

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
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Proper 18 Year C
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Conflicts of loyalty can be heartrending. A father becomes ill and is dependent upon his son. Parental duty may require some sacrifice of attention and resources and what ordinarily would go to the spouse or child is diverted to the parent. A mother with 3 children finds her time and energy consumed by the needs of her severely autistic child. The mother's time and energy, which belongs to the other two, has been nearly used up when it comes time for the bedtime routines the other ones yearn for. The graduate student finds that the overwhelming course load consumes the time she needs to devote to her marriage. The part-time pastor of two small parishes finds one of the parishes needs much more pastoral care, and he worries that the other parish is feeling neglected.

We make daily decisions about priority of love, energy, and attention. At the end of the day, we often feel as though we have short-changed someone, and the strain is often full of regrets and resentments, mixed with exhaustion that seeps into our bones. We like to believe that everyone can see the long-arc of our love, can hold us in love and prayer when we feel distant to them. We like to imagine there is enough love in most of us for us to love our parents, spouses, children, siblings, and even ourselves, but sometimes it doesn't seem to balance out.

Yet of course, it is not only family members who compete for our affection and dutiful attention. We find ourselves with different allegiances that pull our priorities in different directions. We're distracted by the career paths we covet. The different civic groups or volunteer organizations we belong to crave our resources of money and time. Typically, with intention and hard work, we can keep our loyalties and obligations in balance, but sometimes they come into conflict.

Today, Jesus throws another complication into the delicate balancing act of our life. Jesus invites us to move from travelling alongside him, to being his disciple. And in doing so, is asking us to re-order our loyalties and affections that might normally claim first place. We can imagine that discipleship will help us in bringing all things into balance, for belonging to God affects the way in which we belong to others, and perhaps that means life will be easier for us if we truly follow Jesus – but Jesus' message is also that Jesus is now the center and there is no room for competing loyalties. When loyalties compete, they need to be sorted out according to priority. For those called to discipleship, Jesus himself becomes the sorting principle. The embodiment of self-offering love, of mercy, of compassion in the person of Jesus becomes our true north. We join into that spirit of love when we are baptized, when God claimed our life anew, and we became disciples of Christ.

Jesus is very clear that there will be costs to being a disciple and suggests we calculate them prior to making this important decision that will move us from a wish of being faithful, or from a casual attachment to God and to our church, to careful deliberation and total dedication to that which will

transform our lives. There are many spiritual paths to God and in this passage, Jesus is saying: use your head. Ask the questions, raise your doubts, count your costs, use your brain, evaluate your steadfastness, take inventory of your resources, and dive into the deep end of discipleship only if you can commit fully for a life time.

I imagine Jesus recognized that our discipleship can have many false starts or half-hearted attempts, and Jesus is saying, “that’s fine, as long as you don’t settle there. Keep on moving along the Way of Love.”

It is not a question of whether there will be costs as we continue on our faith journey. Of course, there will be. If we’re not feeling stretched by God, then we need to bend a bit more, open our hearts more fully, pray more dangerously, and ask the Spirit change our hearts.

Although this doesn’t seem like one of Jesus’ pastoral passages, I do think there is care set within these harsh words. Because Jesus is asking us to name and claim what we need to let go of, and in that release, to feel the grief that comes with that. Only when we say out loud what we are being asked to give up, the priorities we thought we cared most about, the money we had set aside for another purpose, the balance we thought we had found in our lives, the progress we had made toward self-improvement, can we realize the enormous and life-altering shift Jesus is asking of us. Letting go can hurt—and it is natural to grieve. Sometimes we need to cast aside something or someone who mattered to us, or a way of being, or the image we could be in control, or could get it all right. This can be something rather abstract such as our pretense of self-sufficiency, to something concrete like that first hour of the day which we are now committing to prayer.

At the recent retreat time I spent at Holy Cross Monastery, we spent the first morning engaged in a conversation with Br. Aiden about the Way of Love. Specifically, about our desire for God, which is the core of this passage around discipleship, as desire for the holy is absolutely central to Christian spirituality. Br. Aiden spoke about the points along the way of living deeper in love of God, for that is what Jesus is inviting us into and telling us there are costs for. Jesus knows that when we move into an intimate place with God, the real cost is ourselves, for we will never be the same. The deeper we go in, the more transformational the change will be. Nothing will be left untouched.

Often, our love of God begins as our love for others does— with curiosity, intrigue, testing the waters, allowing ourselves to seek and find love, and then falling in love, somewhat desperately, where there can be excitement, and energy and a desire to be with one another. I remember this time in my adult life, when I was like a sponge, soaking up any and all spiritual opportunities to know and love God and to be known and loved by God. It was a glorious time when my heart naturally made time with God my first priority. However, just as human relationships can’t stay in that intense time of the first blossom of love, our relationship with God mellows, turning into a companionship, when we find ourselves conversing with Jesus throughout the day, sharing our problems, rejoicing together, and deepening our friendship so that ultimately we can reveal the inner

workings of our heart and God can reflect them back to us, in a way that can reshape our hearts, so we move along that path a bit lighter, a bit truer, a bit more faithfully. For these first two stages of engagement with the divine, God is always present, but we still have a choice as to how to respond to that movement of God within.

Then pure grace shows up, often unbidden, and we enter into a time of abiding with God. This is pure God, all God. Our work is only to surrender, and here's the hard part which Jesus was referring to in this morning's passage— we need to surrender into not-knowing, which means we have given up everything — we have relinquished our possessions, anything we had attached ourselves to that offered us a sense of security or formed our identity. This is what Jesus means when he says, "So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." This is when we need only to know that God is in us and we are in God and we can rest there.

And that is where we will find the joy of discipleship. We can and should talk about the costs of discipleship for those are decisions we each are continually being asked to make, but we must also talk about the joy found in the letting go, of the freedom of abiding in that love with God. The joy is worth all the costs. Our gospel story today tells us that the great reversal is beginning — that the kingdom of God has been inaugurated, and it is happening in individual's hearts—in your heart and in mine. The truth is that Jesus wants us to be disciples and wants to inhabit more of our lives, for us to use our days better, for us to experience life abundant. Let us dare to live into the holiness that resides in each one of us. Let us walk with Christ along the Way of Love. Amen.