

Sermon, Proper 18C
September 8, 2019
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Luke 14:25-33

*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."*

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The last time I was up here to preach, our scripture readings offered us the chance to think about Faith—in particular the utter dependence of Faith on Imagination.

Today our Gospel reading offers us the chance to think about Vocation (or in more everyday English, "Calling")—in particular, today's Gospel invites us to recognize the utter dependence of Vocation, or Calling, (not on Calculation, or Capacity, or Reason, or Strength) but utterly and entirely on Love.

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Too often popular imagination limits our notions of "vocation" or "calling" to so called *religious* vocations and callings—a vocation or calling to be a priest, or a nun, or a missionary. But if we are to understand the power of the Gospels in our own lives, we need to understand vocation and calling in its fullest sense—as followers of Jesus we are called into all kinds of work, we are called into all kinds of relationships, we are called into all sorts of unknown situations and challenges and adventures and futures. What makes a vocation "Christian" is not necessarily the content or even the context of that calling---but rather its source. Our vocations are Christian insofar as they are a response to the call of God in Christ Jesus who calls to all who will hear saying— "Come. Follow me." Or, in slightly less "churchy" (but no less theological) language, our many and varied vocations are Christian insofar as they are a response to the relentless, insistent, undeniable call of Love.

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I wonder sometimes—is it just me, or is there some sort of (presumably well-meaning) universal plot to thwart our vocations? Is it just me, or do you often find

that as soon as you begin with any resolve down some path in the direction of God's call—that forces conspire to pressure you to abandon the journey or change course?

For example--I know of at least one young couple who declined to participate in the pre-marital counseling program at their church, because their distinct impression was that the main goal of a pastor in pre-marital counseling is to convince people *not* to get married.

Or—for those of you who have ever been pregnant—did you have the experience, when you became visibly pregnant-- of friends and strangers alike suddenly approaching you to tell you their horror stories about childbirth and parenting?

Or perhaps you've encountered these discouraging voices along your path when discerning a direction for your education and work---you would-be doctors, do you know how brutal a residency will be? You would-be teachers, do you know how crummy the pay will be? You would-be engineers, do you know how few women excel in your field? You would-be artists, do you know you can't make a *living* doing that?

I know I've been guilty of discouraging those who come to *me* discerning possible calls to ordained ministry. Not unlike the rector of the parish whom I first approached to discuss my own call to the priesthood.

"Oh, don't do it Sylvia," he said. "Good priests are a dime a dozen, but good laypeople are hard to find. Besides, if you become a priest, you'll price yourself out of a job. We couldn't afford you if you were ordained."

Or the Bishop who ordained me, who at our ordination retreat looked us all in the eye and said, "You know the church is changing. You know that none of you can count on ever having full time paid work in the church."

Or Jesus, who in today's Gospel says to his would-be followers, "Don't do it. It's not too late to turn back. Unless you're prepared to give up all your possessions, and all of your family, and your life, itself, DO NOT FOLLOW ME."

"My dear, dear Child," our Teachers say, "you just can't know what you're getting into. This path you've chosen will be incredibly costly. It's not too late to change your mind. Don't blame me. Don't say I didn't warn you."

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Then all of a sudden, in the midst of it all Jesus offers this example by way of comparison:

[Look: 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.]

Sounds sensible, right?

Yeah, it is. Unfortunately, that's not what following God's call is like AT ALL.

Because the fact is that, when we sit down and do the calculations in advance, we find that we NEVER have what it takes to answer God's call.

No matter how many times we run the numbers, the MATH will NEVER work out.

- We'll never have enough commitment to sustain a marriage.
- We'll never have enough courage to bear or raise a child.
- We'll never have enough patience to teach school.
- We'll never have enough compassion to care for the sick.
- We'll never have enough stamina to do the work.
- We'll never have enough faith to follow Jesus.

And yet, despite our inarguable inadequacy to the task, still love compels us to heed the call.

- To commit.
- To create.
- To nurture.
- To teach.
- To heal.
- To labor.
- To follow.
- To love.

We make ourselves profoundly vulnerable when we say "yes" to God's call.

Quite *unlike* a prudent builder, in spite of our poverty, we're given the grace to say "yes" to the call. We willingly open ourselves up to the possibility of ridicule because, despite our shortcomings, love compels us to answer Her call.

Quite *unlike* a strategic ruler, in spite of our weakness, we're given the grace to say "yes" to the call. We willingly open ourselves up to the possibility of failure, because, despite our shortcomings, love compels us to answer Her call.

The cost is, indeed, real. The cost is, indeed, great.

But greater still is the cost of living as a slave to fear.

And so, despite the advice of wise Teachers

Despite the warnings of Strangers and Friends,

Despite the calculations that show that we're bound to come up short

When God's Call comes to our heart, we dare to say "yes"

Because deep down we dare to hope that the probable pain of releasing our clinging attachments to family, to possessions, to the security of life as we know it

pales in comparison with the impossible reward of saying "yes" to the daring, abundant Life God desires for us; the impossible reward of saying "yes" to God's call; the impossible reward of saying "yes" to Love.