

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

How Not to Grow a Church

Luke 14:25-33

Sunday, September 4, 2022

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I have come to the conclusion that Jesus would not have been a very good pastor. The text for today isn't exactly a seminar on how to attract a crowd for Sunday worship.

Imagine an SPR committee interviewing a potential pastor the Bishop would like to appoint to their church:

"Yes, very nice to meet you, Reverend. Tell us, what is your understanding of church membership?"

"The first rule is you must hate your father and mother, your wife and children, your brothers and sisters--yes, even your own life. Jesus said that if anyone who is not prepared to give up everything cannot be a member."

"Um, well thank you. We will be in touch. Don't call us. We'll call you."

After being a pastor for several years, I have learned that if you want to grow a church, you have to create an attractive environment that meets the needs of people. Or, to put it bluntly, you must give people what they want so they don't go to a church down the road.

And once you get people here, you have to keep them here. So, worship and preaching need to be inspiring and meaningful. Opportunities for Christian education should be offered for all ages and must be stimulating, varied and convenient. And there should be ample opportunities for service and fellowship. That's the way you grow a church.

When I was serving another church, a lady I had never met came to see me in my office one day. Apparently, she had just left another church in frustration and was looking for a new one. I asked her why she had left the church. She said, "I wasn't being fed. And my needs weren't being met." She continued, "I have checked your services online and you don't seem like a bad preacher and your church seems to be doing a lot of good things. I think I will give your church a try. But, before I do, I have some expectations."

She then pulled out a piece of paper with a long list of things she expected, including the proper length of sermons, types of hymns to be sung, particular Sunday school curriculum, etc.

When I thought she was finished, I asked, "Anything else?" She replied, "Yes, and the sanctuary should not be too cold." I almost gave her the line from Burger King, "Your way, right away!" but I didn't. I would find out later from some other pastors in the community that this particular person was a "frequent shopper" of churches.

There is nothing wrong with expecting a church to meet your needs. The only problem is that Jesus said that if we want to follow him, our needs will not be a priority. In fact, they are virtually irrelevant. Jesus said that unless we are willing to hate our families, carry our crosses, and give up everything that is dear to us, we can't be his disciples.

I must say that Jesus is not really much help in the church growth department. We like to say that the Bible has many answers to the questions of life and ministry, but building a booming church that meets everyone's needs is not one of them.

If I took today's text as seriously as I should, I would have ushers and greeters greeting new people at the door, not with a bulletin, but with a clipboard with a list of questions:

"Are you absolutely sure you want to follow this way of life?"

"Are you absolutely sure you are willing to give Jesus everything you have?"

"Are you absolutely sure you are willing to put aside everything that matters to you for the sake of the gospel, even family?"

"If you are not, you may want to go home and think this over. This is not a country club you're joining."

I think it is safe to say that this approach is not the way to grow a church.

Barbara Brown Taylor said, "If Jesus were in charge of an average congregation there would be about 4 people left there on Sunday morning, and chances are those four would be fooling themselves."

This is a hard passage. I came very close not preaching on it today. Earlier this week, I asked some of my preacher friends about this text and they said they were not going near the pulpit with it. I guess I am just dumb enough to preach on it!

One of the things that bothers me about this text is probably what bothers most of you: "Hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, an even life itself..." Hate? Jesus is teaching us to hate? Doesn't that cancel out everything Jesus taught us about loving one another?

Well, take some comfort from the fact that Jesus was using an old Semitic expression that means to "detach oneself from, to turn away from." It was a figure of speech we don't use anymore. Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that "In Jesus' day you expressed your preference for something by pairing two things and saying you loved one but disliked the other." In other words, "I love the Bulldogs but hate the Yellow Jackets." Jesus' use of the word hate didn't have anything to do with hating something in the way we experience it. It was about priorities.

But, if we are honest, there is little consolation in that explanation because Jesus is plainly laying out what is costs to follow him and it's no picnic. Jesus does divide families and loyalties. He does create chaos and turn lives upside down.

I remember a classmate of mine in seminary. He was middle aged, second career. He had a good life and a good career, and then God called him to preach. How inconvenient. His wife and family lived in another state, so he would go to class during the week and travel back to his family on the weekends. I recall him coming into class one day looking very upset. When I asked him what was wrong, he said, "I spoke with my wife last night. She said I have to make a choice." She said, "It's me or the ministry. I don't want to be married to a preacher." The next semester he was in one of my classes. I guess he made his choice. I guess he took today's text seriously.

This is a hard text, but honestly, I think Jesus is really doing us a favor in this passage. He is telling us what we are getting ourselves into. It is not an accident that the writer of Luke says in our text that there was a huge crowd following Jesus. Many people were following him for different reasons. Some wanted

to see him perform a miracle, to see a trick. Others needed healing. Still some thought he was a revolutionary who was going to overthrow the Roman Government and bring power back to the people.

Very few people in the crowd knew what Jesus was up to and what it meant to follow him. Jesus was headed to Jerusalem, and he knew what awaited him. He also knew what awaited those who claimed to follow him. It wasn't going to be pretty. He did not want them and doesn't want us to have any illusions about what it means to be his disciple.

You don't follow a man like Jesus without getting into deep yogurt. Jesus wasn't killed for saying, "I am here to make life easier and more peaceful for you." Will Willimon reminds us that Jesus was killed for saying, "The poor are precious and the religious and privileged are in trouble; Not everyone who cries, 'Lord, Lord' will get into God's Kingdom. In fact, prostitutes, tax collectors, and vile sinners will get in before you!"

You don't say things like that without getting into deep trouble. And you certainly don't follow a guy like that without creating problems for yourself. For many of us, the problem with Jesus is not that we find him unclear or confusing. It is that we find him too darn difficult and demanding. This Jesus is relentless, and here we are today wanting to follow him?

I remember a man coming up to me after a service and saying, "I didn't like your sermon today. In fact, I don't like a lot of your sermons."

"Oh really? Well, thanks for your honesty. Why is that? Do tell."

"Well, your sermons make me feel uncomfortable. I don't come to church for that. I come to church for some peace and comfort."

I said, "Well, you picked the wrong faith. I didn't have problems until I met Jesus."

Then he said, "And that's another thing, if I was a preacher I wouldn't spend so much time on those difficult sayings of Jesus. They are too hard. People aren't going to do those things. You're wasting your time."

Maybe he was right. Maybe I am wasting my time preaching on this text. I have to say I have struggled a great deal to find a digestible lesson for you on this

passage today. In my preaching classes, I teach my students that if you want your sermon to be sharp, clear and powerful you must prepare it around one clear, compelling point. Well, it has been challenging to come up with that point. This preaching thing is not as easy as it looks!

All week long I have thought what my point on this passage should be. First, I thought, maybe I should tell them following Jesus is not for everyone. There is a difference between being saved and being a disciple. If you don't think you have what it takes, that's ok. Just try to be a good person from time to time and come to church every once in a while.

And then I thought, no that's too soft. I should tell them that in this passage Jesus is telling us to get our lives together and priorities straight. Jesus and the church should be our number one priority, above all else. No more spiritual apathy! And that wouldn't be a bad sermon. I have actually preached those sermons.

But the more I thought and prayed about this passage the more it became clear to me that this text is a warning for you and me. I must warn all of us about Jesus. What do I mean?

A colleague of mine had a good friend he went to college with. They remained good friends after they graduated. My colleague's friend became very successful and wealthy at a young age. He had three or four homes. He was a member of a half dozen prestigious golf clubs. He had all the nice cars and toys with all the bells and whistles. He would joke with my colleague about not having kids: "You can't have kids and keep a scratch handicap." Besides, he and his wife loved to travel and didn't want to be tied down.

One day, my colleague could not find or contact his friend. He looked everywhere – social media, contacted other friends. It seemed like his friend dropped off the face of the earth. My colleague thought maybe he and his wife were on a long trip to Europe.

Well, there came a time when my colleague took a group of adults on a mission trip and they visited an orphanage they had heard about. It was run by a couple that adopted several kids and had taken in many more. They had a staff of people helping. When my colleague walked into that house, he almost fell on the floor. There was his friend changing a diaper in a t-shirt and shorts. He and his wife had given up their lavish lifestyle to run an orphanage.

Well, my colleague was dying to find out what had caused his friend's dramatic transformation. So, later that

night, after they had put all the kids to bed, they sat in the small living room and talked. "What happened to you?" my colleague asked. "Well, you are not going to believe this, but I was on a business trip and a co-worker of mine kept bugging me to go on this spiritual retreat. So, finally, I went begrudgingly. One night I heard a man speak about his ministry to orphans and something happened to me. It was like an out of body experience. Something grabbed my heart and wouldn't let go. Afterwards, I called my wife and told her that things were about to change." Then he said, "If I had known how much Jesus was going to change my life I would have never gone near a retreat or a church. I was just minding my own business and out of nowhere Jesus grabbed my heart. So, there is no going back now."

You know what I think the message is for today's text? It is dangerous to follow Jesus because Jesus changes you. Suddenly, you see the world through the eyes of Jesus and it changes your heart. You see all the pain and hurt and want to heal it. You see all that needs to change and you want to change it. And you are willing to do anything and everything and give up anything and everything to get it done.

Are we ready for that kind of change?

So, fair warning. We are playing with fire. Jesus is not interested in growing churches: he wants to grow disciples. So, this Jesus we pray to, sing to, preach and teach about, is not messing around. He is on the move and his love is relentless, even reckless. I would watch your heart because he just might change you so much that everything you think is important won't mean that much to you anymore. All you will care about is being the hands and feet of Christ. If you are not prepared for that kind of transformation, don't follow Jesus.

You've been warned. In today's text, Jesus has warned all of us.

-Barbara Brown Taylor's message "High Priced Discipleship" and Will Willimon's sermon, "Who Do You Say that I Am" were helpful resources for me as I prepared this sermon.

Devotional Guide:

Monday – Read John 18:36; Matthew 6:25-33; Romans 14:17. How does the Kingdom of God overturn ways of thinking and living that you take as “common sense”? Can you identify one or two ways that the values of the kingdom have changed your life and the way you live in the world?

Tuesday - Read Psalm 40:6-8; Jeremiah 31:31-34. How do these texts explain how God’s will is to be done by God’s people? Does this change the way you interpret “Thy will be done” in The Lord’s Prayer?

Wednesday – Read Luke 14:25-33; 2nd Corinthians 4:5-7; Colossians 2:6-7. Think of the times in your life when you have had to choose between building up “your kingdom” and “God’s kingdom”? What kind of sacrifices have you had to make in choosing God’s kingdom over your own?

Thursday - Read Ephesians 5:3-10. If God’s will is to be done on earth as it is in heaven, it begins with each one of us. What is one change you will make in your life in order for God’s will to be done?

Friday - Read Revelation 1:4-6; 1 Peter 2:9-10. Darrell Holtz writes, “As children of God, we are not just isolated individuals—we are a ‘kingdom,’ a community where God reigns. How are you growing together with the church in your active service to God’s kingdom and will, as well as in knowledge? How are you taking part in moving our congregation toward becoming more fully “the kingdom of God” in action?”