

September 8, 2019
13th Sunday after Pentecost
“*Disciples Take Faith Seriously*”
Rev. Emma Nickel
Scripture: Luke 14:24-33

Every week in worship, we take time to declare out loud, what we *believe*. Often, we use the Apostles’ Creed, which was a statement of faith some of the earliest Christians learned as they prepared to be baptized. Creeds offer a shorthand way of summarizing much bigger theological beliefs that characterize Christianity. But I’ve known plenty of people who just can’t sign on to the idea that there really was a virgin birth. And others who struggle with the idea of a bodily resurrection. In our day and age, which has so much scientific knowledge at the click of a mouse or the swipe of our finger, there are new ways of thinking about what *we believe* about Jesus, God, and our faith.

Although Christian faith has long been marked by shared *beliefs*, I’m not certain that’s all Jesus had in mind. The gospels record so many stories where Jesus told people what their lives would look like if they followed him. Jesus taught what we can do—how we should live—if we want to be his disciples. And so today, we begin exploring *What Disciples Do*, which will carry us through this season.

Jesus was talking to the crowds in our scripture today. He had a ready audience. And he had just proclaimed some good news: that everyone is welcome in God’s Kingdom. So from there, I expect him to go on and urge these crowds to join his program. If it were up to me, Jesus would double-down on the good stuff, the best stuff: God’s unconditional love, the grace we receive even though we don’t deserve it, forgiveness poured out for each of us, being named, claimed, and known by God, being welcomed into a community founded on trust and love. Yeah, on this day though, Jesus didn’t say any of that. Others have called Jesus’ words here the worst marketing campaign in history.

Instead, Jesus declares that following him requires a total commitment. Being Jesus’ disciples means, as Donald McKim writes, “following him without reservation or [other] entanglements.”¹ We are called to take our faith in Christ seriously, even more seriously than some other, very important commitments like our families. Initially, this sounds hard at best and off-

putting at worst. Why would Jesus tell us to hate our parents and children and siblings when God commanded that we honor our father and mother? Even though hyperbole is surely at work here, it's still a tough question.

A few weeks ago, Peter Tanaka, who is in the choir, emailed me after the sermon on the Great Commission, where I shared about Buzz Aldrin taking communion on the moon. Peter said it was all right for me to share this story with you today. He wrote asking me about this one sentence. I said: "By making time for God and the things God values, by getting up early and going to church, even giving up some other valuable things like family time or exercise, we teach children and ourselves that faith trumps some other things." Peter said, "This was surprising to me because giving up family time and exercise is something I've never really heard encouraged before. I don't think that was your point, just that we can't let other things in life become more important than God and the time that we make for God, regardless of what that other thing is." He asked if his understanding and mine were on the same track.

Indeed, they were. In fact, I think Peter summarized the meaning of today's passage perfectly. I responded to Peter that family and exercise and time for rest really *are* valuable. So when we choose to come to church and either give up a little bit of that or *rearrange* things so we can still fit both in, then we're demonstrating that faith holds a really important place in our life. If church/fait h/God are so important that we're willing to prioritize those over some other really important things, then that's saying something. On the other hand, if coming to church or living out our trust in God doesn't change any other aspects of our lives, then does it really mean anything to us after all?

We already know what commitment and sacrifice look like. Most all of us here have practiced it at one time or another for some cause we hold dear. Maybe your family holds education as one of its highest commitments. And so you scrimped and saved throughout the years to save for your kids' college. Although it was hard, you let go of your desires to buy a new car or move into a bigger house to save that money for schooling. Or maybe your mother started dealing with dementia and you were committed to keeping her out of nursing care as long as you could. So not only did you cook her dinner every night and take it to her house, manage her medications and bank accounts, but eventually you quit your own job to care for her full time. Or maybe you're passionate about your career and so you agreed to work every weekend for the first few years, knowing that was the dues you had to pay to move up in the company. All of that is commitment. All of it includes sacrifice.

Commitment in our faith looks a lot like that. If we want to commit to following Jesus in this way, then we'll make changes on our calendars to

make time for faith; in this church, yes, but especially at home and in the midst of our regular days. We will make changes in our finances, moving our pledge closer to a tithe each year by reducing our spending money a little bit. We will try to connect with God as often as we connect with our social media. Many of you gave up time and energy this past week to ensure that the funeral luncheon for Carol Lengjel was well staffed with volunteers and well-stocked with cookies. Others of you quietly give up time you could be out doing other wonderful things to come and garden around the church, or clean out classrooms, or type up minutes from a meeting late at night. These are small ways we demonstrate the big thing Jesus is talking about: what it means to take our commitment to him seriously.

There are also times when our commitment to Christ asks us to make challenging choices that affect our own safety and comfort. During the Montgomery Bus Boycott, African Americans, motivated by faith and justice, refused to ride on public transportation in Montgomery, Alabama to protest segregated seating. The boycott lasted from December 5, 1955 to December 20, 1956. Throughout these 381 days, nearly 40,000 African Americans in Montgomery found other ways to get to work and everywhere they needed to go. African-American taxi drivers took a hit to their own income by choosing to offer rides for just ten cents - the same cost as a bus fare. Leaders organized carpools for workers. And most people simply walked wherever they had to go. Imagine the elderly folks trying to get around town. Imagine the parents with young children. Imagine students trying to get to school. Imagine the exhaustion, the extra time, the extra planning, all of it lived under the threat of racial violence. The participants in the boycott took their commitment to justice and nonviolence seriously, even though it included a great deal of sacrifice. We don't know what those folks thought it would be like to participate in the boycott. But I suspect they realized ahead of time how hard it would be; yet they stuck to their commitment. Like the two short parables Jesus tells of the builder and the King, when it comes to following Jesus, we are urged to understand just what we've signed up for. Lynn Japinga, Professor of Religion at Hope College says Jesus means, "Know what you are in for [in this thing called discipleship]. Be prepared for loss and poverty and [even] suffering."²

This kind of language is not popular anywhere, and certainly not in the church. Our church, like many others, often tries to accommodate our life to the world. We try not to ask too much of new members when they come through the doors, so as not to scare them off. We tiptoe around how to schedule activities for our people who have wonderfully busy lives. We try to pack as much as we can into Sunday mornings because we fear people won't come back later in the week. I am as guilty as anyone with this. Because I so want church to "work" for families, and members old and new. I don't

want people to write us off because life with us is too demanding. But this scripture makes us ask, “Has following Jesus become too easy?”³ Because in life, it’s the things we commit to, the things we sacrifice for, that we find most meaningful. The kids who went to college knew the sacrifices of their parents and treated their education accordingly. Those days spent with your ill mother were wearisome and challenging, but you wouldn’t have had it any other way. After those years of working 60 hour weeks, you got promoted and you started to be able to make the difference you’d always hoped for.

And so maybe there is good news, joyful news yet for disciples who take faith seriously. First, there is good news because the kind of commitment Jesus seeks is total. That means it’s a high calling, but it’s not a one shot deal. Instead, we get to try again every day to take our faith seriously, to let our trust in God shape the rest of our lives. It’s not a single opportunity that we can mess up or let pass us by. With each new day, there is another chance to recommit ourselves to following Jesus. Second, there is good news because when we commit to Jesus in the way he asks, then *we* are transformed. Ask anyone who’s played a serious sport, and she will tell you what she learned of work ethic, follow-through, and the value of a team. Ask someone who has learned to walk again after an injury or a stroke and we will find that not just their body, but also their whole outlook was transformed by the commitment and focus of re-learning such a skill. We find this with our discipleship, too. A person who has truly sought to follow Jesus: who has put their relationships, their finances, their time, and their minds in service of God will be different than a person who has always lived as their own compass. Doing these challenging things bring out the best in them and touches the lives of all the people around them for the better. God’s grace has equipped them to do what they could not have done on their own.

So rather than ignoring the Jesus who says these hard things, or trying to figure out how he didn’t mean what he said, let us take seriously his words. Let us not follow Jesus because we think it is easy, but rather, because the commitment of discipleship transforms us into the loving, compassionate, justice-seeking people God created us to be.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

1 Donald K. McKim, “Luke 14:25-33, Connecting the Reading to Scripture,” *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship* (Louisville: WJK Press, 2019), 299.

2 Lynn Japinga, “Luke 14:25-33, Connecting the Reading with the World”, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship* (Louisville: WJK Press, 2019), 301.

3 Ibid..