

A Christian's Struggle With Tension

13th Sun. after Pent. – 09/04/22 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Luke 14:25-35 Pastor Keith Besel

vv.34-35, [Jesus summed up His teaching about Christian discipleship by saying,] **“Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile. It is thrown away. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”**

Introduction

✘ As today is the 13th Sunday after Pentecost on the Church calendar, we have now reached the half-way point of the season of Pentecost. Taking their cue from the color of our altar paraments, some have called this the “green season”. Often we call it the “non-festival season” as it is the time where we go through Jesus’ teaching about what it means for us to live as His disciples; as Christians whom Christ has redeemed and who now live in His Spirit.

→ At times this season has been viewed as the “boring” season in the church, or even the time of the “Law” because the Bible Readings lean more toward God’s commands or expectations or warnings in regard to how we are to live our lives as Christians.

✘ Today’s Gospel reading is definitely one of those texts, as Jesus teaches the great number of people who were following Him about the very real cost of being one of His disciples.

→ Ultimately, what most of us Christians see and hear and feel as we engage with Jesus and His teaching here creates a bit of tension. Is Jesus warning us or is He encouraging us? Is it a blessing to be a disciple of Christ or an impossible demand that’s not even worth our effort? Is it a joy or a struggle to follow Jesus?

✘ The calm, nonthreatening, happy-go-lucky Jesus that most people like to think of as our Savior seems to take on a different persona here as He cranks up the pressure and says, “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple” (v. 26). What? I thought we were not supposed to “hate” anyone. And the Fourth Commandment even says we are to “Honor our father and mother”. No wonder this season of the Church year brings so many people down, right?

✘ In fact, some have said that this kind of teaching; this call from Jesus to discipleship; this kind of “fanatical” teaching is why they don’t and won’t follow Jesus. Others who really want to follow Jesus, but are not able to stand the tension of this text, have tried to explain it away through their own creative theological gymnastics.

→ Some pastors even feel like it’s our role to find some way to try and calm the congregation so that y’all won’t be too distressed by Jesus’ words here. But as much I’d like to do that, I’m sorry folks – I just can’t change Jesus’ words; I can’t betray His reason for speaking them.

✘ So, rather than dodge the tension, I want to challenge all of us here today to allow this tension to do what it’s supposed to do – to bring our daily lives into alignment with our faith life.

→ Sometimes when we have a pain in our hip, our lower leg, or our shoulder, a physical therapist, with some pushing, twisting, pulling and exercise can bring things back into alignment, and the pain goes away. The pushing and pulling is the tension of our text. What we believe and what we live can get out of alignment. But embracing the tension of this text brings us the alignment we need and we discover that living Christ’s call to discipleship means giving up everything for Him. And it’s then that we finally find the peace and the joy with Jesus that this world cannot understand.

I. Tension between devotion loved ones and Christ

- ⊗ The text begins with the statement that large crowds were gathered around Jesus. This is an important distinction to note. Jesus is not talking to the disciples or the inner circle of the three. He's talking to masses of people that followed Him, pressing in – not because they were buying into what Jesus was all about, but because they wanted to watch the action. They wanted to “learn” but not actually do.
 - ➔ 2 Timothy 3:7, talks about people who are “always learning” but “never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth”. Well, that describes this crowd to a “T”. They are interested but not committed. It's to these people, both then and now, that Jesus issues this shocking ultimatum: “Hate your father and mother, give up everything you have, take up your cross and follow Me” (see vv. 26-27). In other words, the life we are called to live in Christ necessitates our active and uncompromising participation.
- ⊗ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor who stood up against Hitler in WWII and lost his life because of it, wrote in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, “So many people come to church with a genuine desire to hear what we have to say, yet they are always going back home with the uncomfortable feeling that we are making it too difficult for them to come to Jesus” (pg. 38).
 - ➔ Yes, even for you and me here today, the cost of discipleship is shocking to our ears. Jesus really did say, “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple” (v.26). There's no easy way to hear these words. The call to discipleship is a call to hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters. While it's clear that Jesus is speaking in hyperbole and not literally, that's no excuse for us to take this statement lightly. In Luke 16:13, Jesus clarifies His reason for using the term “hate”. He says, “No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money”. You see, you cannot mix allegiances, attention, or affection. When push comes to shove, you will choose one over the other. So the time to make the choice is now, not later. Is it Jesus or is it something or someone else?
 - ➔ To be clear, the choice is not literally to hate your friends and family. It is, however, a call to put faith in Christ first; obedience first; Jesus first in every aspect of life.
- ⊗ That's what it looks like when we follow Jesus as He intends. It looks like living out our faith; sharing the Gospel; defending the truth, even when the rest of the family or friends are wringing their hands; asking us to tone it down. It looks like standing up and speaking the Gospel truth, even when we know there may be earthly consequences.
 - ➔ But let's be clear: discipleship is not the same thing as acting like a jerk, being rude, judgmental, or condescending. Our most effective weapon in the kingdom of God is love. Friends, we can't shout people into heaven, but we can't be passive and silent and expect them to wake up to the truth. This is a call from Jesus to the fact that discipleship is costly.
- ⊗ The tendency and temptation is to live in a “safe faith”; to have one foot on the dock and one foot in the boat. You don't want to miss out on the journey, so you tentatively step one foot into the boat. But if the boat starts to go crazy, you're still not fully committed; you can always get back on the dock.
 - ➔ That is, until the boat starts moving away from the dock. At that moment having one foot on the dock and one in the boat is the absolute worst position to be in. The only option then is a very wet future. Following Jesus is like that. You can't have one foot anchored in the things and relationships of this world, and another foot anchored in the things that God values. Jesus calls us to lift that worldly foot and start living for the kingdom of God.

II. Tension of sacrificing everything to follow Jesus

⌘ Second, God makes it clear that the cost of discipleship is not just to surrender our family. In verse 26 Jesus calls us to surrender everything. “If anyone ... does not hate ... even his own life, he cannot be My disciple”.

➔ The concept is the same as with our relationships. Jesus is not calling us literally to give away everything we have and to hate living. He’s calling us to look at all of God’s good gifts from the steward’s perspective. If I am the owner, then the well-being of my property and my relationships is dependent upon my work and my diligence. This means my focus is on my stuff and I’m not focused on the things of God. But when I surrender ownership to Jesus, then I manage and care for His good gifts, but I always know that their safety and well-being are in God’s hands, not mine.

⌘ You see, this shift does two things. First, it aligns my priorities with God’s priorities: 1) people before stuff, 2) eternal before temporal. Second, it releases me from the anxiety and stress that all of my stuff wants to bring at me. Though it isn’t mentioned in this passage, Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 7 that surrendering ownership of our families and our possessions to God is true freedom. Paul says, “For the present form of this world is passing away. I want you to be free from anxieties” (1 Cor. 7:31b–32a).

➔ I know all of this about the cost of discipleship can shock our system. But for those in the crowd before Jesus, in His day this was absolutely terrifying to hear. Jesus goes over the top in verse 27 when He says, “Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple”.

➔ Now people have attached all kinds of very different meanings to those words. But in Jesus’ day, a cross meant crucifixion which was a common form of punishment for those who sought to overthrow Rome. Those rebels knew the reality; the cost of their convictions and living out their beliefs. They knew that they had two likely futures: either die in battle or die by crucifixion. So they approached their cause with the belief that they were already dead men, even as they lived life for their cause.

➔ So for this crowd, Jesus is not calling them to a metaphor; people were literally being crucified along the roads between their towns for being insurrectionists. A call to carry the cross was a call to live life as if judgment had already been passed and now each step they took was a step that brought them nearer to the place of their execution. This was the worst possible death known at that time, but they considered the benefits worth the cost.

⌘ And now this kind, loving Rabbi is telling them that to follow Him is to choose this kind of terrible death? Talk about living in tension.

III. Understanding the source of the tension

⌘ So what do we do with this tension, with this radical, if not fanatical, call to follow Jesus? To live properly in tension we must first understanding the source of the tension. You see, Jesus doesn’t cause the tension that you feel when He calls you to discipleship. That’s on you and your sin.

➔ God created man to walk with Him, without distraction or compromise. Remember, in Genesis before the fall into sin? Adam and God walked together in the garden in the cool of the evening? Sin is what pits two loves against each other. It’s our weakness that drives us to love one and hate the other. So instead of blaming Christ for setting impossibly high standards we must blame our own sinful, broken lives that have separated us from God.

- ⊗ Yet God still gives us all a reason to rejoice. Paul says in Romans 8:28 that “we know that for those who love God all things work together for good...according to His purpose”. You see, the tension that we feel in this challenge is a good thing because it means that we have been convicted of our sin; we know that something is not right, that something needs to be addressed.
 - ➔ And so, the tension turns the man/woman; the boy/girl of faith to Jesus for the answer. Jesus is the one who did what we could not do. Through His death on the cross, He defeated sin and He conquered the grave. In Baptism, our old nature along with our sinful actions and desire are drowned, and we have been given a new life in the Spirit (Rom. 6:1–11).
 - ➔ It’s in this new life, by the Spirit’s power, that we find the will and the strength to follow Jesus with undivided attention and unwavering conviction. As Romans 12:1 says, our life becomes “a living sacrifice” to God.
- ⊗ So now you and I rejoice; we embrace the tension in faith; we bear the cross of difficulty and persecution for our faith because we know that it reminds us of the new life that we have in Christ.
 - ➔ If we had not been born again through water and the Word, we wouldn’t even care about Christ’s call. We wouldn’t feel the tension. But we would also not be saved. But now, that new life in Christ that we have is like a new patch of cloth sewn to an old garment. It tugs at the seams of our old life, causing us to rejoice at the grace Jesus showers upon us in calling us to follow Him in faith.

Conclusion

- ⊗ Jesus sums up this call to follow Him when He says in verses 34-35, “Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile”.
 - ➔ Salt, like our faith in Christ, exists to flavor and preserve either the food or our souls in the world around us. If we follow Jesus only expecting a simple and easy life without sacrifice or tension or death, we are like salt that is no longer salty. There is no purpose; no benefit to that kind of faith.
- ⊗ As Jesus turned to the crowds in the text, He now turns to you and me friends, not to put a burden upon our shoulders but to invite us to be bound to Him first and foremost so that we will be set free to live out our faith without fear of consequence or challenge.
 - ➔ When we are bound to Christ, His promise in Matthew 11:28-29 is then fulfilled to our earthly relief and our eternal peace. “Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls”. That’s how Jesus takes care of our tension as His disciples. Amen.