

WITHOUT MY WORLDLY GOODS

September 4, 2016

Luke 14: 25-33

Jeremiah 18: 1-11, Philemon 1-21

We've been reading from the Gospel of Luke all summer and it is amazing how single-mindedly it is focused on the matter of possessions. Over and over again Jesus tells his followers stories of people who store up goods for nothing but their own vanity or for their own sense of security. You may remember the Rich Fool whom Jesus lambasted because after all, what good would his much vaunted goods do him when God calls him that very night. But there are many more stories within the book of Luke in which Jesus asks his followers to consider the worthiness of the possessions and material things that they spend so much time caring for, acquiring, and defending.

And certainly in our own time, there could be nothing more relevant, for, goodness gracious, who would we be without our stuff? How would the economy survive if we did not love our cars, our phones, our clothes, houses, gardens, and electronic devices? And thus how would we all survive? This is part of our life and who indeed would we be without it?

In our reading for today, Jesus asks those following him to embark on many renunciations, much more profound than those he has asked for in earlier passages. In part it seems that he is responding to the increasingly large crowds that have begun to follow him. Like the pop culture figures of our own time, every day that goes by makes him more and more of a hero, an icon so that more and more of the people turn out to follow him. Thus

he wants to admonish them as to the seriousness of his purpose.

“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.”

Now, we know, because Bob once told us, that Jesus was not much of a family guy. But still this is kind of tough talk. The word “hate” is a translation from a semitic term meaning “turn away from”, “detach oneself from” and so it is not as suffused with passion as our word hate is. Still Jesus is clearly bent on instilling in anyone who will be a disciple that it is only this mission upon which they can be focused, this and no other. There must be no distraction from what has been left behind, no thoughts of the loved ones, the properties, the possibilities if one had stayed.

And then there is something else. For Jesus knows that as he is going to Jerusalem, he is going to his death. Perhaps it is an intuition, political whisperings, insights from God, but he knows. And so the next thing that he says to the large crowd that has gathered about him is, “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” This is something that any follower must factor into their consideration of discipleship - the possibility of death by crucifixion. There are also a couple of parables about planning ahead: could you build a tower without making sure that you had sufficient funds? Could you go to war without considering the likelihood of victory or defeat? And that is why Jesus says that his followers must be prepared to give up everything, even life itself.

This summer I read Don DeLillo’s new novel, *Zero K*. In it, the protagonist’s father is the principal investor in a remote and mysterious compound where

dying people can be preserved, presumably cryogenically, until a future arrives in which they can survive. The narrator's stepmother and later his father both give their bodies to this compound. The father's philosophy in building this place and in choosing this path for himself is, as it states in the book, "We are born without choosing to be. Should we have to die in the same manner? Isn't it a human glory to refuse to accept a certain fate?" The son accompanies his stepmother and father to their, at least temporary, resting place and he spends a lot of time there cogitating about what they have done and what the place is all about, but he is never of a mind to follow their route. It is not that he has a calling outside in the world... he most definitely does not. He takes jobs and finds attachments as they come along and he appreciates them, pours his being into them, but never plans for them or around them. Rather, he seems committed to experiencing the everyday astonishment of his life as it happens to him.

Now, the reason that I speak of Zero 9 at all is because, of course, it describes another path that people take to the end of life. The father and the stepmother have their deeply frozen bodies cared for until something changes in the world and they can come back to life and to health in some future but unknown situation. Then there is the son who will make no plans at all, who will live each moment as it occurs, and will presumably die when that occurs too.

In Jesus' world, and in ours too, there are those whose lives are bound to and by the people and the possessions in their lives. He is saying that is fine, but if you want to be a disciple, you gotta give it up - give up those

people, give up that stuff, give up that life that you are addicted to. You can't be lugging that with you and be with me.

And I want to point out that the Zero K people are not going to make it in Jesus' world either. The Zero K father and stepmother may have abandoned their worldly goods (sort of), but they are also not doing anything but waiting for another chance to pick them up again, if everything works out the way it is planned. And it occurs to me that they are cheating in a way by taking this end run around their own life's end into another life altogether. As for the son, in opposition to the father and stepmother, he seems to have no plan at all, though he has an appetite for life experience, and that aversion to planning, a certain passivity is not going to put him on the list for discipleship.

Jesus spends a lot of time in Luke talking about planning ahead and in this passage that we read today, it is particularly dramatic, because discipleship is beyond most experiences. It is not convenient. And it might cost us everything.. After all, if loyalty to Jesus comes first, then everything, even the fundamental social structures of family and things, comes second. Last week we read the parables about the dinner party where Jesus suggested that the host of a dinner or luncheon should not invite "friends or brothers or relatives or rich neighbors" but invite "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." That way you will be repaid not in your lifetime, with another dinner, but at your resurrection with a blessing. See, it is all about planning ahead!

We are certainly all not made out to be disciples, not if we have to abandon family and friends and life itself and carry the cross. No. But there will be and have been moments and more than moments in our life when we will have to make decisions, just as Jesus did at Gethsemane, moments that will be difficult, moments when we will have to leave our worldly life and goods to follow what we know is the right path, at least for a while. In a world where racism is pervasive, where violence has become the default mode for settling conflict, these moments will present themselves. In a world where prejudice and bigotry are everywhere these moments will be frequent. And in a world where natural disasters occur more often than ever before we may find moments when we will have to help strangers rather than our own families. We may see greed and power grabs and betrayal even by those entities that we had once trusted, and moments of decision will rise before us. We will have to take a stand when we thought we could just go on living our life. But we will be able to do it, because we will have thought it through before. We will be able to do it and take joy in doing it because we have good examples before us, and we know that wholehearted living leaves no room for excuses when that moment comes.

Let us pray:

Lord, let us not be timid and half hearted as we face the challenges of the world today. Let us not retreat from what is required of us but pursue it with relish, as with your help we shall. Amen

