingly go to the cross? Jesus' exhortation is that we follow, but fortunately we don't have to go it alone. Grace abounds as we step out in faith. We go with God and with one another. And the journey is a process. Most of us don't get there at once. Little by little we learn to live into the life of God. And ultimately that journey doesn't end at the cross but in abundant life, the resurrected life.

Our final hymn has a text that speaks to Jesus' message beautifully. I want to sing it with you now a capella. Would you turn in your hymnal to #675 and sing it with me, paying attention to the words?

1 "Take up your cross," the Savior said,
"if you would my disciple be;
take up your cross with willing heart,
and humbly follow after me."

2 Take up your cross; let not its weight
fill your weak spirit with alarm;
Christ's strength shall bear your spirit up
and brace your heart and nerve your arm.

3 Take up your cross, heed not the shame,
and let your foolish heart be still;
the Lord for you accepted death
upon a cross, on Calv'ry's hill.

4 Take up your cross, then, in Christ's strength,
and calmly ev'ry danger brave:
it guides you to abundant life
and leads to vict'ry o'er the grave.

Problem Jesus reminds us that carrying our cross can often be difficult and harrowing. But “problem Jesus” is also “empowering Jesus” who helps us live into the holiness that is already in each one of us. It is Christ’s strength that will lead us into the way of real life, abundant life, the life of love.

Amen.