

**St. Francis Episcopal Church, Holden, MA**  
**The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Sept. 9, 2007**  
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*Now large crowds were traveling with Jesus; and he turned and said to them:*

*Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.*

*Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*

*For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'*

*Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace.*

*So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.*  
*(Luke 14:25-33)*

I love it when there is some synchronicity between what I want to talk about in a sermon and the readings for the day. Our context this weekend is an occasion for balloons and celebration: church school begins, our space is renovated, the choir is back, we commission lay ministers. All of these would suggest readings that are *happy!* What we get, however, is Jeremiah, Philemon, and this gospel reading from Luke's Gospel about hating one's family.

When there is not synchronicity, I decided early on in my ministry that I need to defer to the texts—not impose my will on them. So I want to talk about this gospel reading today, and trust it to take us where it needs to take us. Hang in there as we make that journey together...

At the beginning of the fourteenth chapter of Luke's narrative, Jesus is going to the home of one of the Pharisees for some supper. He notices when he goes to sit down at the table how people choose their places of honor. So he tells them a parable about how the ethics of God's Kingdom turns the world's norms upside down. "Sit in the place no one wants," Jesus tells them, "and then if you get invited to move up that is a lot better than the host coming and saying to you, excuse me but that's not your seat!"

So Luke has us on this theme of dinner parties and then we get another story. It was the gospel appointed for last weekend except that we used the Labor Day propers instead, so we didn't hear it. Jesus tells about a guy who had a dinner party and everyone had responded that they would be there. But then, at the last minute the phone began to ring. One guy had to close on a real estate deal. Another guy had just gotten married. The third guy had just bought some new oxen and needed to work his field. Now these are all presumably very good excuses. But the point is that

the guy throwing the party has already bought all the food and stocked the liquor cabinet. Instead of letting it all go to waste, he brings in the crippled and the lame and the blind.

Whatever else this story is about, it's about setting priorities. The door opens and the kingdom is in our midst but sometimes other good things like work and family and soccer games and dance lessons keep us from coming to the table to be with other Christians and being part of the faith community. I think this is important. Certainly we are all sinners and sometimes it is our disobedience that draws us away from the Kingdom. But sometimes it is when we make penultimate things ultimate that we get into trouble. That's idolatry: we take good things and make them first in our lives and always that will fail us. So Jesus is telling a story to make a point about putting first things first in our lives.

Some of you know I teach a class over at Assumption College and I continue to be amazed at how easily all kinds of other obligations intrude on my students' lives. Last week I got an email: "can't make class, I have a job interview." This week: "have to leave class early; I have a doctor's appointment." Now these kids are in class fifteen hours a week! I get them for three fifty-minute classes: two and a half hours! You might think that that would be the priority in their lives given what their parents are paying in tuition. But apparently not. I know that health and work are important values but call me old-fashioned; I think students should focus first on their academics.

So anyway, now the crowds are gathering around Jesus. That's where we picked up the story today. Actually, *large* crowds are traveling with Jesus. Apparently people are attracted to the spectacle of it all—the magic, the healings, the good preaching. Jesus is a charismatic guy. That context matters because the words that follow are addressed to those crowds, not the disciples. And I think what Jesus is doing is saying, "look, this is really hard...if you want to be with us that's cool but know what you are getting into...I'd rather have a few good men and women and children than crowds of spectators who will soon be bored with it all."

Modern literature on evangelism tends to counsel a "soft sell." *Give 'em good music and entertain 'em with funny stories and why not put in a movie theater and gym while you are at it? And then once you have them in the door you can tell them the harder stuff about the cross but no rush...no need to push that too hard.* But Jesus apparently didn't attend that evangelism workshop. Jesus doesn't want people to claim later on that they didn't read the fine-print. So he lays it out: *discipleship is costly.* The word translated as "hate" sounds harsh; doesn't maybe even sound like the Jesus we know. But Jesus is a first-century Middle Eastern man and in his culture there is something called Semitic hyperbole. We might call it exaggeration to make a point. The word used here is not about being angry with your family or hostile to your family. But it is about duty. What comes first?

This is a very hard word for every generation of Christians but maybe it is especially hard in suburban culture. We tend to worship our families. We want the best for our kids—no expense spared. The thing is that we are often too scared to ask, "at what cost?" We tend to be blind to the number of children who go to bed hungry today, who will die of diseases that are so easily treated if we just make sure the water is clean. So Jesus says that in the Kingdom of God, "family values" are not about taking care of your own. Family values include all of God's

children. And the irony, it seems to me, is that this is actually good for our kids. But that's another sermon...

Jesus says you have to pick up your cross to follow him. Jesus says that you have to stop letting your possessions possess you. He says God is a jealous God who demands all of us. And that (again this is a paradox) in putting God first all the rest will actually fall into place. Human community—authentic community—becomes possible when God is at the center of our lives.

A part of me wishes we would save the hard texts for another day—after you all notice how great this space looks and that the choir is back and how wonderful the rector really is and all that. But ultimately all I have as a pastor and priest to offer you is Jesus, and he wants to be first in your lives, and in my life. He isn't a Puritan or a prude. I don't think he is trying to inflict guilt. He isn't saying don't laugh and have fun and excel at sports and cheer loudly when your kid excels at sports. But he is saying that we can very easily lose our way if we aren't careful: that our joys can become obsessions, and our obsessions can become addictions, and our addictions can kill us.

He is saying to us, "Seek First the Kingdom of God....and all these things will be given unto you." Or as the collect we prayed today puts it: "Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts..." That is a journey that takes time, to put all our trust in God. But with God's help, it is the journey we are called to make—and it is the path that leads to full and abundant life. Amen.