



feeding . . . gathering . . . carrying . . . leading. (Isaiah 40:11)

May 7, 2013

Dear Church Family,

We have been dealing with some heavy themes of judgment, rejection and exclusion in Luke lately. Most recently, Jesus has been warning the Pharisees that they may be excluded from the banquet in the kingdom of God. In 14:25-35, Jesus is now addressing the large crowds who are accompanying him on his journey. Unlike the Pharisees who have rejected Jesus, these people are attracted to Jesus and want to be with him. Evidently this is not enough to be a disciple, however, because Jesus talks about what a person must do in order to be a disciple. We tend to focus on Jesus talking about hating one's family and renouncing all one has as challenging and disturbing. But the most challenging aspect of Jesus teaching here is one we might miss because we are too familiar with the language and image. That is the image of the cross. Consider the meaning and impact of Jesus using this language in the first century. The cross was an instrument of public execution by the Roman government. It was characterized by long suffering and public shame leading to death. In that context, consider how you would understand, *"Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple."* Alas, our string of heavy themes continues.

The context we see in our passage this morning that surrounds the radical and shocking image of a disciple bearing his or her own cross is not connected to persecution and emphasizes what disciples must do, not what is done to the disciples. With the language of hate in regard to one's family, this is not a case of the family hating the disciple for his or her devotion to Jesus (which happens in societies hostile to Christianity). It is the disciple who must hate his or her own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters and even his or her own life. There is an understanding of Jesus' use of hate that we can glean from his use of love and hate later in Luke 16:13, *"No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other; or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money."* It is essentially an issue of allegiance. There can only be one master, and that is Jesus. Any other competing allegiance must be hated if Jesus is to be loved.

In the culture of the New Testament, the family claimed primary allegiance. Indeed so much of one's life and identity was understood and lived in relationship to devotion to one's family that to hate family was to hate one's own life. And this was not just because one's family would be upset. The whole of society would view such actions as unacceptable and even threatening to the fabric of the social order. The very idea that devotion to God would ever be at odds with devotion to family would have been rejected out of hand.

For us, devotion to family is not nearly as strong a value or allegiance. In our individualistic culture, the importance of allegiance to family has been replaced with the importance of allegiance to one's self. We need to consider what are the allegiances for us that compete with Jesus for supremacy? And it may be as simple as our allegiance to our selves, our well-being and fulfillment as the paramount concern of our lives. And note that family allegiance is a good thing, not a bad thing. This is not a matter of turning from sin or something sinful. We need to be aware of good things that we see as so valuable, that they become synonymous with God. In effect, we refuse to consider that devotion to God might require us to act in ways counter to our devotion to that allegiance. We see them as compatible, but what if Jesus sees it as serving two masters? And to parallel the situation for people that Jesus is addressing here, our competing allegiance needs to be so highly valued by our culture that to hate it out of love or allegiance to Jesus will earn us the condemnation of our society. (This is even more reason for us to want to see them as compatible and not in competition.)

In addition to not hating family, Jesus also presents not renouncing all one has as incompatible with discipleship. There are two important points about the Greek words used here. First, the word that gives the idea of giving up or renouncing literally means to bid farewell to. This fits well with the whole image of discipleship as a journey. To literally follow Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem, disciples had to say goodbye and leave behind whatever they owned that they could not easily carry. But how does this apply to us today? This leads to the second point. The word that gives the idea of what one has or possesses literally means to be under one's rule. It is a verb, so the emphasis is on the possessing not the possession itself. One way to look at this is nothing really belongs to a disciple. It all belongs to the Lord. So for us, what is required is to leave behind the idea that we own anything. Nothing is under our rule because our allegiance to Christ means it is all under his rule, not ours.

Even as we gain understanding of what Jesus is communicating, we still may be bothered by the idea that there are requirements for discipleship. Does one have to earn the right to be a disciple? What about the idea that Jesus wants everyone to come to Him? Why is he turning to the crowd who is coming to him and talking in exclusive language about those who cannot be his disciple? The two parables that Jesus gives, about building a tower and a king going to war, explain his perspective on discipleship. He is not talking about criteria that need to be met before someone can become a disciple, as in what is needed to get in. He is talking about what it will take to finish. We need some corrective balance to the presentation of the gospel with an emphasis on getting people saved rather than making disciples. For Jesus, it is not about acceptance (in the sense of him accepting us) or about achievement (in the sense of us earning anything) it is about accomplishment. In the parables, the man and the king both have the desire to begin their endeavor, but they may not have what it takes to complete the task. And just like it takes materials to complete a tower and troop strength to win a war, it requires ultimate allegiance to Jesus to be a disciple. Jesus then stresses the same point with his reference to salt. Just as salt that has lost its saltiness is useless, discipleship without primary allegiance to Jesus above allegiance to anything else has lost its essential quality and is useless.

So what is someone to do if they want to be a disciple but feel like their allegiances are often divided between Jesus and other concerns in their life? What if someone fears that they lack what it takes to be a disciple? How do we reconcile this demanding Jesus with our own sense of lack and not measuring up? One approach is to deny that Jesus is demanding, seeing him as always accepting and affirming. However, we saw a biblical approach in Rev 3:14-22 with the risen Jesus' words to the church of Laodicea. Here is a demanding Jesus bringing words of judgment and threatening rejection to people in this church. But they are to come to him when they realize their lack. The key is that the demanding Jesus is also the Jesus who will supply what they are lacking. Jesus then goes on to provide a wonderful image that is so often taken out of this context. *"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."* Those who want to be disciples are not knocking on a shut door that Jesus will not open for them, that disturbing image from Luke 13. Instead, it is Jesus who is knocking on the shut door and we simply need to open that door and let him into our lives. But when he comes in, he comes in as Lord, our primary allegiance. To try and follow him with competing allegiances is to leave him outside the door.

It was fitting to celebrate communion and rejoice in our Lord Jesus who enables us to conquer as disciples because he has already conquered on our behalf.

In Him,

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<http://www.christourshepherd.org/pastlet.htm> (and follow links to download MP3 audio of sermon)