

Sermon, Proper 18C, Psalm 139:1-6. 13-18, Luke 14:25-33 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

Many have found solace in the Episcopal Church after difficult experiences in other forms of Christianity. Here, we don't try to scare each other with fiery pits of hell if we don't believe certain doctrines. Here we invite reason to converse with scripture and tradition. Here, we welcome questions and make room for doubt. We try to express God's love more than anything else. I remember what my friend Dale said to me years and years ago, when he was a new priest and I was discerning ministry: "Every Sunday I get to tell people how much God loves them," he said. Sounded to me like the best job in the world.

Psalm 139—at least, the portions that we read in our bulletin today—is a perfect psalm for Episcopalians, and is perhaps the most beloved psalm after the twenty-third. The Lord has searched us out and known us, traced our journeys and our resting-places, knitted us together in our mothers' wombs. Those words warm my heart every time I read or hear them, and saying them in unison with all of you is incomparable.

But then we come to Jesus in Luke's Gospel. "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 disciples. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."

This sounds a lot different than the guy who called his first disciples by saying "come and see," isn't it? I'm confused by Jesus' platform building skills here. How could anyone grow a movement—and later, a church—by saying such things?

Then again, sometimes I worry that the inclusiveness in the Episcopal church and in St. David's in particular can lead to an impression that following Jesus is easy. Simple. Anyone can do it.

"Come and see. We will love you and you won't have to change and we won't try to make you feel bad."

That's only partially true, isn't it? We will try not to make you feel bad, but once we decide to follow Jesus we do have to change. When we follow Jesus, we are called through our baptismal covenant to proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ. When we become a disciple of Christ, we are called to seek and serve Christ in all persons. As Episcopal Christians, we are called to strive for justice and peace among all people.

Seeking and serving Christ in all persons is easier to stomach than *hating* our brothers and sisters. Saying that Jesus was speaking in hyperbole does not help much. His examples about a tower and a war demonstrate that Christian discipleship is costly. This isn't the reading that I want to preach about today, at a time when across the country, church attendance and pledges are down sharply. I just want to tell you how much God loves you. I don't want to talk about the cost of discipleship.

But maybe, in spite of all the challenges churches face today: maybe this is the message that we need. Yes, Christ loves you, no matter who you are or what you've done. You are God's beloved child, and nothing will change that. Nothing.

But Christ does embody a sacrificial life. A sacrificial love. Many of us, when we hear the word “sacrifice,” think of those *other* churches—the not-Episcopal churches that want us to set aside our sexuality or our political inclinations or our call to ordination and listen only to The Church and its strictures. As a woman, in a different denomination, I could not be a pastor, for example. Other women may hear sacrifice and church think that we are called not only to set aside leadership positions but also obey our husbands or stay in an abusive situation.

Absolutely not. Christ is not calling those without power to bow down to an all-powerful church. He *is* calling us to set aside what power and privilege we have. Jesus calls us to put him in the center of our lives, and putting him in the center means that we will sometimes be outsiders. We are going to disappoint and even anger people, including people we love, if we truly focus on keeping Christ in the center of our lives. This kind of sacrificial faith means we need to be willing to sometimes live in the margins, even if we are the president of a bank or a bishop or an important elected official.

Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, we heard at the beginning of this morning’s reading. Some of them were probably there because they were dazzled by his miracles. He seemed flashy. If he could heal people, what other tricks could he perform?

Here Jesus was letting them know the *cost* of following him. While Christianity is mainstream now, back then his disciples were not respectable, and as we heard in last week’s epistle, many of them ended up dying ignoble deaths. Following Jesus was not the place for people seeking prestige. This was not a networking opportunity. This was not the way to wealth. Sometimes, this was a path to losing people and things that you valued.

What do you value in your life? Your phone, your money...I value my books. All of these trappings of life are things that Jesus calls us to hate compared to him. I see some of that as an invitation to reimagine what I love in service to Christ. What books bring me closer to Jesus? I know that watching the Real Housewives of Beverly Hills does *not* bring me closer to Jesus, yet I seem to find time to watch it every week. What does that say about my values and what I need to work on?

Today’s Gospel may not sound like good news. It may sound harsh. It’s *supposed* to sound harsh. Jesus does love you, but Jesus also has expectations of you. This is a message we have also been exploring all summer with our journey with the Old Testament prophets. A life of faith is not an easy life. But I cannot imagine a better one. Can you?