

Thirteen Sunday in Pentecost, September 7, 2025.

St. Michael's Church

The Rev. Joshua Wong

Gospel reading: Luke 14:25-33

*Let us pray:*

Lord Jesus, thank you for your gift of grace and redemption. We desire to follow you, and ask for your help to learn what it means to die to ourselves in order to be fully alive in you. *Amen.*

In the Episcopal Church, we divide the year into six different liturgical seasons.

We are now in Ordinary Time, symbolized by the color green, when the church explores the everyday sacredness of life and how faith is woven into our daily work. It is a season in which we focus on what discipleship means and how we can nurture our faith to become messengers of the gospel.

Last week, Jesus spoke about the importance of humility, “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

This week, Jesus delves even deeper beyond humility into self-denial. The passage speaks about the cost of discipleship, one of the most controversial and difficult passages for theologians to interpret. Jesus gets to the point and says that a disciple must hate their family members, hate life itself, carry their cross and even give up all their possessions, in order to be his disciple.

Jesus compares the cost of discipleship to calculating the cost involved in building a new tower, or a king calculating war plans before going into battle. Reading this passage makes us wonder whether anyone can be his disciple.

In the corporate world, the phrase, “the cost of doing business” is self-explanatory. There is an expected cost associated with leading or owning a business. It may be purchasing a building, paying employees, or buying a new vehicle, but I don’t know many people who jump into a life of discipleship with Christ and ask about the cost involved.

But when we study this passage in depth, we need to remember the context in which this was written by Luke so long ago. For Luke, Jesus’ journey to the cross has already begun; he has “set his face to go to Jerusalem,” down into the valley of the shadow of death (Luke 9:51). Luke is saying, therefore, anyone who follows him, then, must be willing to do likewise.

Nevertheless for us today, the concept that there is a cost involved to following Christ still remains relevant. So, what does Jesus mean to hate our family, life itself, give up our possessions, and what does it mean to “carry our cross?”

A few pages earlier in Luke, Jesus has already used this same image to mean not physical crucifixion, but rather that the cross symbolizes a life of commitment — a willingness to “lose one’s life in order to save it” (Luke 9:23-24). Hating your family, and even life itself can mean that in order to follow Jesus, there cannot be anyone, or anything that gets in the way. This may mean that we need to evaluate our lives to see who our allegiance is with, and what are our priorities?

Jesus warns us to “Count the cost before following him,” because the Gospel may be for everyone — but discipleship may not be for everyone.

This last point — that discipleship isn’t for everyone — may at first be counterintuitive for many Christians today. Isn’t the whole point of Christianity that anyone can become a disciple, and that the goal is to make as many as possible? Indeed the answer is yes, but some commentators have offered a new

perspective. During Jesus' time on earth, according to the Gospel writers, Jesus encountered thousands of people during his ministry — but only called about fourteen to be His disciples. Nor did he send out the twelve disciples, and later the seventy “laborers,” to recruit and expand their ranks; rather, Jesus expressly sent them out to heal and proclaim that “the kingdom of God has come near” (Luke 9:6; 10:9). Likewise, Jesus moved through the countryside feeding and healing and teaching the crowds, but not calling on them to become disciples. For the overwhelming majority of the people he met, he did not say to them, “Follow me,” but rather: “Your faith has made you well,” or “Return home and declare how much God has done for you,” or “Go on your way, and sin no more,” or “Go in peace.” In short, Jesus comes to save many, indeed the whole world! — but as for disciples, he calls only a few.

If this is indeed the case, and Jesus called a few to be disciples, but most, the seventy “laborers,” to serve him in a different way, could this mean that serving the daily needs of the world, such as feeding the hungry, providing safety to the powerless, healing the wounds of the injured, are just another form of discipleship that are equally important to Jesus?

The church needs all tangible forms of ministries to spread the gospel of love. Not everyone may be called to ordained and full time ministry, but just as the seventy “laborers,” all of us are called to testify about God to the world. All of us are called to be mediators of peace and justice in the world, just as Jesus was.

The preacher and author Barbara Brown Taylor once began a sermon by saying: “If any of you came here this morning believing that you were disciples of Jesus, then I guess that you know better now.” Her point is that, if we are honest with ourselves, most of us are less like “disciples” and more like what she calls “friends of the disciples.”

Maybe what Barbara Brown Taylor means is that the word “Disciple” can be used both as a noun and a verb. We sometimes think of disciples as the ordained or those people who put their lives on the front line of the gospel. People like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dorothy Day, archbishop Oscar Romero, Sojourner Truth or Jonathan Daniels, many of whom gave up their possessions, and even their own lives for the sake of the gospel. Both disciples and “friends of disciples” are equally important. As friends, our job includes continuing the good works of these

people, and generously supporting these disciples wherever and however we can; and like friends, we are inspired to follow their good examples in our own lives.

Whether we use the noun or the verb, we are reminded by the Prophet Jeremiah that we are still on the potter's wheel, still in God's hands — and as such, what and whom we become is ultimately up to God. This week's passage from the prophet can be understood as a call to repentance — and at the same time, it's powerful testimony that even when we go astray, God doesn't throw away the clay, but rather redeems and remakes us over and over again.

Every week, one of the joys I have as a pastor is to journey with people in their faith. Faith is like the clay that God reshapes, sometimes breaks down, and always fashions to become something newer and more beautiful. During the process of change, there will be moments of “the unknown,” but the more we give up our treasure, and as the gospel says, “die to ourselves,” and trust in the one who is the potter, the more our faith will be transformed. These “unknown” moments is what King David calls, “Wandering in the wilderness.” But friends, know that God is there with you.

These past two weeks, our Gospel readings may seem like God is taking everything away from us, family, personal achievements, and our possessions. But we are reminded last week that God's kingdom is not a kingdom of scarcity, but rather a kingdom of abundance. When we are willing to count the cost of discipleship, when we are willing to put God first, we will experience God's abundant life beyond our imagination.

But don't confuse God's abundance with prosperity theology. It actually means the opposite. Counting the cost as a disciple of Christ means we are willing to give up what we treasure and take on the values of God. Only then can the potter remake us over and over again to be something of greater value. So, next time you feel a bit lost in your faith, don't be afraid, for Jesus is IN the lost and you will find him there. "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find, knock and the door will be open." Amen.