

Sermon September 8, 2013 “Getting into Shape” Luke 14:25-33 Jeremiah 18:1-11

Today's lesson from Luke is a tough one. In fact, I have often wished it were not in the Bible! Once I became a parent, I stopped being able to get my heart around “hating one’s children,” and I am pretty sure most of you agree. We tend to be centered around concern for our children, whether they are babies or 60 year-olds.

This having been said, the passage stands and needs our attention. Jesus was addressing a large crowd. A man had approached Jesus earlier, volunteering to follow him wherever he went. Jesus responded by talking about the cost of discipleship. He told his followers in no uncertain terms that it would cost them everything they had and were if they wanted to follow him. "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.... Count the cost before you sign up for the course."

Reflecting on today’s Gospel lesson, now-retired Methodist Bishop William Willimon found himself contrasting Jesus’ challenging message with the United Methodist Church’s attempt, during the last few years, to bring folks into our churches by offering “Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors.” The two messages are quite different, with one promising a nice welcome and no pressure while the other, the one of our Lord, promises a tough time, where every aspect of one’s loyalty will be terribly challenged.

Since we tend to be attuned to political speeches these days, perhaps we could look at this in such terms. Candidates tend to spend their money to tell you how bad the other guy is, and how much better *they* will make things for you... How they will create more jobs even as they lower taxes, and will make sure that we are secure in our country. Imagine how would it be were one candidate to come along and declare, “Don’t vote for me unless you are ready to face a huge increase in income tax, unless you are willing to have every son and daughter give two years to some sort of service to this country after college, and unless you are prepared to make tremendous sacrifices in terms of your own comfort levels so that we can make sure that nobody in our country or this world goes hungry. If you are willing to give your life for this country, vote for me; otherwise, go away and offer your vote to someone else.”

Jesus did no false wooing of his followers. He didn’t just tell them that things would be tough, he warned them in terms of the things they held most dear, their families, that to follow him would cause other priorities to fall apart. And this was true: families were divided as pressure increased on those who confessed belief in Jesus, for if one family member became a Christian, the rest of the family was often persecuted as well. The early church was not a Norman Rockwell picture of the family dressing up to head off to church together.... In those days, it was as dangerous as it was full of grace to be a Christian.

Today, in our country, we tend to have little understanding of Jesus’ warning.... The only thing hard about being a member of most churches is having to get out of bed on Sunday morning or finding the motivation when there are all sorts of great and fun things to do outside of church on Sundays... Churches tend to open our hearts and our doors and say, as I myself have said over and again, “Come when you can! We’re glad to see you even if it’s only twice a year!”

But is that what Jesus said? Is that what he would say today, in 2013? I think not. In fact, it would seem that Jesus knows that there is no grace available for those who don't realize that they are in need of grace....Jesus wanted deliberate dedication. Someone once said, "Jesus wanted fishers of people, not keepers of aquariums" (Quoted by several preachers via Internet). He wasn't offering eternal life at bargain rates; instead he was saying that there would be a high price - even some very difficult hidden costs.

If a youth wants to play a sport in school, he or she is not allowed to simply sign up and then appear in the locker room on the day of the game, expecting to play. Instead, the youth must attend practices and make those practices a priority. Too often in churches, someone "signs up" by joining or being baptized, but then disappears.

In sports, the rule, "no pain, no gain," tends to ring true. In Christianity, no self-giving, no serious commitment to God equals no grace. Not because God is not offering grace, but because *until it means enough to us to open ourselves to it, we won't let God's grace in....and we don't notice what we're not getting.* (Pause)

The invitation is this: Live a life made **different** because you follow Jesus. Forgive one who doesn't deserve it. Help those who cannot help themselves. Feed those who cannot and will not pay you back. Don't cheat when those around you consider cheating to be the norm. Lift up those others would put down. Do whatever you do because that's what Jesus would have done. Living differently because of your commitment to Christ lets God make a difference in your life. (pause)

What kind of shape are we in when it comes to taking God seriously? The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah was called to go to the house of a potter in order to grasp the word of God, a word of judgment pronounced to some very out-of-shape people. They had forgotten God, they had failed to be faithful to God, they had turned their allegiance and trust to other things. At the potter's house, Jeremiah saw that the potter - God - is in control of the outcome, and can bring order out of chaos. The potter makes with the clay what he wishes by shaping it; if it is misshapen, the potter destroys the form and makes a new one. This is the message of judgment, the law which says that God is Creator. But the image of the clay in the potter's hand has another message, one of grace, for no matter how many times the potter reshapes the vessel, the clay is not destroyed. The potter alone determines the shape of the clay, but the potter *does not throw the clay away.*

Jesus has laid before us a very hard road. The cost is more than any of us can pay. We cannot do it ourselves, no matter how hard we try, for we are full of weakness. But in God's hands, by God's grace, if we will but permit it, we can be shaped into useful vessels, ordinary people who can choose to work for what God would bring about in this world.

There is an apt analogy, originally out of South Africa, entitled "The Parable of the Pencil":

The inventor of the pencil addressed his finished product as follows:

"I want you to remember four things: First, your goodness or true worth is within you. Second, you'll need to be sharpened as you go through life. Third, you'll be in someone else's hand, otherwise you'll make an awful mess. Fourth, you'll be expected to leave a mark." (told by James A. Feehan)

God is the Potter, we are the clay. We spend so much of our lives – time, money, angst, energy - trying to be our own potters.... But God knows who we really are, what's inside of us, what we were created to be... and only God can shape us and challenge us and shake us up so as to lead us to Life.

A statement by Bishop Willimon: “Forgive me, and forgive the church, for sometimes implying that Jesus will make life easier for you, that Jesus will fix everything that’s wrong with you, that Jesus will put a little lilt in your voice and a little sunshine in your life. Chances are, he won’t. He can do even better than that: Jesus can make you a disciple.” ( William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, vol. 32, no. 3, edited by fte)

We are an out-of-shape people, a people addicted to our own ways, our own comforts, our own rights. May God our Potter re-shape us, through grace and love, into disciples of Jesus Christ, and make us vessels able to share the grace and love of God with this world. Amen.