

"Is your faith visible?" A sermon by Lee Ireland
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church
September 8, 2019, Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 14:25-33

Let us pray together: Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.

Is Jesus really telling us that we are to hate life itself? Those are pretty strong words coming from someone who brought us the message to love God and your neighbor as yourself. Is Jesus exaggerating to make a point? Jesus did exaggerate in his teachings to make a point from time to time. I mentioned last week his story about the seeing a speck in your neighbor's eye and missing the log in your own eye. Is Jesus using hyperbole in these verses or are we to literally hate those who are often most dear to us: father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters?

In this reading from Luke, Jesus doesn't stop there, though some of us may wish he had! Jesus says that the life of discipleship depends on giving up all possessions. Does Jesus mean you cannot be Jesus' disciple unless you give up all your stuff?

What are we to make of these verses? Certainly, giving up your stuff seems much easier than hating those you love. What is Jesus really saying?

Let's pause here and take a deep breath. In the context of today's definitions of the words Jesus uses, we may be a bit taken back. So, let's pause for a moment and silently ask God to open our hearts and minds to help us understand Jesus' words and how they apply to our lives.

(BIG PAUSE)

OK. To start, let's look at the situation where Jesus uttered these words. The verse says that large crowds were traveling with him. Jesus was a celebrity. People wanted to be close to the famous, the powerful. That certainly hasn't changed in the last 2000 plus years! If Jesus had celebrity status in today's world, people would post on Facebook Jesus' latest healing they had personally witnessed. They would certainly brag about being in the crowd and close to someone so famous.

I don't think that Jesus would have a Twitter account like our President. Jesus intent was to deflect the praise and recognition others wanted to give him. Jesus deflected that adoration to adoration for God, to praise for what God has done and is doing.

In today's scripture from Luke, perhaps Jesus was checking the loyalties of those large crowds following him, and the essence of this teaching is not about having possessions or about loving your family. Perhaps Jesus is asking each of us to check where our loyalties lie. Are we putting Jesus first in our lives? Can someone from the outside looking in at you see that is what you're doing? Putting Jesus first. Is Jesus really, visibly, first before all else in your life?

Jesus' life makes it abundantly clear that he's not interested in worldly glory, but the way of sacrifice and service. Is that what Jesus is saying in these verses? Can we, like Jesus, hold nothing back from our love of God – a God who holds nothing back from us, a God who loves us in spite of what we do?

Is Jesus really, visibly, first before all else in your life? Wait, you say, "I try to live the way Christ taught us to live. I work for those who are marginalized by our world. I tithe 10% of my income to the church." My question: is that enough given the words of Jesus in today's scripture?

I asked just a few minutes ago for each of us to open our hearts and minds to help us understand the message God has for each of us in these verses. Have you allowed your life to be reshaped, reworked by

God, the potter, as we read in the text from Jeremiah today? Or consider the text from Philemon. Paul's letter calls on Philemon to act differently, to make a choice counter to society's norms and Philemon's own self-interest. Philemon's slave, Onesimus, had run away and should have been punished for doing so. But Paul reminds Philemon that his relationship to Christ changes our relationship with each other. Has your relationship with Christ changed you and your relationship with others?

R. Alan Culpepper of Mercer University writes, "Some churches, preachers and TV programs present the gospel as though they were selling a used car," No money down! Attractive terms! Low, low monthly payments! "They make it sound as easy as possible, as though no real commitment were required. Jesus' call was far different. He was not looking for superficial commitment or a crowd of tagalongs. Instead, he required his followers to be totally committed if they were going to follow at all" ("The Gospel of Luke," The New Interpreter's Bible [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995], 293).

Is Jesus really, visibly, first before all else in your life? This next week consider three areas of your faith-life.

1. Strengthen your faith-ties. Jesus said we are to hate our fathers, mothers, children, etc. – even life itself. Perhaps we can say that Jesus was using a bit of hyperbole here. I don't believe Jesus is asking us to hate. I believe Jesus is asking each of us to value our relationship with God over our relationships with other family members. I pray that is your relationship with God.
2. Practice self-discipline. This may be difficult in our consumer society. Can you give money to the poor or to the church when it means you'll not be able to purchase the latest toy advertised, the one that makes you fit in with your friends? I'm not talking about sacrifice just so you can suffer and feel good about it. Apply constructive Christian self-discipline to your life.
3. Practice generosity. Martin Luther observed, "There are three conversions necessary: the conversion of the heart, the mind and the purse." It has been said that of these three, we moderns find the conversion of the purse to most difficult.

Consider Eleanor Boyer. Her house was paid for. She had her pension. And no, even though her 1968 car was in the shop, she didn't need a new one. What could she possibly want with the \$11.8 million she won in the state lottery?

"God takes care of me," said Boyer, a retiree who prided herself on her self-reliance and her unshakable faith.

Boyer decided to make her newfound wealth a gift to everyone but herself, donating the \$8 million or so, after taxes, to her church and her town. Although the donation stunned the congregation at Church of the Immaculate Conception and a community where people are kind enough to nod and smile at strangers, many said that Boyer's gift should not surprise Christians who have faith.

"We are constantly being called during the course of life to let go and to trust in God," said David Lee of the Buffalo diocese. "In her heart, she is answering the call, to share what we have with those who are in need." (LA Times, Nov. 22, 1997)

Jesus told the crowd that they needed to consider what it means to be a Christ-follower. Jesus calls us, as Christ-followers, to radically re-order our values and, as a result, to reshape our actions.

Is Jesus really, visibly, first before all else in your life?