

- Luke tells us that “large crowds were *traveling with Jesus*.” Doesn’t that sound hopeful, and a great way to describe the goal of our lives and for our parish ~ to, *as it were, travel with Jesus*? Yet, turning to the crowds, Jesus says this: “Whoever comes to me and does not *hate* [family] and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not *carry the cross* and *follow* me cannot be my disciple.” Paying attention to the words here, we can notice something important, but *something that we might otherwise overlook*. It is this ~ that *traveling with Jesus* is *not* necessarily the same thing as *following him*. Jesus’ strong words are coupled with others that are *equally off-putting*. For he says that “*none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions*.” In other words, on my *best days* I may be wondering about *which* of my things I *might* be willing to give up. Yet, Jesus tells us that we must give up *everything!* What are we to do with these *starkly uncompromising words*?
- *Our temptation* when considering Jesus strong words is to take them *figuratively, or to blunt them by abstraction*. Yet, it is helpful to remember something that St. Anthony of Egypt observed centuries ago. It was about those who came to join him where he lived, out in the desert caves. Observing the newcomers, he came to realize that those *who manage to give up their possessions* don’t always give up their *attachment* to them. So, as Anthony came to see, *it’s not the possessions that are our problem, but our attachment to them*.
- This insight *can help us deal with* Jesus’ hard sayings about family, possessions and our vocation. And it is found in wisdom common to the spirituality of *both* the East as well as the West. It concerns *the spiritual practice of non-attachment*. The spiritual writer, John Shea, offers this insight concerning Jesus’ words here. He observes that “possessions are whatever we hold onto *that competes with* our communion with Jesus and {our} cooperation with his mission. They are *substitute absolutes*.” In speaking about more than just physical things, Shea says that “*an essential step of discipleship is selling what we have that keeps us from integrating the mind and actions of Christ into our minds and actions*.”

## PROPER 18, September 8, 2019, Year C

- Here, taking note of Eugene Peterson's translation of our Gospel may be helpful. This is how Peterson renders Jesus' words: "Anyone who comes to me but *refuses to let go of* father, mother, spouse, children, brothers, sisters—yes, even one's own self!—can't be my disciple. Anyone who *won't shoulder* his own cross and follow behind me can't be my disciple." In other words, Jesus is *not urging us to* engage in the counter-intuitive emotion of hate. Instead, he wants us to recognize *how two objects of our affection can compete*, and compete in such a way that *one blots out the other*. For *it is possible* for us to love our families and our present lives *in such a way, and to such an extent, that these loves impede* our ability to *follow* the Lord.
- When it comes to *possessions*, we face *a particular challenge*. Whether it's by selling them or giving them away, or by simply throwing something out, we are faced with *trying not to dwell* on *what we no longer have*. In the process, we must *accept having less*, in exchange for *the promise of receiving something more*, something that we don't see or have yet. This challenge is at the heart of Christian discipleship, and it's the difference between simply *traveling with* Jesus and actually *following him*. About this test of character and our intentions, Jesus tells two short parables. Their basic point is that, *in order to live into the Kingdom, we must first count the cost!* It's another way of asking if we are prepared to pay a price, or to make a sacrifice. The things we look at, or think about, can confront us with a challenge, especially as we consider doing *without* things we need or enjoy. And so, *the way we look at or think about* things has the potential to be *transformative*.
- For there are always *two sides to how we see the stewardship of our time and our energies, as well as of our money and possessions*. It's always possible, when giving time and attention to someone or to a project, *to count the cost negatively*. In the process, we focus on *what we will lose or be without*. *Or*, we can move *beyond* counting the hour or weekend we *won't have* again. *Instead*, we can focus on *how our use of that time will enhance* other aspects of our *lives, and make them richer* ~ while also enhancing the community around us.

- *This is abundance-focused spiritual wisdom.* And it is compellingly reflected in a hymn, based on a poem by G.A. Studdert Kennedy. Here is part of it: “So let the love of Jesus come and set thy soul ablaze, *to give and give, and give again, what God hath given thee; to spend thyself nor count the cost, to serve right gloriously...*” On the face of it, these words appear to contradict Jesus’ admonition in our Gospel, that we *must* count the cost of following him. But Jesus’ words concern deciding *whether* to follow him. The hymnal words about *not counting* the cost have to do with *how* we live, *as* we follow him. And so, to *follow* Jesus may involve a *loss* of things that seem important to us *now*. Yet, *as* we follow Jesus, we notice and consider the abundance of what we *receive* in the process. Attending to what we receive, we are more ready to give from that abundance, with great thanks in our hearts.
- *All this has to do with the challenge of following Jesus.* I am reminded that, when we make decisions, we are prone to focus on what we might miss or *lose* ~ what economists call *the ‘opportunity cost.’* Yet, spiritually, we can also be attentive to what we might *gain*. Making decisions based on *what might be lost*, prevents us from seeing *what there is to receive*. Whereas focusing on what we might receive, helps us put a possible loss in perspective. **God surrounds us with gracious abundance.** And so, we can focus on God’s many gifts that fill our deepest need, gifts we can then share with others. Especially God’s own gift of self to us, in Jesus.



James Tissot, *Simon the Cyrenian Compelled to Carry the Cross with Jesus*

**Luke 14:25-33 [NRSV]**

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 [The Message]**

One day when large groups of people were walking along with him, Jesus turned and told them, "**Anyone who comes to me but refuses to let go of** father, mother, spouse, children, brothers, sisters—yes, even one's own self!—can't be my disciple. Anyone who won't shoulder his own cross and follow behind me can't be my disciple.

"Is there anyone here who, planning to build a new house, doesn't first sit down and figure the cost so you'll know if you can complete it? If you only get the foundation laid and then run out of money, you're going to look pretty foolish. Everyone passing by will poke fun at you: 'He started something he couldn't finish.'

"Or can you imagine a king going into battle against another king without first deciding whether it is possible with his ten thousand troops to face the twenty thousand troops of the other? And if he decides he can't, won't he send an emissary and work out a truce?

**"Simply put, if you're not willing to take what is dearest to you, whether plans or people, and kiss it good-bye, you can't be my disciple."**

---

Notes